

The Collapsing Western Way of Life

The greatest threat to the Western Way of Life is the Western Way of Life itself.

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The Age of Enlightenment was born sometime around the beginning of the eighteenth century. A mere three-quarters of a century later, industrialization ushered in the Age of Endarkenment, and human life has grown more and more perilous ever since. The Golden Age of capitalism cannot be recreated merely by applying the right mixture of spending, subsidies, re-regulation, and international agreements. Because the economic advantages of industrialization rely on overproduction and profit, balanced trade is impossible if the advantage is to be preserved; it entails no economic profit. Industrialism is a Hegelian synthesis which embodies the forces for its own destruction. The greatest threat to the Western Way of Life is the Western Way of Life itself.

That human beings seem unable to solve their most pressing problems is too obvious and well known to deserve much mention; that most of the problems that human beings seem unable to solve are caused by human beings themselves deserves mention but rarely is.

Human beings act as though having to deal with problems whose causes are beyond human control is not enough. Cyclones, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, droughts, floods are apparently not serious enough to command human attention. These problems, apparently, have to be supplemented by self-made catastrophes to keep our minds engaged. But most manmade problems could be avoided by careful and complete analysis of the ideas that, when implemented, have dire results.

Time-tested and effective ways of analyzing problems have been known for centuries. Rene Descartes published his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* around 1627 and the *Discourse on Method* in 1637. John Stuart Mill published his *Methods* in his *System of Logic* in 1843. The mathematical method known as *reductio ad absurdum* has been employed throughout the history of mathematics and philosophy from classical antiquity onwards, as has the method known as counterexample. And root cause analysis is a highly developed method often used in information science and other places. Oddly enough, however, even most well educated Americans seem to be unaware of any of these analytical techniques, and when attempts are made to analyze ideas, these attempts are rarely carried out logically or all the way to their ultimate ends. Americans rarely “follow the argument wherever it leads;” even those good at analysis often stop when they come across something that looks appealing.

John B. Judis recently published a [piece](#) in the *New Republic* in which he summarized some claims made by Robert Brenner, a UCLA economic historian. Judis writes:

“Brenner’s analysis of the current downturn can be boiled down to a fairly simple point: that the underlying cause of the current downturn lies in the “real” economy of private goods

and service production rather than in the financial sector, and that the current remedies—from government spending and tax cuts to financial regulation—will not lead to the kind of robust growth and employment that the United States enjoyed after World War II and fleetingly in the late 1990s. These remedies won't succeed because they won't get at what has caused the slowdown in the real economy: global overcapacity in tradeable (sic) goods production. Global overcapacity means that the world's industries are capable of producing far more steel, shoes, cell phones, computer chips, and automobiles (among other things) than the world's consumers are able and willing to consume."

Why this is worth mentioning is difficult to fathom. Overproduction has always been associated with economic busts, and such busts have happened with such regularity that economists have even incorporated them into theory by euphemistically calling booms and busts the "business cycle." The question that must be asked is, "What causes overproduction?" And the answer is industrialization.

The Industrial Revolution began in England around 1780. It transformed England from a manual labour and draft-animal economy into a machine-based one. But this change in the primary mode of economic activity was not merely economic; it changed the entire culture, not clearly for the better. Almost every aspect of life was changed in some way.

Many cite increased *per capita* GDP as evidence of the revolution's benefits, but GDP is a poor measure of benefits. It merely measures the sum total of economic transactions in terms of the culture's money, neglecting the effects of economic activity on the quality of human life.

The Industrial Revolution is largely responsible for the rise of modern cities, as large numbers of people migrated to them in search of jobs. These people were mainly housed in slums where diseases, especially cholera, typhoid, tuberculosis, and smallpox, were spread by contaminated water and other means. Respiratory diseases contracted by miners became common. Accidents in factories were regular. In 1788, two-thirds of the workers in cotton mills were children; they were also employed in coal mines. Henry Phelps Brown and Sheila V. Hopkins argue that the bulk of the population suffered severe reductions in their living standards. Although life in pre-industrial England was not easy, for many it was better than laboring in factories and coal mines.

Other consequences of the revolution are worse—craft workers lost their jobs. The Industrial Revolution concentrated labour into mills, factories, and mines, but industrial workers could never experience the sense of satisfaction and pride that craftsmen derived from their creations. Working a craft is a mentally stimulating and creative activity; operating a machine is not. The best craftsmen were renowned as artists. Some are still renowned today: Thomas Chippendale and George Hepplewhite, for example. The integral strength of Windsor chairs has never been duplicated in a factory. Handmade textiles, Persian rugs, even handcrafted toys are renowned for their artistry. Today that pride and satisfaction accrues only to hobbyists, such as quilters, but never to industrial workers. The Industrial Revolution degraded human life to the status of coal. People became fuel for machines. Bought cheap, people are used until unneeded and then discarded like slag. Individuality, talent, imagination, originality—the best attributes of human beings—are suppressed to the point of extinction. The Industrial Revolution sucked the humanity out of the human race; people became things.

But the revolution gave England a temporary economic advantage as that is measured by economists. Excess production, that is, production not consumed domestically, could be exported, and England's wealth could be increased by buying (importing) cheap and selling (exporting) dear. This worked—for a while, but never smoothly.

