

The Oil Drum: Campfire

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

Coming Chaos? Maybe Not

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This essay was written by [Michael W. Foley](#) (TOD user [greenuprising](#)), a former professor in the social sciences at an eastern U.S. university who I now know as a local farmer. At a recent Farmers' Market, I suggested that we needed a more empirical and scholarly discussion of the potential for social breakdown, especially violence, during energy descent. Thankfully, he agreed to write the following for The Oil Drum.

A sizable subset of what some on this site call “doomers” are convinced that the demise of the petroleum economy will bring social breakdown and a violent struggle of all against all. Some are even preparing for the chaos to come. I'm convinced we have to take end-of-affluence scenarios, including the scarier ones, seriously. But it can help everyone confront these possibilities if we try to think more intricately about how people might respond. In particular, we need to face head-on the question whether social breakdown and violence are inevitable.



The concerns I'm addressing here are pretty U.S.-centric, though I'm drawing on examples from around the world. Images of marauding bands sacking grocery stores and small farms and of neighbors guarding their hoards with shotguns mainly come out of the American imagination, I suspect. In places like Western Europe and Latin America, with old traditions of militant social organization, acute shortages might bring people out into the streets all right, even entailing looting and such (remember the Latin American “food riots” of the 70's and 80's?), but crystallizing pretty quickly into organized efforts to get governments to respond. But I'll try to

suggest some conclusions that might have broader relevance than the U.S.

First, some reasons to be concerned. As Richard Heinberg notes, we're facing not just peak oil but "peak everything" -- cheap energy, cheap food, abundant water with which to grow it, clean air and water and soil, a reliable climate, and government resources to deal with the cascading crises. The financial crisis and world recession/depression won't be turned around by a few hundred billion dollars for the bankers, and "restarting growth" is little more than a recipe for widening the gap between the economy and the real, physical limitations of the planet. As mainstream a figure as Lester Brown documents the slowdown in agricultural productivity, the decline of water resources, and the threat of climate change to future food production. Whether because of rising seas or abrupt disruptions in food supplies, lots of observers predict massive displacements of people and enormous strains on governments competing for ever scarcer energy, water, and food resources. Border conflicts escalating to war seem likely in some parts of the world, and war will breed still more social disruption. Hunger and climate refugees, in any case, could be expected to besiege the still-affluent countries, including the United States, straining the resources of these countries still further. Add to that the possibility of a dramatic interruption of petroleum supplies, and there is plenty of reason to worry.

And social disruption can turn nasty very quickly. The classic example is the Ik, an African hunter-gatherer group deprived of their land and forced into agriculture on a small parcel of unsuitable farm land. Colin Turnbull's [The Mountain People](#) describes a social breakdown that went so far that children preyed upon their elders in loosely organized gangs. In Yugoslavia, a society with high levels of education and a long history of inter-ethnic cooperation, things fell apart still more rapidly in the face of the IMF-sponsored financial crisis of the early eighties and the decision of state-level politicians to carve out their own power bases with a claim to independence from the union. And throughout Africa, the predatory states of the seventies gave way in the face of the economic crisis of the eighties, and seemingly intractable conflicts followed in quick succession.

At the same time, we have to recognize that economic and ecological collapse don't necessarily lead to violence. We have lots of cases of localized peace in the midst of violence and even cases of "intractable peace." Consider the Great Depression in the United States, for example. A quarter of the population was unemployed, ten thousand banks failed, taking people's life savings with them, and food shortages were not uncommon. But the level of violent crime did not rise notably, many people shared food willingly with wandering hobos, and people organized, more than anything else, to pressure government for help, which eventually came.

In Somalia, to take a surprising example, when things fell apart in clan-based political strife and widespread famine before and after the U.S. intervention in 1989, people eventually turned to Islamic courts to adjudicate disputes and begin to re-organize local community life. The courts movement, together with leaders of relatively stable regions, eventually came together against the warlords of the clans to create a new government, until the U.S. unleashed the Ethiopians against them. But the peace had come from the bottom up. And in one of the most violent countries in the world, Colombia, dozens of "peace communities" in war-torn areas generally manage to stave off guerrillas, paramilitaries, and the Colombian Army.



The sign reads: The community freely: participates in community work; says 'No' to injustice and impunity; does not participate in the war either directly or indirectly, nor bears arms; does not handle information or offer it to any of the parties to the conflict.

So what makes for non-violent outcomes to social crisis? And could we expect this to apply to a peak everything crisis in the United States? I don't have any firm answers and want to provoke a discussion more than anything else. But here are a few suggestions.

