

Civilization

Ongoing Holocausts

The lesson of the Holocaust is the facility with which most people, put into a situation that does not contain a good choice, or renders such a good choice very costly, argue themselves away from the issue of moral duty (or fail to argue themselves towards it), adopting instead the precepts of rational interest and self-preservation. In a system where rationality and ethics point in opposite directions, humanity is the main loser. Evil can do its dirty work, hoping that most people most of the time will refrain from doing rash, reckless things — and resisting evil is rash and reckless. Evil needs neither enthusiastic followers nor an applauding audience — the instinct of self-preservation will do, encouraged by the comforting thought that it is not my turn yet, thank God: by lying low, I can still escape.

— Zygmunt Bauman¹

Many of us go willingly to our own deaths. In the Nazi Holocaust, in front of the gas chambers and crematoria were well-kept lawns and flower gardens. Often, as those who were about to die arrived, they would hear light music, played by an orchestra of “young and pretty girls all dressed in white blouses and navy-blue skirts.”² The men, women, and children were told to undress, so they could be given showers. They were told, most often pleasantly, to move into the room where they would soon die. As Zygmunt Bauman observes, “rational people will go quietly, meekly, joyously into a gas chamber, if only they are allowed to believe it is a bathroom.”³

Once the doors were locked behind them, a sergeant would give the order to drop the crystals: “All right, give ‘em something to chew on.”⁴ Soon, but too late, the people would realize that they had signed their final false contract, and at last they would fight for their lives, stampeding toward the doors that were sealed behind them, where “they piled up in one blue clammy blood-splattered pyramid, clawing and mauling each other even in death.”⁵

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The endpoint of civilization is assembly-line mass murder. The assembly-line mass murder of the Nazi Holocaust is production stripped of the veneer of economics. It is the very essence of production. It took the living and converted them to the dead. That's what this culture does. It was efficient, it was calculable, it was predictable, and it was controlled through nonhuman technologies. And it was also, as well as being grossly immoral, incredibly stupid. Even from the perspective of pure acquisitiveness and land-hunger, it was self-defeating. As German troops froze and starved on the Eastern Front, valuable railroad cars were used instead to move cargos that fed crematoria. The Nazis performed economic analyses showing that feeding slaves just a bit more increased their productivity more than enough to offset the extra cost of feed. Yet they were starved. Similarly, slaughtering Russians was foolish. Many Ukrainians and Russians greeted the Wehrmacht with kisses, open arms, and flowers, happy to be out from under the tyranny of Stalinism. The Germans quickly began murdering noncombatants to make room for the Germans who would move in after the war, or because they were told to, or because the Russians were inferior, or for any of the reasons given for these slaughters since the beginning of civilization's wars of extermination. And so Russian noncombatants fought back. They blew up trains, they killed German officers, they picked off individual soldiers. They hurt the Germans. For all their vaunted rationality, the Germans weren't so very rational, were they?

Of course we're different now. We have rational reasons for the killings. There's no silly talk of master races and *lebensraum*. Instead, the economy is run along strictly rationalist lines. If something makes money, we do it, and if it doesn't, we don't (ignore for a moment that to divorce economics from morals and humanity is as evil as it is to do the same for science). But the United States economy costs at least five times as much as it's worth. Total annual U.S. corporate profits are about \$500 billion, while the direct costs of the activities from which these profits derive are more than \$2.5 trillion.⁶ These include \$51 billion in direct subsidies and \$53 billion in tax breaks, \$274.7 billion lost because of deaths from work-place cancer, \$225.9 billion lost because of the health costs of stationary source air pollution, and so on.⁷ This is to speak only of calculable costs, since other values — such as a living planet — do not, because they're not calculable, exist. The fact remains, however, that it is manifestly stupid to destroy your landbase, regardless of the abstract financial reward or esteem you may gain. Yet this culture spends more to build and maintain commercial fishing vessels than the fiscal value of the fish caught. The same is true for the destruction of forests. In the United States the Forest Service loses in a not atypical year \$400 million dollars on its timber sale program, or about seven hundred and seventy-nine dollars per acre deforested.

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Hitler was ahead of his time. Social conditions weren't yet ripe for a government to fully realize the elimination of diversity toward which he aimed. Simply put, his — or any — corporate-governmental state had not yet achieved the sort of power necessary to emplace and maintain that purity of control. This is true for power relative to other corporate states, it's true for power relative to human beings, and it's true for power relative to the natural world.

