



A Conversation with Richard Heinberg

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I caught up with Richard Heinberg, author of *The Party's Over* and *Powerdown* at the recent Peak Oil and Community Solutions Conference. Here's the conversation.



SS: Tell me a little bit about yourself.

RH: I grew up in several towns in Missouri, Illinois, and Iowa in the 1950s and '60s. Went to the University of Iowa where I studied violin performance and fine art -- painting. Then I quit school during the Vietnam war as an undergraduate. Iowa was one of the schools shut down by protests and riots during the war and I was an active participant in those. From there I taught myself how to play electric guitar and played in rock bands for about seven years, and realized that the music business was not going in a particularly productive direction and there was more I wanted to do in my life than play music. I became a writer and lived in a number of intentional communities.

SS: Which ones?

RH: One in Toronto, Canada called Society of Integrated Living, SOIL for short; one in Colorado called [Sunrise Ranch](#)...

SS: Which is a spiritual community?

RH: That's right. In the early '90s my wife and I moved from an intentional community in Southern California called [Glen Ivy](#) up to Santa Rosa and I decided from that point on I would

make my living completely as a writer. I wrote several books on environmental spiritual themes, one called "Celebrate the Solstice," another "A New Covenant with Nature." Then toward the end of the '90s I read a Colin Campbell/Jean Laherrere article in Scientific American, and that set some gears going. I got on the [energy resources list](#) and started reading Jay Hanson's "[Die Off](#)" web site and all the links and recommended readings there. It basically turned my whole world around. I had written a whole book criticizing industrialism and the whole industrial revolution without any reference at all to energy (laughs). This completely reorganized my thinking.

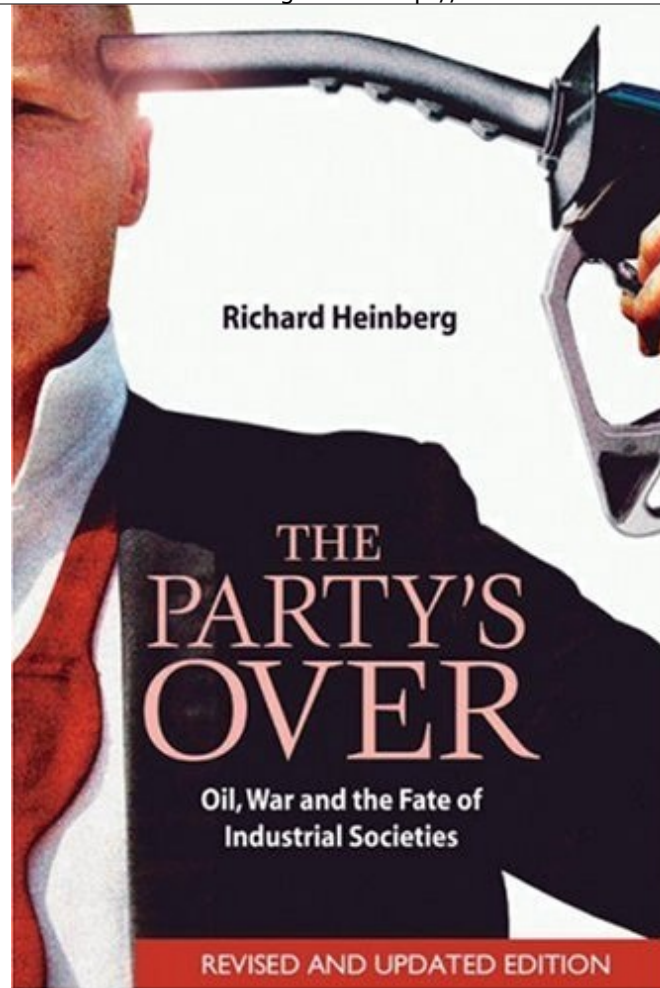
I imagined that somebody else would write the definitive book on peak oil, some petroleum geologist would do it because I didn't feel I was qualified to do it . I was waiting for somebody to come out with such a book but it wasn't happening. At a certain point I said well, this is too important to wait, and at least I know how to write a decent book. I had edited a bunch of books for other authors, I had worked for a publisher - I figured, maybe I can contribute that to this cause, even if I'm not an expert. At the time I didn't think *The Party's Over* would be as successful as it has been. It's been very gratifying to see the response that's come from that book.

SS: Are the roots of your social and political development in the Vietnam war protests originally?

RH: That definitely was a mind changing event, but it was in the air. I remember in the early 1970s giving a talk at a college in Toronto, where I was living at the time, where I predicted that by the end of the 20th century there would no longer be car companies and that civilization would have changed profoundly and we'd all be growing organic food, and all of these things...obviously that didn't happen. I was wrong. Maybe I was just a decade off.