First, in most of the violent outcomes listed above, violence is not a matter of social banditry but is politically organized. In Croatia and Bosnia, politicians “played the ethnic card” in trying to secede from the union and recruited thugs to organize violence against both their political opponents and members of other ethnic groups. Though these groups recruited thousands of men, the desertion rate was astounding, according to John Mueller; most people, including young men, preferred to take their chances with their families than to fight. Ashutosh Varshney has a fascinating study of religious conflict in India, where he shows that cities with similar levels of religious division could have long histories of communal violence – or not. The crucial factor was politically motivated thuggery. Where politicians hired thugs to stir up communal violence, you had riots; where the politicians didn't feel compelled or able to do so, there was no such violence. Even where social banditry is widespread, as in El Salvador and Nicaragua after those countries' civil wars, we see the most overt sorts of violence, like highway robbery, fairly quickly suppressed by local police forces, replaced by more sporadic and harder to target crime, like kidnapping.



Franjo Tudjman, former president of Croatia, played the ethnic card to beat out liberal and socialist rivals and sent armed bands to stir up ethnic conflict among Croatia's tens of thousands of Serb residents, sparking civil war.

The first conclusion, then, might be that, absent some sort of political motivation, we're unlikely to see large-scale violence. The prospect of armed gangs roaming the countryside called up by many “doomers” is also unlikely, so long as local law enforcement remains intact (and why should we think it would just fall apart?).

In cities, it makes sense to worry about rioting and looting in the event of food shortages. But again, Americans might recall their own experience. In the fuel crisis of 1975, when Arab countries cut oil supplies to the United States in retaliation for U.S. support for Israel in the 1974 war, we had enormous lines at gas stations and some theft (this was when we started worrying about whether our gas caps had locks, remember?), but very little violence beyond a fist fight or two at the pumps. Food riots could be more serious, but these are usually responses to specific events: the government announces a sudden price increase; a bakery closes its doors and rumors spread that the owner is hoarding food; and – always important – the police step in with force.

Most riots, in fact, start with police violence. Police conduct is key, even when people in the street start the violence. SWAT teams can do a lot of damage; they generally exacerbate violence when lots of people are involved. In Seattle, for example, the WTO protests only became “riots” when out-of-town, SWAT trained police crossed their own line in the sand and started lobbing tear gas in the Capitol Hill neighborhood. Young people enjoying life in that area's outdoor cafes, who had had no part in the protests, rose from their seats and started pelting the police with rocks and their own tear gas canisters. In New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, the hysterical news reports to the contrary, violence was almost wholly the work of white vigilantes inspired by those same reports to “defend” their communities against supposed looters.



So a second conclusion is that we look to the police, and their training, for help in averting violence. Above all, local police should have good relations with their communities. They should also put as much effort into restraining vigilantism as into defending property. We ought to learn something about media hysteria and rumor mills from New Orleans, too.

The examples of ethnic and religious violence in Yugoslavia and India also suggest lessons about leadership and community. In the Indian cities that did not have a history of violence, in Varshney's study, it was because community leaders from both sides (Hindu and Muslim) worked together on a regular basis. Business leaders had little tolerance for politicians who stirred up violence, and some of them depended on a workforce made up mostly of people from a different religion. In Croatia and Bosnia, leaders who opposed ethnic nationalism lost power struggles to those who hoped to gain by independence from Yugoslavia. ***Third lesson: Leadership plays a big role in promoting or avoiding violence.***

When I lived in Washington, D.C., a riot in a predominantly Salvadoran neighborhood in response to police abuse was stopped by a young Salvadoran woman, leader of a legal aid organization, who went out into the streets in the middle of the night to talk to the angry men, many of them drunk. Though most of them didn't know her, they knew who she was and responded to her courage.

Fourth lesson: Community is also important. Neighborhood watch committees apparently help bring down crime in urban neighborhoods. On the other hand, they notoriously don't promote community in their neighborhoods. In Guatemala and Guerrero, Mexico, local vigilantes broke waves of banditry in the face of police and judicial indifference or complicity by taking justice into their own hands; but vigilantes are dangerous beasts themselves. Most of these worked because the community and its leaders could restrain them from running amock. Where a feeling of community exists, neighbors watch out for one another. This doesn't break down easily. It can also force leaders, police and other authorities to play positive roles in crises, if the Indian examples are right. So, yes, stockpile food; but also build community and prepare to share.

So what are the prospects for violence in the United States (and other affluent societies) in the event of a "hard landing"? As far as large-scale violence goes, I'd say chances are next to nil. The

political class is too wed to economic elites (national and local) to promote mobilization that would be to their detriment, and they have too much coercive power at their disposal to tolerate violent would-be counter-elites. Urban rioting would be sporadic and impossible to sustain without this sort of political support. At the local level, we could see some increase in banditry. But a lot depends on how solid local communities are, how their police are likely to behave, and how prepared they are to react generously in a time of crisis.

As I said, these aren't real firm answers, just quick conclusions based on my reading of history and patterns of social violence over the last couple centuries.



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