So far as the former goes, we need to remember that Hitler wasn't defeated by Jews or members of resistance organizations; he was defeated by other imperial powers, the Soviet Union, Britain, and the United States. Had the Wehrmacht not foundered on the Russian winter and been repulsed by Russian troops, our stories of the time after Dachau would now read much differently. And certainly these other powers didn't stop the Nazis because of that nation's mistreatment of Jews, Romani, and so on. Indeed, each has its own august tradition of similarly unabated ruthlessness. At base, these nations stopped the German government because they didn't want it to control resources they themselves controlled or coveted.

So far as the second, control over people, imagine if Hitler had been able to broadcast his message twenty-four hours per day into peoples' homes, and if people had willingly tuned in to these broadcasts hour after hour, day after day. Imagine the effectiveness of his propaganda if teleplays could have insinuated his form of casting and fate into the lives of his subjects from infancy to senescence. I think we do ourselves a disservice if we look at old clips of Hitler strutting, yelling, and gesticulating, and wonder how the hell anyone came under his spell. First, consider who chose those clips: the victors, who as always have an interest in making their enemies look ludicrous. But more importantly, that wasn't even the Nazis' main form of propaganda. Joseph Goebbels, party propaganda chief for the National Socialists, was clear that rather than having the media inculcate people with heavy-handed political messages, it was much better to give them lots of light entertainment. Goebbels also believed that propaganda worked best when it put forth the illusion of diversity, but had a numbing sameness — a purity — to the underlying ideological message.⁸

For those whom light entertainment failed to convince, technology was also not sufficiently advanced to allow such strict governmental control of individuals as Hitler would perhaps have liked. Sure, his state police force was reasonably efficient for its day, but not only did the Nazis have no satellite surveillance systems, they didn't even have satellites. And the forensic sciences were in their early stages. It would not have been possible to track, identify, or apprehend anti-social individuals through computer-matching of fingerprints or facial scans. I'm sure by now you've heard that every person who attended the 2001 Super Bowl had her or his face surreptitiously scanned; these images were cross-checked with computer images, to identify lawbreakers. And now Sacramento's airport has begun scanning the face of every passenger. Hitler had no worldwide network of computers (named *Echelon* or not) capable of intercepting three *billion* phone or email (*What's email?* I can hear Adolf

ask) messages per day, sifting through approximately ninety percent of all transmissions. Hitler not only did not have what we would consider computers, but he also did not have the capacity to capture computer signals such as keystrokes or images from monitors through walls or from other buildings. He did not have the capacity to point special types of cameras at people and perform strip searches, or even body cavity searches. Amateur that he was, Hitler did not even have a national system of social security numbers, which, in the words of United States Secretary of State Colin Powell, “allows us to monitor, track down and capture an American citizen.”⁹ None of this he had. Scientists used such unreliable means as phrenology to identify potential miscreants, having no knowledge of the human genome. And Hitler would not even have recognized the word *genotype*, much less been able to create genetically-altered diseases to target specific races. He would have had no idea what an RFID chip is.

So far as the third, Hitler did not have the capacity to irradiate the planet, nor to poison it (organochloride pesticides and herbicides came into common usage after World War II and in fact were in many ways by-products of the gas warfare programs of World War I: prior to that *every* farmer was organic). He didn't have the capacity to change the planet's climate. He did not have at his disposal a standing army designed to fight two major wars in disparate parts of the globe at the same time. The Wehrmacht couldn't even handle two *fronts*. The economy had not become so integrated, so *rationalized* — in other words, it had not lost so much of its diversity — as to be under the control of so few people who could kill millions of human beings — hell, who could kill the whole planet — by the merest extension of economic pressure.

In his analysis of the social effects of information technologies, Joseph Weizenbaum wrote, “Germany implemented the ‘final solution’ of its ‘Jewish Problem’ as a textbook exercise in instrumental reasoning. Humanity briefly shuddered when it could no longer avert its gaze from what had happened, when the photographs taken by the killers themselves began to circulate, and when the pitiful survivors re-emerged into the light. But in the end it made no difference. The same logic, the same cold and ruthless application of calculating reason, slaughtered at least as many people during the next twenty years as had fallen victim to the technicians of the thousand-year Reich. We have learned nothing.”¹⁰

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Unless it is stopped, the dominant culture will kill everything on the planet, or at least everything it can.