SS: I think that in this question of how one relates to peak oil, there are some people who hear the facts and think, "Oh we'll be fine, we're all going to think of something, this must be a soluble problem"; and there are other people who hear it and think, "Oh what are we going to do", and begin to focus on the difficulties of solving the problem. We often come with some personal factors which determine whether we take an optimistic stance or a pessimistic stance. Do you think there's anything that shapes the way you react to it that you've identified, that you're comfortable talking about?

RH: I'm sure there are a lot of people who pick up *The Party's Over* and read it and think of me as a doom-and-gloomer. That was the substance of most of the comments and feedback I was getting in the first year or two after the book was published. But now I find people coming up to me and saying, "Thanks for being so hopeful." It's very strange. I think other people have published books that were more doom-and-gloom than *The Party's Over* like *The Long Emergency*, and by comparison I look like a moderate and even sometimes hopeful. I think it's important that people either come away from a lecture or a book with a sense of what they can do, some possibility, because if you're just giving people the message that the end is coming and there's nothing you can do about it you're not doing them that much of a favor. If you have terminal cancer I guess it's better to tell the person they have terminal cancer rather than hide it from them, but it's better still if you can tell them, hey, if you change your lifestyle, stop smoking and all of these things maybe you can prolong your life and have a better quality.



SS: I love the cover of [The Party's Over](#), where did it come from?

RH: A British publishing company, [Clairview](#), bought the rights and got their own designer and the minute I saw it I said, "That's way better than our cover". I called my publisher and said, "We have to buy the rights to that." All the printings since the first printing have had that other cover.

SS: How do you track progress toward peak: are there particular indicators you look at on a regular basis that give you a sense on how it's evolving?

RH: I'm doing what everyone else is doing, looking to the people who are doing the studies, watching what studies are coming out. When Chris Skrebowski comes out with something...I was interested to read this thing from Rembrandt Koppelaar. Whenever anybody's actually crunching the numbers, I pay attention to that. Opinions are easy, I can spout my own opinion as to when it will happen, but I'm not one of the people actually doing the studies; I'm a reporter. So I have to rely primarily on data from international energy agencies, OPEC, whoever is releasing numbers, and then from the people who understand the significance of those numbers and can actually put them into some context and interpret them. People like Colin Campbell and Jean Laherrere and Matt Simmons, even. I listen to them and each of them has a slightly different view of the numbers. You have to take that into account, and say why is this person a little more pessimistic. It's a full time job keeping up with it all. I spend 3-4 hours a day reading all the web sites and what's been published over the last 24 hours.

SS: You have the likes of CERA coming out with significantly more optimistic projections than the various peak oil figures. What do you think is going on?

RH: CERA has been very wrong before. They made some very optimistic projections about North American natural gas as recently as 2000 that were completely wrong. That was at a time, or very near the time, when Matt Simmons was making some projections about American natural gas that were much more pessimistic and much more accurate. I look at that and some of the rebuttals to the CERA report on your site and elsewhere are very convincing to me. I think the CERA folks are dramatically underestimating the power of depletion. When we see Norway's production going down in the range of 10% a year, we need enormous amount of production capacity over the next few years to fend off that degree of depletion. What's going to happen when Canterell starts down that slope? It takes a lot to offset that kind of depletion and I don't think the CERA people are taking it that seriously. And they overestimate what we can get through non-conventional resources, like the tar sands. They seem to be much more economic in their thinking. For instance, if the tar sands are economical to produce then throwing more money at them will translate into higher rates of production. I just don't believe that.

SS: It's clear that existing expansion plans don't look adequate. Once society realizes that and panics, why can't we ramp them up rapidly?

RH: Certainly, more resources will go in that direction but there are basic physical constraints. Shell's process of removing oil from shale, it's an ingenious method but I can't imagine producing millions of barrels a day, it would be mind boggling. The scale of the technology, the infrastructure that would be required to do that...

SS: You don't think it can be scaled that fast

RH: I don't think it can be scaled that fast, no. I really don't.

SS: At this conference there's been a strong sense in the audience, summarized very nicely by John Ikerd this morning, essentially saying the industrial revolution was a mistake and we've made ourselves dependent on all these non-renewable resources and we need to go back to where we went wrong, back before we started using these non-renewable resources. Which to me suggests an 18th century level of economy and output. The 18th century population is about a 10th of what we're going to have here before long, we'll easily reach nine or ten billion. Do you have some basis for thinking we can feed that many people with that kind of level of energy?

RH: I think we probably can't. We're approaching the population bottleneck. I write in both of my books about the population problem and make a few suggestions, not original with me but suggestions from people who understand population issues, as to how we can gradually reduce global population. I'm not particularly saying we're going to do any of those things, I think that over the course of the 21st century we'll see a culling of the population by starvation and famine and epidemics.

SS: When we're making choices -- say like nuclear power -- suppose it were the case that we were able to ramp up nuclear power, and that would allow society to have more energy and not as many people would have to die, wouldn't we be obliged to just do it?

