

Letters to the Editor

EDITOR:

I found John Attarian's review of *The Essence of Oil & Gas Depletion* by C. J. Campbell, and *The Party's Over: Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Societies* by Richard Heinberg to be very interesting (*The Social Contract*, Vol. XIV, No. 1, Fall 2003, p. 67).

However the following quote from Heinberg is most unfortunate: "the information infrastructure of industrial societies will collapse and virtually all electronically coded data will become permanently irretrievable." As an electrical engineer and designer of integrated chips, I can tell you that this is nonsense. If you save the data on your computer to the disk or other non-volatile memory, you can unplug your computer and plug it back in without losing data. That's similar to a power outage.

Further more, electronics and communications use very little energy when compared to heating, cooling, lighting, transportation, agriculture and industry in general. It is this sort of alarmist error that calls into question the credibility of what might otherwise be a good book.

Since the industrial revolution, the dominant paradigm has been perpetual-growth/infinite- resources. That paradigm has been very successful. No amount of data or fine argumentation will change the minds of the establishment or the public. Over- population is the fundamental problem. The peak and decline of oil and natural gas is about the only thing that will convince the establishment and the public to change paradigms to one of finite resources and over-population.

The sooner that happens, the sooner a massive fertility reduction program can be started. To that end, Arctic oil and all coastal oil must be fully developed as quickly as possible. Otherwise the decline of oil extraction will be blamed on environmentalist obstruction. The infinite-resource paradigm must first be depleted by depleting all oil resources as rapidly as possible. Only after a paradigm shift occurs, can serious attention be given to over-population.

Suggestions that civilization may collapse because of high-priced oil are far-fetched and undermine otherwise good points. High-priced oil will cause a long decline of the standard of living in industrial societies. If the price of oil goes up by a factor of 10, what is the added cost to ship coffee; or to fly from New York to Los Angeles; or

to produce food for a family for one year? More answers from economists on questions like these, and less talk about the end of civilization would be more useful.

We will shift from oil and gas-fired power plants to coal-fired. We will follow France and Japan on the path to more nuclear energy production. There may be pollution or disposal problems, but the public will choose that over poverty and joblessness. After coal, more nuclear energy. We are near the end of cheap energy and the wide-spread wealth it supported, but that does not terminate civilization.

The Third World is a different matter. Their population grows by one billion every 13 years. Undoubtedly famine and disease will reduce their population, perhaps at half that rate. Ironically, Third World farmers will be exporting their food at high prices rather than give it away to their fellow nationals who starve, but produce little for exchange. A declining standard of living in the West, will curtail the generosity people feel when things are going well. At that time, our borders will close. It's easier to keep swimmers out of an over-crowded life-boat when that boat begins to sink.

Perry Lorenz

Fort Collins, Colorado

John Attarian Responds

EDITOR:

Perry Lorenz may be right that electronics use relatively little energy, but most of the rest of his letter is terribly wrongheaded

(1) Heinberg's warning that information may become irretrievable in the absence of alternative power sources for the grid is not "nonsense" at all, but quite plausible. If energy from fossil fuels becomes increasingly scarce thanks to depletion and declining EROEI, and none of the alternatives (solar, wind, etc.) can adequately replace fossil fuels, then the abundant and utterly reliable supply of electricity on which the Information Economy absolutely depends will disappear. Sure, you can store your information on a disk, but so what? Storage is one thing, retrieval quite another. If large-scale power outages such as August 2003's become frequent and protracted, the Information Economy will no longer be viable.

(2) Depleting all oil resources as rapidly as possible is a very dangerous way to teach people about resource finitude. It is like slashing a hemophiliac's wrists in order

to impress upon him that he has a problem with blood loss. Hmm.

(3) Lorenz's unfortunate fixation on "high-priced oil" misses the whole point of Campbell's and Heinberg's books. The real problem, to repeat, is that our entire way of life is dependent upon abundant supplies of oil and gas; that they are finite resources subject to depletion; that their worldwide extraction will soon peak and then relentlessly decline; that supplies will then be nowhere near sufficient to sustain our way of life; and that nothing can adequately replace oil and gas. "High-priced oil" will be the *least* of depletion's consequences.

Lorenz's statement, "Suggestions that civilization may collapse because of high-priced oil is far-fetched" is thus an exasperating misrepresentation of what Campbell, Heinberg, and I actually said, as well as an exercise in straw man-bashing. We did not suggest any such thing. Price is not the issue. Physical scarcity is the issue. A civilization which is absolutely dependent on a depleting resource is likely to collapse when that resource becomes too physically scarce to keep that civilization's activities going.

Just one example, which Lorenz entirely missed: modern agriculture is utterly dependent on oil for fuels and on natural gas for nitrogen fertilizers. It cannot function without them. Oil and gas depletion means our current mode of agriculture cannot endure. How is our civilization supposed to survive the collapse of its agriculture? Coal and nukes can't operate plows and combines and react with nitrogen to make nitrogen fertilizers. They can't be made into petrochemicals, of which we use half a million, either.

(4) Coal and nukes are no answers. We currently use oil, in the form of gasoline and diesel fuel, to mine coal! And coal is becoming increasingly costly, not least in energy, to extract. Anyone who thinks nuclear power is the answer needs to read Chapter 15, "Nuclear Power: A Nonsolution," of Garrett Hardin's *Living Within Limits*.

JOHN ATTARIAN, PH.D.

Ann Arbor, Michigan

EDITOR:

Last night I kept hearing voices outside my house, and assumed that they were illegals on the other side of the road from my house. The "coyotes" showed up as usual at 4:30 a.m. but I shone my bright Qbeam spotlight on the truck and horse trailer that they've been using for

picking up the illegals. So they split in a blaze of smoking tires. Unfortunately, they didn't pick up the illegals who were, to my dismay, 20 yards from my house. I yelled and threw rocks and 32 illegals ran off through the bushes. Border Patrol? Nowhere to be seen! Why? Because all the coyotes pick up illegals during shift change [as they have] for 10 years now, and the Border Patrol still never changes shift times. Four million illegals in the U.S. and we do nothing about it. Another day along the border.

DAVID JASPER

Portal, Arizona

[*"Portal" seems an apt name for an entry point along our porous borders. – Editor*]

EDITOR:

In the past month or so I have purchased 35 pamphlets entitled "Common Sense on Mass Immigration." I've collected another five or so from NumbersUSA. I've distributed all these pamphlets at the large telecom company I work for.

Since the year 2000 this company has laid off, off-shored, and out-sourced 21,500 employees. At the same time they "in-sourced" countless foreign nationals.

If you guessed that this place would have many open ears for the message of immigration reduction you're correct. I encourage all those I speak with to register at NumbersUSA; I just can't guess how many will get off their fat duffs and do something.

Unfortunately, my number has come up. My work is being transferred to IBM, then probably to India.

Meanwhile, I am making another purchase of the pamphlets...

NAME WITHHELD BY REQUEST

The booklet, "Common Sense on Mass Immigration" is a collection of mini-essays exploring the need for reform of our country's immigration policies. It is available for \$1.00 each, with quantity discounts, at 1-800-352-4843. The contents can be seen at www.commonsonmassimmigration.us.