Each holocaust is unique. The destruction of the European Jewry did not look like the destruction of the American Indians. It could not, because the technologies involved were

not the same, the targets were not the same, and the perpetrators were not the same. They shared motivations and certain aspects of their socialization, to be sure, but they were not the same. Similarly, the slaughter of Armenians (and Kurds) by Turks did not (and does not) look like the slaughter of Vietnamese by Americans. And just as similarly, the holocausts of the twenty-first century will not and do not already look like the great holocausts of the twentieth. They cannot, because this society has progressed.

And every holocaust looks different depending on the class to which the observer belongs. The Holocaust looked far different to high ranking Nazi officials and to executives of large corporations — both of whose primary social concerns would have been how to maximize production and control, that is, how to most effectively exploit human and nonhuman resources — than it did to good Germans, whose primary concerns were as varied as the people themselves but probably included doing their own jobs — immoral as those jobs may have been from an outside perspective — as well as possible; may have included feelings of relief that those in power were finally doing something about the “Jewish Problem”; and certainly included doing whatever they could to not notice the greasy smoke from the crematoria (constructed with the best materials and faultless workmanship). The Holocaust then also looked different to good Germans than it did to those who resisted, whose main concerns may have been how to bring down the system. And it looked different to those who resisted than it did to those who were considered *untermenschen*, whose main concerns may have been staying alive, or failing that, dying with humanity.

Manifest Destiny looked different to Indians than it did to JP Morgan. American slavery looked different to slaves than it did to those whose comforts and elegancies were based on slavery, and than it did to those for whom free black labor drove down their wages.

What will the great holocausts of the twenty-first century will look like? It depends on where you stand. Look around.

If you're in group one, one of those in power, your post-modern holocausts will be at most barely visible, and at least a price you're willing to pay, as Madame Albright said about killing Iraqi children. The holocausts will probably share similarities with other holocausts, as you attempt to maximize production — to “grow the economy,” as you might say — and as when necessary you attempt to eradicate dissent. This means the holocaust will look like a booming economy beset by shifting problems that somehow always keep you from ever reaching the Promised Land, whatever that might be. The holocaust will look like numbers on ledgers. It will look like technical problems to be solved, whether those problems are increasing your access to necessary resources, dealing with global warming, calming unrest on the streets, or figuring out what to do about too many unproductive people on land you know you could put to better use. The holocaust will look like houses with gates, limousines with bullet-proof glass, and a military budget that can never stop increasing.

The holocaust will feel like economics. It will feel like progress. It will feel like technological innovation. It will feel like civilization. It will feel like the way things are.

If you're in the second group, the good Germans, you will continue to be coopted into supporting the system that does not serve you well. Perhaps the holocaust will look like a new car. Perhaps it will look like lending your talents to a major corporation — or more broadly toward economic production — so you can make a better life for your children. Perhaps it will look like working as an engineer for Shell or on an assembly line for General Motors. Maybe it will look like basing a person's value on her or his employability or productivity. Perhaps it will look like anger at Mexicans or Pakistanis or Algerians or Hmong who compete with you for jobs. Perhaps it will look like outrage at environmentalists who want to save some damn suckerfish, even (or especially) if it impinges on your property rights, or if it takes water you need to irrigate, to make the desert bloom, to make the desert productive. Maybe it will feel like continuing to do a job that you hate — and that requires so little of your humanity — because no matter how you try, you never can seem to catch up. Maybe it will feel like being tired at the end of the day, and just wanting to sit and watch some television.

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An article appeared in today's *Ottawa Citizen* under the headline: "Science turns monkeys into drones — Humans are next, genetic experts say." The article read, "Scientists have discovered a way of manipulating a gene that turns animals into drones that [sic] do not become bored with repetitive tasks. The experiments, conducted on monkeys, are the first to demonstrate that animal behaviour can be permanently changed, turning the subjects from aggressive to 'compliant' creatures.

"The genes are identical in humans and although the discovery could help to treat depression and other types of mental illness, it will raise images of the Epsilon caste from Aldous Huxley's futuristic novel *Brave New World*.

"The experiments — detailed in the journal *Nature Neuroscience* this month — involved blocking the effect of a gene called D2 in a particular part of the brain. This cut off the link between the rhesus monkeys' motivation and reward.

"Instead of speeding up with the approach of a deadline or the prospect of a 'treat,' the monkeys in the experiment could be made to work just as enthusiastically for long periods. The scientists say the identical technique would apply to humans.