RH: Maybe there is a scenario in which that's possible; I tend to doubt it. I see this discussion in a larger ecological context, because that's what I teach -- I'm not a trained ecologist, but I do teach human ecology, I managed to educate myself in the science of ecology over the years. I see the energy problem, the problem with fossil fuel depletion, in the larger context of the ecological dilemma: the population pressure, resource depletion, habitat destruction. The only way to solve that ultimately is to scale down the human project. You can't solve it by simply replacing one resource for another that's becoming scarce -- you can ameliorate the problem temporarily, but it

will only come up in another guise. Maybe oil or natural gas is the first resource to be depleted, but what's next? Will it be topsoil or fresh water or copper? There's a whole list that's depleting quickly. The only answer is to reduce the per capita rate of consumption of resources and reduce the population. We can't do that in an organized way, and I think we've shown that we can't, with a few exceptions. China has experienced less population growth than it would have otherwise but the population is still growing. If we can't do it in an organized, cooperative, deliberate way, then nature will do it for us.

SS: The lessons from Cuba do seem to be the best one can find of a society that was faced with a similar issue and handled it about as well as one can imagine handling it.

RH: I think so.

SS: What do you think are the lessons of that?

RH: There are a lot of lessons for the U.S. in the experience of Cuba. As dysfunctional as planned economies can be, and socialist governments can be, there was an advantage in this instance in that they were able to make decisions quickly and change their modes of agricultural production rapidly. One person could say, "This is the way we're going to go," and cause a whole chain of responses within the system. They could decide to pay agricultural workers better than urban engineers and that would happen overnight. It's a very difficult scenario to imagine that happening in the U.S. with a diversified economy and a political class that is so deeply corrupt and dysfunctional. So, lessons from the U.S. will have to be learned by individuals and small groups who are willing to learn them. The U.S. government is not likely to learn many lessons from Cuba because I don't think they're paying attention. I wish it were otherwise.

SS: In history, when societies get into crisis, you sometimes see great people emerge as leaders that you might not have expected. For example, in the Great Depression we have FDR. Then on the other hand you can look at Weimar Germany, where they elected Adolf Hitler. Crisis will certainly bring out **something** different in us. What do you think it might be?

RH: In the U.S. I'm sad to say, the deep leadership, not the people we elect but the people who are actually making the decisions, are aware of the general trend of events. They see the American standard of living cannot be supported. Rather than informing the American people of this and asking for a national consensus based on a shared willingness to cooperatively reduce living standards, what they're doing is to quietly put in place the mechanisms for an authoritarian regime. When the time comes they will enforce that on the American people. How that will come about, when, I don't know.

SS: You're not optimistic about us finding an FDR?

RH: Maybe there's someone waiting in the wings who could be the benevolent dictator under these circumstances but I don't see that person out there. The American political system has been eviscerated in terms of democracy - in my opinion the last two presidential elections were fraudulent. At this point if there is a benevolent dictator in the wings, it's not going to be somebody we actually elect, or if we happen to elect them it will only be a coincidence that we vote for the person the elites have chosen for us. It's not a very happy place to be in, but the evidence I see points to it.

SS: Could you tell me about New College?

RH: New College is a small private college in Northern California started back in the '70s by some

idealistic leftists. Its main campus is in San Francisco and teaches courses on social justice issues. About 8 years ago they decided they wanted to have a satellite campus that focused more on environmental issues, so I was hired to design the curriculum for the Santa Rosa campus. We're doing some pretty exciting things there, particularly the BA program there is education for a post-petroleum world. We teach our students ecological agriculture, natural home building, and the year-long program is designed so that students get a clear understanding of how the modern industrial world came to be, with its roots all the way back to the very beginning of agriculture itself. It's an education in not only ecology but cultural anthropology, history. On top of that with every subject we explore, whether it be economics or technology or food and agriculture, we also look at sustainable alternatives that are happening in the world today, who are those leaders in those fields and what are they doing, what can we take away from what they're doing to implement in our lives. Students come into New College and usually within the first month or two they become extremely depressed because they had no idea that things in the world are nearly as bad as they actually are. Then usually by the end of the year they're, if not hopeful, then highly motivated because they've been given the tools to actually do things in their lives. They realize the information they have is very important because not many people have this information and therefore they have a sense of mission in their lives that they can actually be of value to their families and communities with this knowledge.

SS: There's a new edition of [The Party's Over?](#)

RH: Yes, it's out now. It's substantially revised and much improved. All of the data is updated, there's some spiffy new graphs, and an afterword. The first edition came out before the Iraq invasion had occurred, so the timeline is updated.

SS: Tell us about how you use the Oil Drum.

RH: Oh, I check in on the Oil Drum at least a couple of times a day. I look at [EnergyBulletin.net](#) to see what the latest articles are in the press, and then Oil Drum is the only site I go to for discussion because I find the discussion there is much better informed than any of the other peak oil sites. And with the hurricanes, I found the resources there for keeping up with what was actually happening on the ground, both with Katrina and Rita, were better than any other site.

My thanks to Tamsen Merrill for transcribing the tape - SS



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