

Chapter 10

The Unsolved Mystery of the Sustainable Society

The term “sustainable society” arose in the context of designing a form of human society that is sustainable within the boundaries of the natural planet. But the term has been co-opted by groups of people who want to sustain a particular form of society.

For example, many would like to sustain the current form of industrial civilization, a form of society intensely dependent on oil, natural gas, and coal for its energy. More narrowly, some of these people want to sustain the current U.S. economy. Still more narrowly, some want to sustain that part of the wealth of the U.S. economy that is rooted in a particular set of oil, natural gas, and coal-dependent companies. These three layers of supporters of current industrial civilization include those who are willing to hire scientists to prove that there is no such thing as global warming (or climatic destabilization as I prefer to call it). These layers of people also include those who are deeply concerned that the oil rich nations of the Middle East might become client nations of the European Union or China rather than the United States. Indeed, many of these people are willing to wage costly wars and continue to do so as long as it takes to assure that this loss of control does not happen. Why? Because they want to sustain the U.S. industrial civilization.

Then there are those who are not crucially invested in maintaining the wealth that is dependent on oil, gas, and coal, but who support sustaining current industrial civilization for other reasons, life-style reasons. Wasting energy has become a life-style addiction for millions of people, people who do not even want to think about changing this style of living. Driving a Humvee or a super SUV that gets 15 miles per gallon of fuel is not seen as an immoral waste but as a transportation necessity or perhaps an investment in safety on our crowded highways. Super-insulating a house is viewed as too much bother or too much initial investment. Arranging for healthy and secure food supplies that have not been transported thousands of miles is not even an issue that these minds want to dwell upon. Consciously or unconsciously millions of people are addicted to cheap energy, cheap food of great variety, no hassles in earning or spending money in whatever manner suits a long list of immediate whims. Most important of all, we are addicted to not thinking too hard about any of these things. To a certain extent, all of us who live in prospering industrial societies are gathered up into this mostly unconscious commitment to sustaining the existing society.

But the fossil-fuel enabled society is not a sustainable society. The form of society that is dependent upon cheap oil, natural gas, and coal is already in decline. This form of society is on its way to a permanent grave. We are running out of these energy sources. And the cost of them will quite soon become much, much greater. Our current industrial civilizations are like a jet plane that took off from New York City for London with insufficient fuel to get there. And since it is too late to return to New York City, a crash into the ocean for this vehicle is already determined.

Is all hopeless then? No, unlike the analogy of the insufficiently fueled jet liner, we can get off this social vehicle and board something else. We can board a sustainable society. But we must figure out what a sustainable society is and how to build one, hopefully before the final crash of this industrial-civilization vehicle in which we are traveling.

In the larger planetary picture not everyone is traveling in an industrial-civilization vehicle. Most are hoping to do so. China, for example, is a place committed to fast growth in that direction. Other places would like to be members of an industrial civilization but find themselves excluded by the rising panic to sustain those industrial regions that already exist.

But neither the developed, developing, nor not-developing sectors of the planet have a clear picture of what a truly sustainable society might look like. Our imagination is blocked by our past pictures of what society can be or perhaps ought to be. Let us return, some say, to the pre-industrial Middle Ages of whatever continent they treasure. But it can be shown that all of these old societies are not now sustainable or even desirable in terms of the consciousness or sense of justice, equity, and democracy that has become the hope of most people. So let us return, others say, to the pre-civilizational period of tribal simplicity. These societies were sustainable for tens of thousands of years. And most of these societies had a certain simple equity and democracy that might be recreated. But again, it can be shown that this planet cannot now support a tribal form of life for six billion people. Let us assume that it is only one billion. Can these one billion stand the tragedy of sacrificing the other five? And can they also stand sacrificing the level of consciousness, technological imagination, and planet-wide adventure that the six millennia of civilization have brought into being? This direction is even more doubtful than returning to modernized forms of medieval monarchy.

So let us conclude that there is no going forward with current industrial civilization, nor a returning to earlier civilizations, nor a returning to primitive tribal life. What then is a sustainable society? **It is an unsolved mystery.** And this mystery will not be entirely solved until we have built it. The truly sustainable society is like a huge jigsaw puzzle, the overall picture of which we have never seen. All we have is pieces of vision, and we do not know how these pieces fit together.

So what are some of the pieces? A few directions have become clear. One is energy conservation. We need to support a crash program of cutting back the amount of energy we use to do all the things we do. Secondly, we need to increase geometrically the amount of energy we derive from wind, direct solar, ocean movements, and other non-fossil-fuel sources. Thirdly, we need to use our remaining fossil-fuel treasury carefully and judiciously. Especially, we need to use this treasury to enable conservation and the development of other energy sources, rather than fighting against these trends as many fossil-fuel developers and investors currently do.