"'Most people are motivated to work hard and well only by the expectation of reward, whether it's a paycheque or a word of praise,' said Barry Richmond, a government neurobiologist at the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health, who led the project. 'We found we could remove that link and create a situation where repetitive, hard work would continue without any reward.'

“The experiments involved getting rhesus monkeys to operate levers in response to colour changes on screens in front of them. Normally they work hardest and fastest with the fewest mistakes if they think a reward for the ‘work’ is imminent.

“However, Mr. Richmond’s team found that they could make the monkeys work their hardest and fastest all the time, without any complaint or sign of slacking, just by manipulating D2 so that they forgot about the expectation of reward.

“The original purpose [sic] of the research was to find ways of treating mental illness, but the technicalities of permanently altering human behaviour by gene manipulation are currently too complex, he said. However, he and other scientists acknowledge that methods of manipulating human physical and psychological traits are just around the corner, and the technology will emerge first as a lucrative add-on available from in vitro fertilization clinics

“‘There’s no doubt we will be able to influence behaviour,’ said Julian Savulescu, a professor of ethics at Oxford University. ‘Genetically manipulating people to become slaves is not in their interests, but there are other changes that might be. We have to make choices about what makes a good life for an individual.’

“In a presentation at a Royal Society meeting titled *Designing Babies: What the Future Holds*, Yuri Verlinsky, a scientist from the University of Chicago who is at the forefront of embryo manipulation, said: ‘As infertility customers are investing so much time, money and effort into having a baby, shouldn’t they have a healthy one and what is to stop them picking a baby for its physical and psychological traits?’

“Gregory Stock, author of *Redesigning Humans* and an ethics specialist from the University of California, agrees. ‘I don’t think these kind of interventions are exactly round the corner, they are a few years away, but I don’t think they are going to be stopped by legislation,’ he said.”¹¹

Remind me again, what are we waiting for? Why are we not bringing down civilization now?

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If you’re in the subsection of the third group who might some day resist but don’t know where to put your rage, the holocaust might look like armed robbery, auto theft, assault. It might look like joining a gang. It might look like needle tracks down the insides of your arms, and might smell like the bitter, vinegary stench of tar heroin. Or maybe it smells minty strong, like menthol, like the sweet smell of crack brought into your neighborhood at the behest of the CIA. Or maybe not. Maybe it’s the unmistakable smell of the inside of a cop car, and a vision through that backseat window of a little girl eating an ice cream cone, with the knowledge that never in your life will you see this sight again. Maybe it looks like Pelican Bay, or Marion, or San Quentin, or Leavenworth. Or maybe it feels like a bullet in the

back of the head, and leaves you lying on the streets of New York City, Cincinnati, Seattle, Oakland, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Baltimore, Washington.

If you're a member of the subsection of group three already working against the centralization of power, against the system, then maybe from your perspective the holocaust looks like rows of black-clad armored policemen, and it smells like teargas. Maybe it looks like lobbying a congress you know has never served you. Maybe it looks like the destruction of place after wild place, and feels like an impotence sharp as a broken leg. Maybe it looks like staring down the barrel of an American-made gun in the hands of a Colombian man wearing American-made camo fatigues, and knowing that your life is over.

For those of the fourth class, the simply extra, maybe it looks like the view from just outside the chain-link fence surrounding a chemical refinery, and maybe it smells like Cancer Alley. Maybe it looks like children with leukemia, children with cancer of the spine, children with birth defects. Maybe it feels like the grinding ache of hunger that has been your closest companion since you were born. Maybe it looks like the death of your daughter from starvation, and the death of your son from diphtheria, measles, or chicken pox. Maybe it feels like death from dehydration, when a tablet costing less than a penny could have saved your life. Or maybe it feels like nothing. Maybe it sounds like nothing, looks like nothing: what does it feel like to be struck by a missile in the middle of the night, a missile traveling faster than the speed of sound, a missile launched a thousand miles away?

Maybe it feels like salmon battering themselves against dams, monkeys locked in steel cages, polar bears starving on a dwindling ice cap, hogs confined in crates so small they cannot stand, trees falling to the chainsaw, rivers poisoned, whales deafened by sonic blasts from Navy experiments. Maybe it feels like the crack of tibia under the unforgiving jaws of a leghold trap.

Maybe it looks like the destruction of the planet's life support systems. Maybe it looks like the final conversion of the living to the dead.

