

Predicting Collapse

by

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Nobody can say what is going to happen. Nobody can predict the future with 100% certainty. And that is even truer today as we are stepping into unknown territory. There might be no crash at all, although I think the odds are about 70% in favor of it.

Energy depletion, in itself, is not that serious a problem. We are most probably talking of a yearly depletion rate of 2%. This means that in the year 2020, we will be producing as much energy as in 1990. The decline is gradual enough that we could adjust to it naturally, both in terms of population and otherwise.

The problem is that we are talking about introducing turbulence in a complex system, a system wherein its own complexity has grown to nearly unsustainable proportions.

There are two critical areas where energy depletion could lead to collapse: the economy and the energy infrastructure.

Our economy is predicated upon continuous growth. As our energy base begins to contract, this growth will no longer be possible. This economy is simply incapable of gradual contraction because it is an economy built entirely upon confidence: the confidence of investors and consumers. Yet it is difficult predicting when that confidence will fail because of two contradictory influences.

The first influence is denial. Many inside players deny that energy depletion will be a problem, or that it will even happen. These players want to support confidence in the market.

The second influence is from inside players who know the truth about energy depletion and who are seeking to maximize their own profit before world energy production really does begin to decline. These players exploit smaller crises such as the hurricanes to drive up prices for oil and gasoline, while downplaying the significance of energy depletion. It is a very tricky game to keep the market on edge by admitting just enough about energy depletion while stating confidently that they are working on alternatives, and then to extract the maximum profit out of the various localized crises such as hurricanes and instability in oil producing regions. It is possible that these players might even intentionally provoke economic collapse at a time of their choosing, as opposed to waiting until actual energy depletion sparks the collapse.

Concerning the energy infrastructure, we are talking about a system burgeoning on edge of over-complexity. Our energy infrastructure, and particularly our electrical grid were not the result of foresight and intelligent design. They were erected piecemeal over the course of the past century, as need dictated. Currently the system is strained to the edge of capacity by growing energy demand. Already we are seeing major regional blackouts as the result of problems as small as a bird on the wires. Richard Duncan (Olduvai Theory) has studied the potential effect of energy depletion upon the energy infrastructure and foresees a complete system breakdown once we go beyond some unknown but critical level of energy depletion.

I would say the odds are about 70% that we will see the collapse of present civilization within the next 20 years. But leaves a 30% change that there will be no collapse. The odds against collapse could be increased by community awareness, and community organization to prepare. Sorry I can't name an exact date. We won't really know when (or even if) it will happen until after the fact. Anyone who does try to predict the collapse is a soothsayer.