



## No, It Really Isn't Just a River in Egypt, Part 2

Posted by [Prof. Goose](#) on July 20, 2005 - 6:28pm

*After Ianqui's excellent post yesterday, it seems like a good time to talk about the nature of denial a bit more. Part one of this series can be found [here](#).*

In his book, *States of Denial, Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*, Stanley Cohen argues that the capacity to deny a level of awareness is the normal state of affairs for people in an information-saturated society.

Cohen argues that 'far from being pushed into accepting reality, people have to be dragged out of reality.' As I have stated many times, I believe that's what this community needs to do: giving people a nudge, but in a gentle fashion edified by empirical evidence.

According to Cohen's definition, denial involves a fundamental paradox "that in order to deny something it is necessary at some level to recognize its existence and its moral implications. It is, he says, a state of simultaneously 'knowing and not-knowing' something.

This description is well suited to the current social response to peak oil...

The 'knowledge' of the problem of peak oil is pretty well-established at all levels of society; the general public (a large percentage of Americans call dependence on foreign oil a serious problem in polls); the scientists (many organizations and scientists from different disciplines attempting to bring attention to the topic); corporations (oil companies, etc.); the financial sector (reports warning of rising demand from China); the many heads of government (regular pious speeches calling for alternative energy sources and a slackening of dependence on foreign oil).

One problem is the integration of all of this information, data, and philosophy. There's a lot of folks coming at this problem from a lot of different perspectives. Those of us in the peak oil community have a leg up on them, we have begun that integration, but even we disagree on the course of the future.

Yet, at another level, our society clearly refuses to recognize the implications of that knowledge. Policymakers surely see the road ahead with oil, but they have not deemed it rational to steer away from the upcoming severe downhill grade with any alacrity.

Individuals, including my friends and family, after they understand the problem, can express grave concern, and then just as quickly block it out, buy a new SUV, turn up the air conditioning, or fly across the world for a holiday without a thought.

Cohen's analysis of the social responses to human rights abuses finds that the mechanisms of denial are extremely complex and varied. The circumstances that create any historical event are unique and it is unwise to make direct comparisons. However, following Cohen we can draw out certain consistent psychological processes that are highly pertinent to what's coming with peak oil.

Firstly, we can expect widespread denial when the enormity and nature of the problem are so unprecedented that people have no cultural mechanisms for accepting them. In *Beyond Judgment*, Primo Levi, seeking to explain the refusal of many European Jews to recognize their impending extermination, quotes an old German adage: 'Things whose existence is not morally possible cannot exist.'

In the case of peak oil, then, we can intellectually accept the evidence of peak oil, but we find it extremely hard to accept individual or collective responsibility for a problem of such enormity. Indeed, the most powerful evidence of our denial is the failure to even recognize that there is a moral dimension with identifiable perpetrators and victims of the crisis. We know who is at fault here, we see what they are trying to do, and we lack the efficacy and the will to do anything about it.

Secondly, we diffuse our responsibility. Cohen writes at length of the 'passive bystander effect' whereby violent crimes can be committed in a crowded street without anyone intervening. Individuals wait for someone else to act and subsume their personal responsibility in the collective responsibility of the group. One notable feature of the bystander effect is that the larger the number of actors the lower the likelihood that any individual person feels capable of taking unilateral action. In times of war and repression, entire communities can become incapacitated. In the case of peak oil we are both bystanders and perpetrators, an internal dissonance that can only intensify our denial and our lack of efficacy in changing the situation.

Psychoanalytic theory contains valuable pointers to the ways that people may try to resolve these internal conflicts; angrily denying the problem outright (psychotic denial), seeking scapegoats (acting out), indulging in deliberately wasteful behavior (reaction formation), projecting their anxiety onto some unrelated but containable problem (displacement), or trying to shut out all information (suppression). As the impacts of oil's peak intensifies we can therefore anticipate that people will willingly collude in creating collective mechanisms of denial along these lines.

It seems likely from many observations of the human condition, however, that suppression will dominate. In South Africa, many white bystanders who intellectually opposed apartheid adopted a passive opposition. They retreated into private life, cut themselves off from the news media, refused to talk politics with friends, and adopted an intense immersion in private diversions such as sport, holidays and families. In Brazil in the 1970s a special term, 'innerism,' was coined for the disavowal of the political. Who are the South African whites in the peak oil scenario, eh? Is there a new innerism developing?

*(NB: this post is adapted and paraphrased (and in some places downright appropriated) from an article by George Marshall in the Ecologist. It originally contained a very interesting take integrating Cohen and a topic similar in many ways to peak oil, that of global warming (the original post can be found [here](#))).*

*I adapted and modified Marshall's excellent review of Cohen's book to the peak oil scenario. I too have read Cohen's book a couple of times and this review is quite on point in many places, hence my approach. Any differences or errors resulting from those differences from the author's original post and my adaptation are purely my own doing. But the ideas struck me as dead on.)*

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