As much as I cannot help but see the similarities between prisons and concentration camps, it seems to me a grave error to count on Zyklon-B-dispensing showers to mark the new holocaust. Perhaps the new holocaust is dioxin in polar bear fat, metam sodium in the Smith River. Perhaps it comes in the form of decreasing numbers of corporations controlling increasing portions of our food supply, until, as now, three huge corporations control more than eighty percent of the beef market, and seven corporations control more than ninety percent of the grain market. Perhaps it comes in the form of these corporations, and the governments which provide the muscle for them, deciding who eats and who does not. Perhaps it comes in the form of so much starvation that we cannot count the dead. Perhaps it comes in the form of all of these, and in many others I could not name even if I were able to predict.

But this I know. The pattern has been of increasing efficiency in the destruction, and

increasing abstraction. Andrew Jackson himself took the “sculps” of the Indians he murdered. Heinrich Himmler nearly fainted when a hundred Jews were shot in front of him, which was surely one reason for the increased use of gas. Now, of course, it can all be done by economics.

And this I know, too. No matter what form it takes, most of us will not notice it. Those who notice will pay too little attention. It does not matter how great the cost to others nor even to ourselves, we will soldier on. We will, ourselves, walk quietly, meekly, into whatever form the gas chambers take, if only we are allowed to believe they are bathrooms.

Endgame

The assassination [of Hitler] must take place, cost what it will. Even if it does not succeed, the Berlin action must go forward. The point now is not whether the coup has any practical purpose, but to prove to the world and before history that German resistance is ready to stake its all. Compared to this, everything else is a side issue.

— Henning von Treskow¹²

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The second lesson [of the Holocaust] tells us that putting self-preservation above moral duty is in no way predetermined, inevitable and inescapable. One can be pressed to do it, but one cannot be forced to do it, and thus one cannot really shift the responsibility for doing it on to those who exerted the pressure. It does not matter how many people chose moral duty over the rationality of self-preservation — what does matter is that some did. Evil is not all-powerful. It can be resisted. The testimony of the few who did resist shatters the authority of the logic of self-preservation. It shows it for what it is in the end — a choice. One wonders how many people must defy that logic for evil to be incapacitated. Is there a magic threshold of defiance beyond which the technology of evil grinds to a halt?

— Zygmunt Bauman¹³

How will the crash play out? Predicting the future is always a sketchy endeavor, and I believe this is especially true for the crash of civilization. There are too many variables, and there will be too many bifurcation points. Will a plague of antibiotic-resistant bacteria hit humans so hard the human population plummets? Maybe the crash will come through a genetically-

modified virus, whether released by a *Twelve Monkeys* protégé, someone who hates the U.S. government, the U.S. government itself (remember the line from *Rebuilding America's Defenses*, that “advanced forms of biological warfare that can ‘target’ specific genotypes may transform biological warfare from the realm of terror to a politically useful tool.”¹⁴), or perhaps most likely of all, Bayer or Monsanto. Maybe peak oil will bring it all down. Maybe global warming. Maybe hackers and ex-military people. Maybe soil loss. Maybe water loss. Maybe nukes: I have absolutely no doubt that when those who run the United States feel their power slipping, whether through oil shortages, external invasion, internal revolt, or ecological collapse, they will have no moral qualms about nuking anywhere they feel necessary, including places in the United States (hell, they’ve bombed Nevada for decades now). Indeed, I have great fears that when they feel their power slipping — and slip it will no matter what anyone does — they may blow up the entire planet before they give up their losing game. I asked Dean and Brian if they thought hackers could prevent this. They said, “No. I’m sure we could hack our way into a dozen or so missile sites and prevent them from being fired but there’s no way we could get in to stop them all. There are thousands and thousands. There’s just too many.”

All that said, I’m going to lay out some possibilities, which may or may not come to pass. Honestly, you might do just as well to skip the next several pages and take a nice long walk. But only on one condition: that you spend the next few days developing your own series of scenarios for what happens next, holding yourself as honest as you can, and making yourself answerable in this honesty to those humans and nonhumans who come after. That’s not a rhetorical suggestion. Close the book, put it down, and take a couple of days to think about it.¹⁵

Now, to one version of the crash, this one caused by oil.¹⁶

Oil, as Brian mentioned, is the black blood of industrial civilization. As demand for this cheap energy continues to outstrip supply, the United States and other industrialized nations will continue to invade regions containing oil. Environmental regulations will be systematically gutted or ignored. Those who effectively oppose oil extraction will be bought off, silenced, or killed.