How do we enable these three positive trends to move at the needed “warp” speed? A core part of the answer is establishing true democracy. We do not now have government of the people, by the people, and for the people in the United State or in most other places on Earth. We have government of the corporations, by the corporations, and for the corporations. Corporation managers, boards, investors, and major owners have convinced us that they are the people, or that they represent the people and serve the people the way the people want and deserved to be served. This is not true. Corporations, especially the public stock-selling type, are legally bound to achieve one thing above all others – produce a return for their investors. This narrow focus almost never translates into the directions that must be taken to arrive at a sustainable society. In fact, corporation cultures almost always support their own profitability over the values of preserving the natural environment, widening democracy, or establishing greater justice. Thus corporations, for the most part, support anti-sustainability values. And these backward values are then given political empowerment by the huge expenditure of corporate money to make sure that politicians do their bidding. Political influence (perhaps better named “legalized bribery”) is understood by the management of most corporations to be simply part of the cost of doing business. And doing business, whatever it is, is rationalized as good for the people. But the end result of this widespread practice is a vast acceleration of the pace that our societies are moving toward the ecological abyss.

Furthermore, this corporation-favoring pattern of power mongering effectively destroys true democracy – that is, the possibility for the people as a whole to choose a sustainable society.

The majority of people are not always ecologically wise; but, unlike public corporations, they are not forced to be wrong by their profit-making, bottom line. Ecological sustainability requires that people take charge of their governments. Then in obedience to values determined by them, the people can firmly discipline the behavior of the business institutions licensed by their governments. This direction is basic. Without it there can never be a sustainable society. Fortunately, the desire for true democracy has become a planet-wide dream in the souls of the vast majority of the human species.

The unclarity in actualizing this basic direction centers around how people can be motivated to refuse to endure corporation tyranny any longer and become practically wise in carrying out their social responsibilities. It is easy to be lazy in our social responsibility: perhaps hoping against hope that the powers that be know what they are doing and that their doings will somehow work out, or at least not upset our particular lives. It is easy to be lazy in not learning the truth and how to separate out the truth from the propaganda that fills the presses and airways of our public media. It is easy to be lazy about becoming strategically and politically savvy and active in making good things happen in the electoral arena. It is easy to be lazy about doing appropriate actions of nonviolent noncooperation to slow or stop significantly bad developments. It is easy to be an angry sideline complainer or a cynic who knows that things are bad but opts out of action with pessimistic excuses that claim nothing can be done. This sociological laziness is one of the key blocks to a sustainable society.

This insight leads us to envision yet another key direction: awakening education. The awake and active portion of our current societies have to become skilled in awakening and training other people for the unprecedented future we need to claim. Vast resources of time and money need to go into this sort of education. Such education includes developing, demonstrating, and imparting workable strategies for getting from our deplorable here to a happier there. And we need to learn how to be happy getting there. Indeed, we need to make special efforts to have fun deconstructing the old unworkable patterns and building the new patterns that give life to a viable future for our children and grandchildren.

This reeducation of currently misinformed, inactive, and reactive people needs to focus on broad values, principles, and policies. The specific programs of change need to be understood by those who do them, but everyone does not have to understand all these specifics. Everyone does need to understand, however, that we need to dismantle everything we have called "civilization" and build a new social vehicle that no one currently understands. The future we need is not some sure set of ideas in anyone's head. It is an unknown. It is a mystery. It is an adventure into a future world to which no one has gone before.

What does it mean to dismantle civilization? It means to take apart topdown, king-to-peasant ways of organizing and replace them with true democracy that involves every person in every local place in genuine, meaningful, decision making. This has never been done before.

What does it mean to dismantle civilization? It means to take apart the patriarchal family and release the full energies of women and the feminine qualities in men. This has never been done before.

What does it mean to dismantle civilization? It means to take apart the current all-out use of the Earth and join people and natural regions of the planet into mutually enhancing partnerships. These regions also need to be mutually enhancing to one another. This has never been done before.

What does it mean to dismantle civilization? It means to end all-out warfare in the expansion

or the defense of a particular civilization and replace this now self-defeating pattern with planet-wide democratically constructed restraints that halt all-out warfare wherever it arises. This has never been done before.

What does it mean to dismantle civilization? It means to take apart the ancient obsession with the uniformity of culture or religion in any land, and build in its place a tolerant secular civil society that rejoices in diversity. This has never been done before.

What does it mean to dismantle civilization? It means to take apart the view that each of us is an island unto our individualistic self and put in its place a realistic understanding of interdependence and mutually enhancing responsibilities between all persons, all regions, all species on the entire planet. This has never been done before.

Are such directions an unrealistic dream? No, they are an unavoidable necessity. They are pieces in the puzzle of our unknown future. They are some of the patterns of movement toward a truly sustainable society.