The Industrial Revolution quickly spread to Belgium, France, the United States, Japan, the Alpine countries, Italy, and other places. As it spread, the amount of excess products that needed to be exported grew and grew, and the number prospective foreign consumers shrank and shrank. Because there is little economic advantage (as economists measure it) in trading exports for imports of equal value, the international economy necessarily divides into net exporting nations who are enriched and net importing countries who are impoverished and less and less able to afford imports. The system has to be patched or the machines would grind to a halt. Most of the work of economists since the middle of the nineteenth century consists of developing patches for this collapsing system. Comparative advantage, creative destruction, free trade, Keynesian stimuli, and even social programs (which would be unnecessary if the economy provided for the needs of people) are merely attempts to patch the system, to keep the machines running.

Industrialists soon realized that if they reduced the quality of their products, their life cycles would be shortened which would require people to replace them more often thereby increasing consumption. Manufacturers have been steadily reducing the quality of products ever since. An essential part in a device is made of an inferior material so the device fails far before its time and becomes junk, batteries in devices are soldered to their circuit boards so that when the batteries die, the products becomes junk, one fewer olive in every jar means more jars are sold, and the jars become junk. Economists like to claim that the system produces the best products at the lowest cost, but in reality it produces the exact opposite. As more and more products must be discarded and replaced, the discarded junk is hauled to landfills or dumped in oceans. But as landfills grow larger and larger, another patch is required—recycling. But it too is ineffective. Batteries soldered to circuit boards cannot be recycled, every half-filled can of paint cannot be taken to a recycling center, separating useful elements from the useless ones is often a hazardous task. The system produces junk! Humans originated about 200,000 years ago. The Soviet Union launched the first Sputnik into space in 1957. In less than 60 years, less than a mere three tenths of one percent of the time people have inhabited the Earth, the industrial nations have put so much junk into near outer space that the junk now endangers the functionality of operational satellites. Abandoned industrial sites are often highly toxic which often require cleanup—another patch. Often complete cleanup is impossible. Toxic residues are a species of junk. Keeping the machines running necessitates the production of it.

Global industrial capitalism will continue on the gradual downward descent to collapse. The Golden Age of industrial capitalism that lasted from 1945 to 1970 cannot be recreated merely by applying the right mixture of spending, subsidies, re-regulation, and international agreements. Because the economic advantages of industrialization rely on the two ingredients mentioned above, overproduction and profit, balanced trade is impossible if the advantage is to be preserved; it entails no economic profit. Ultimately too many nations will be too poor to be importers, and the machines in the exporting countries will cease to function. Industrialism is a Hegelian synthesis which embodies the forces for its own destruction. The greatest threat to the Western Way of Life is the Western Way of Life itself. Patches may prolong it, but they cannot remove its contradictions.

Chandran Nair [writes](#),

The 20th century's triumph of consumption-based capitalism has created the crisis of the 21st century: looming catastrophic climate change, massive environmental damage and significant depletion of natural resources. . . . The western economic model, which defines success as consumption-driven growth, must be challenged. . . . Advocates of the western model tend to play down its dramatic effects on natural resources and the environment. They refuse to acknowledge that their advice runs counter to scientific consensus about limits and the need for stringent rules on resource management. Instead, they argue that human ingenuity aided by innovations in the markets will find solutions. This is rooted in an irrational belief that we can have everything: ever-growing material wealth and a healthy natural environment. The stark evidence . . . should be proof enough that this is not possible.

No, it's not possible, but the impossibility lies in the system's logic, not in its effects. To use the preferred diction of economists, the system is unsustainable. Since the collapse of the industrial system is inevitable, a fundamental rethinking of the way the economy works is the only alternative. It has always been the only alternative. But even that leaves humanity soaking in the pickle. When the economic advantages of industrialization have dissipated, humanity will still be stuck in a world filled with biodegradable junk, hazardous sites, raped environments, the unending consequences of the often accidental importation of alien species, polluted air and water, and numerous other consequences, the costs of which economists have never taken into consideration. And the progeny of both the rich and the poor alike will have to live with them. The pockets full of money that the rich have won't prevent their children and grandchildren from breathing bad air or drinking bad water or dealing with environmental degradation. These children and grandchildren may someday curse the days their fathers and grandfathers were born. Capitalism, as we know it, is reaching its endgame. The meek who inherit the earth will find it to be worthless.

The human brain has enabled mankind to discover and create wondrous things; it has also been used to inflict horrendous suffering and destruction. In fact, it would be difficult to design an economic system more destructive, wasteful, and dehumanizing than the industrial, and much of the destruction it has wrought may be irreparable. Industrialization does not efficiently allocate resources; it squanders them.

So, is mankind smart? Of course, but that is not the question. The ultimate question is, Is mankind smart enough to keep from outsmarting itself? The answer appears to be no!

The Age of Enlightenment was born sometime around the beginning of the eighteenth century. A mere three-quarters of a century later, industrialization ushered in the Age of Endarkenment, and human life has grown more and more perilous ever since. Natural disasters can be catastrophic, but their destructiveness is usually limited, and the really horrendous ones are rare. Manmade disasters are ubiquitous, very extensive, and difficult, perhaps impossible, to repair. Had mankind been wise rather than merely smart, most manmade calamities could have been avoided. *Que Sera Sera!* Whatever will be will be will be. The future is plain to see, and it's not pretty.

John Kozy is a retired professor of philosophy and logic who blogs on social, political, and economic issues. After serving in the U.S. Army during the Korean War, he spent 20 years as a university professor and another 20 years working as a writer. He has published a textbook in formal logic commercially, in academic journals and a small number of commercial magazines, and has written a number of guest editorials for newspapers. His on-line pieces can be found on <http://www.jkozy.com/> and he can be emailed from that site's

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