But no matter how many regions the industrialized nations invade, no matter how many landbases they destroy, supply for oil will never again exceed demand. Oil prices will continue to rise, leading to the eventual strangulation of the entire economy.

We can say the same for natural gas, except that its decline may be even more precipitous than that of oil.

Oil and natural gas are used not only as energy sources. Natural gas is the feedstock from which nearly all chemical fertilizers and pesticides are derived. No natural gas, no industrial agriculture. And plastics are petroleum products. No oil, no plastics. But it goes much further than this. Oil is used in the fabrication of at least 500,000 different types of products, including, to provide a very tiny sample: “saccharine (artificial sweetener), roofing paper, aspirin, hair coloring, heart valves, crayons, parachutes, telephones, bras, transparent tape,

antiseptics, purses, deodorant, panty hose, air conditioners, shower curtains, shoes, volleyballs, electrician's tape, floor wax, lipstick, sweaters, running shoes, bubble gum, car bodies, tires, house paint, hair dryers, guitar strings, pens, ammonia, eyeglasses, contacts, life jackets, insect repellent, fertilizers, hair coloring, movie film, ice chests, loudspeakers, basketballs, footballs, combs/brushes, linoleum, fishing rods, rubber boots, water pipes, vitamin capsules, motorcycle helmets, fishing lures, petroleum jelly, lip balm, antihistamines, golf balls, dice, insulation, glycerin, typewriter/computer ribbons, trash bags, rubber cement, cold cream, umbrellas, ink of all types, wax paper, paint brushes, hearing aids, compact discs, mops, bandages, artificial turf, cameras, glue, shoe polish, caulking, tape recorders, stereos, plywood adhesives, TV cabinets, toilet seats, car batteries, candles, refrigerator seals, carpet, cortisone, vaporizers, solvents, nail polish, denture adhesives, balloons, boats, dresses, shirts (non-cotton), perfumes, toothpaste, roller-skate wheels, plastic forks, tennis rackets, hair curlers, plastic cups, electric blankets, oil filters, floor wax, Ping-Pong paddles, cassette tapes, dishwashing liquid, water skis, upholstery, chewing gum, thermos bottles, plastic chairs, transparencies, plastic wrap, rubber bands, computers, gasoline, diesel fuel, kerosene, heating oil, asphalt, motor oil, jet fuel, marine diesel, and butane."¹⁷

Rising energy costs will undoubtedly hasten the consolidation of the already mammoth conglomerates that control the economy. These state-backed monopolies will act as state-backed monopolies are wont to do, and they will drive prices up and wages down. Unemployment will continue to rise. The gap between rich and poor will continue to widen. Spending on the military, police, and prisons will continue to climb. Starvation will increase, as the poor continue to be denied access to land and water used instead for the production of consumables for the upper classes.

As energy becomes more and more expensive, and as an ever-greater percentage of governmental spending is aimed toward securityTM — which has always meant providing security for those who steal resources and security from those whose lives and landbases are ruined — less money will be available to provide basic maintenance for the infrastructure. This is already happening. The infrastructure — or at least that part of the infrastructure which serves the poor — will continue to degrade.

The more the infrastructure degrades, the more that stockpiles of food, oil and gas, chemicals, and pharmaceuticals will be controlled by the military, police, and other warlords.¹⁸ We see this already in U.S. occupied Afghanistan, and elsewhere.¹⁹

The already (and always) faint line between corporations and governments will fade not only from reality but from memory as well. The already fundamentally false distinction between “public” armies and private “security forces” will disappear entirely. Mussolini's definition of fascism — the merger of state and corporate power — will be complete. We see this already in U.S. occupied United States.

I think the fictional reference I'm looking for is 1984.

The writer and activist Aric McBay has described what may happen next.²⁰ In order to make up for the "energy gap" in agriculture and manufacturing, slavery and forced labor will become ubiquitous. Production will still falter, since huge numbers of people are required to put out even a fraction of the output of a large machine. Many of these people will be worked to death. These deaths will matter no more than these deaths have ever mattered to those who value production over life.

Portions of cities may be ghettoized — sealed off — to prevent those inside from escaping or getting food. Those inside may be forced to work in the factories for food, water, and so on.²¹ Many of these people will be worked to death as well. In the country, people will be worked to death in agricultural labor camps.

But without cheap energy, none of this will be sufficient to supply cities with necessary resources. In time even the rich may begin to go hungry. Urban populations will crash because of disease, starvation, and emigration. The electrical and other infrastructures will fail completely because of deliberate attacks, lack of maintenance, and lack of energy. Most cities will become effectively uninhabitable, and industrial civilization as we know it will be over.²²

Simultaneously, the breakdown of the infrastructure will reduce the effectiveness of the military and police, who rely partly on high-tech communications and energy-intensive mobility to kill or capture their targets. This reduced effectiveness will lead to a gradual return of power to the local level as it becomes impossible to maintain distant control without massive inputs of cheap energy. This transfer of power back to the regional level will not, however, herald the beginning of an enlightened era of ecovillages where people live sustainably in peace and harmony, in part because there are still too many people for the landbases to permanently support, in part because the landbases have been too degraded to support as many people as they did prior to the arrival of civilization, and in part because most of the people are still insane, that is, civilized, and have no idea how to enter into a relationship with other humans, much less a landbase. So there will be those who attempt to seize power. There will be fights over resources, over the protection of resources, over the depletion of resources.

I think the fictional reference I'm looking for is *Mad Max*.

But there are two pieces of good news. The first is that gasoline degrades quickly, so this *Mad Max* era will not be able to last very long. Soon the cars will sputter to a stop. Soon the chainsaws will cease to roar. Soon there will be only the sounds of living beings. No machines. This leads to the second piece of good news. Local battles are eminently winnable. Years ago, as I mentioned earlier, when I asked a member of the rebel group MRTA what he wanted for the people of Peru, he said, "We need to be able to grow and distribute our own food. We already know how to do that. We merely need to be allowed to do so." Without interference from those distant others who wish to steal their resources, people could grow

and distribute their own food. And they could form protective organizations with no fear of being overwhelmed by state power. And they could kill those who try to stop them, those who try to seize power, those who try to steal their food or their land.

Hundreds of pages ago I wrote, about the collapse of civilization, "The urban poor are in a much worse position than the rural poor. They obviously do not have access to land. In the long run, they would of course be far better off without civilization. The problem — and this is a very big one — is that in the short run many of them would be dead: their food is funneled through the very system that immiserates them." I was right, and I was wrong. The most unforgivable word I used is *obviously*. They do not have access to land, true, but why is that? It is not because the rich own the land, since land ownership in this sense is nothing but a shared delusion, backed by the full power of the state. And that last phrase is the key to everything. Without the full power of the state, the rich are no longer rich. They are simply people in big houses with big swimming pools and big piles of paper claiming they own big plots of land. Big deal. Cut these people off from their support by the colonizers, and the poor, including the urban poor, will be able to take back the land that is currently used to produce non-food crops like cut flowers, dog food, coffee, opium, and cocaine for the rich.

What, at its essence, does military technology do? It allows one person to kill many. That has always been the point. With the technology in place you have thousands of starving people being held back by mobile police forces with guns. But without an industrial infrastructure, soon enough a gun is nothing but a metal pipe attached to a piece of wood. Take away these technologies — take away the full power of the state — and you have thousands of starving people with machetes up against a rich guy and the people he used to pay holding guns that will soon run out of bullets. I'll put my money with the starving people. I'll stake my life with them.

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Let's be clear. The richest one-fifth of the world: consume 45 percent of all meat and fish, while the poorest fifth consume 5 percent; consume 58 percent of total energy, the poorest fifth less than 4 percent; have 74 percent of all telephone lines, the poorest fifth 1.5 percent; consume 84 percent of all paper, the poorest fifth 1.1 percent; own 87 percent of all vehicles, the poorest fifth less than 1 percent. Taking out the electrical infrastructure will not harm the poor. It will harm only those who are killing the poor, and killing the world.²³

... * * * * *

I've read several accounts of the crash that suggest that deforestation will increase. This strikes me as nonsensical, for several reasons, not the least of which is that the international

market for pulp and paper will be gone, as will cheap oil, gasoline, and metal. Only a madman would cut down a redwood if he couldn't sell it.²⁴

People will of course still need wood to use for cooking, and in cold climates warmth. But it strikes me that trees will not be the first to burn. Trees are hard to fell, and there will be an awful lot of more easily accessible wood. It's called "someone else's furniture."

... * * * * *

If you're a member of the first group, those in power, the crash of civilization will for a time probably seem like business as usual. You will continue to attempt to increase your access to resources. You will continue to attempt to increase your power. The holocausts you cause — although of course you would never call them holocausts, and it would never occur to you that you are the cause — will become increasingly visible, but time after time you will be willing to pay these prices, so long as it is always someone else who really pays. Faltering production will concern you, but your faith in the system will remain unshaken. Dissent will disturb you slightly, but you will recognize that there have always been those who are jealous of your freedoms, envious of your wealth. And so you will hire more police, install more cameras. And you will keep the charade going as long as you can.

If you're in the second group, the good Americans, you will continue through the crash to be co-opted into supporting the system that does not serve you well. No longer, however, will the holocaust look like a new car. Your expectations will be diminished. And then they will be diminished again. And then again. No longer will the ongoing holocaust that is civilization look like merely continuing to do a job you hate, but it will come to more and more openly resemble slavery. To maintain the façade of pride and dignity — real pride and dignity having long-since been stripped away — you will resist calling it slavery. When you do finally call it slavery, it will probably only be after the razor-wire-topped and electrified gates have been shut behind you. You may vaguely recognize the phrase, *Work Makes You Free*, but you may not know what it means.

If you're in the subsection of the third group who might some day resist but don't know where to put your rage, the collapse of civilization might look like opportunities for increasing your personal power. You might attempt to seize and hold territory through force and terror. You might for a time succeed. But as the system collapses in on itself you, too, like those in group one, with whom you have so much in common, may find your power base too reliant on resources brought in from outside. Also like those in group one, unless you have a change of heart, you will to the extremely bitter end try to maintain your power. You will keep the charade going as long as you can. Or maybe you won't. Maybe your hardships have honed your rage, made it sharp against those who caused the hardships in the first place, those who

exploited and degraded you and those you love, including your community.

If you're a member of the subsection of group three already working against the centralization of power, against the system, then you may find the system no longer so invulnerable as once it seemed. Its weaknesses will every day be more obvious, more inviting. And you will strike. And you will strike again. You will taste something you have never before tasted: victory. And then victory after victory. Some of you will certainly die, as those who were once fully in power cannot even to the end admit they were wrong and just give it up. But some of you will not die. And day after day your success will become more clear.

If you are of the fourth class, those who are now considered simply extra, you, too, will taste something that you, too, have never before tasted: hope. Hope in lasting change. Subsistence farmers will no longer be threatened with dispossession. The same with indigenous peoples. The landless will take back land. And over time this faint taste of hope will become stronger, and stronger still, until it begins to taste like something altogether different: agency. You will come to know that this lasting change is not merely something to be hoped for but is something you can achieve through working in solidarity with others in your community. And you will come to do it.

... * * * * *

For as long as civilization continues, many of us will walk quietly, meekly, into whatever form the gas chambers take, if only we are allowed to believe they are bathrooms. But more and more of us will no longer make this mistake. We will begin to allow ourselves to know what we have always known. And once we know that they are not bathrooms— once we see civilization for what it is — then it will be time for us to dismantle the gas chambers — and gas refineries, oil wells, factory farms, pharmaceutical laboratories, vivisection labs, and all of the other cathedrals of civilization — and to make certain that they will never be erected again.

... * * * * *

Early in this book I described how environmental change is often not gradual, but catastrophic. I quoted one scientist as saying, "Ecosystems may go on for years exposed to pollution or climate changes without showing any change at all and then suddenly they may flip into an entirely different condition, with little warning or none at all." Another wrote that, "only in recent years has enough evidence accumulated to tell us that resilience of many important ecosystems has become undermined to the point that even the slightest disturbance can make them collapse."

The natural world is far more resilient than civilization. This culture may go on for years without showing any change at all and then suddenly flip into an entirely different condition,

with little warning or none at all. This will happen when the system has been undermined to the point that even the slightest disturbance can make it collapse.

What are you waiting for?

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NOTES

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- 15 Hey, no fair cheating! You were supposed to put the book down. Now go outside. I'll see you in a couple of days.
- 16 I'm glad you're back. I hope you had a nice couple of days. Now let's compare lists.
- 17 Thomson, Bruce, *The Oil Crash and You*, http://greatchange.org/ov-thomson,convince_sheet.html, site visited September 28, 2004.
- 18 My thanks to writer and activist Aric McBay for this paragraph.
- 19 Including U.S. occupied United States.
- 20 Aric's excellent website is www.intehwake.org
- 21 I guess that describes the current reality as well.
- 22 Many thanks to writer and activist Aric McBay for these paragraphs.
- 23 Many thanks to writer and activist Aric McBay for this as well.
- 24 Only a madman would cut down a redwood to sell it, as well.