



Jane Jacobs On Peak Oil, Dark Age Ahead

Posted by [Glenn](#) on January 10, 2006 - 11:40pm in [The Oil Drum: Local](#)

Topic: [Sociology/Psychology](#)

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I just started reading Jane Jacobs' landmark book: The Death and Life of Great American cities. Just in the first 100 pages she's already blown me away with her insights into city streets, parks, public safety and educating children. Her insights are so obvious once you read them. She absolutely nails why I love New York City and why people love to hate the suburbs.

Remember that while urban areas may be complex systems requiring significant energy inputs, they are 3-4x more energy efficient than suburban areas. Most people in NYC don't own a car because of good mass transit and dense mixed use residential and commercial areas side by side. We also live in relatively small attached apartment houses which take less energy to heat, cool and illuminate.

When I mentioned this to a friend, he asked what Jane Jacobs thought of peak oil. That reminded me of something when back when we had the Petrocollapse conference. [Kunstler Interviewed Jane Jacobs in 2000:](#)

Here's an excerpt from the interview where Kunstler brings up Peak Oil.

JHK: I'd like to turn to economics which is another principle area of your interest and I think perhaps one that is underemphasized in your career. I'm also interested in systems theories, but particularly the ones that address the great blunders of civilization. It seems to me that the American living arrangement, the "the fiasco of suburbia" as Leon Krier calls it, is approaching a kind of tipping point beyond which it might be difficult to carry on. I have a theory that we don't have to run out of gasoline in order to throw places of Houston, Phoenix, San Jose, Miami, Atlanta into terrible trouble. All that's necessary is a mild to moderate chronic instability in the world oil markets. it seems to me that we are sleepwalking into an economic and political trainwreck.

JJ: Well, I don't know whether we will because of the oil markets or what. But I know things won't go on as they are now. **People who try to predict the future by extrapolating in a line of more of what exists--they are always wrong.** I am not saying how it is going to go. But it is not going to go the same. This is a continuation of what I was actually saying about the revolt against Victorianism. Here comes a generation or two that just can't stand what the previous generations did. And for whatever reasons it is they want to expunge it. And they are absolutely ruthless with the remnants of it. But I don't think of it as an economic or political trainwreck. I think of it as one of these great generational upheavals that's coming. And I think that part of the growing popularity of the New Urbanism is not simply because it is so rational, and not simply because people care so much about community or even understand it, or the relation of sprawl to the ruination of the natural world. But they just don't like what is around. And they will be ruthless with it.

JHK: You say that you are not theoretical or abstract. As a practical matter there is such a thing called the Hubbert Curve, the petroleum depletion curve that says that we will

reach a peak of world oil production and then we will go down the slippery slope of having less and less oil, having oil that is harder to extract, or oil that is less economical to extract. And of course this is happening in different regions and different parts of the world. The two places in the world that basically saved our asses in the last twenty years were the north slope of Alaska and the North Sea oil fields. They are scheduled to reach peak production in the next year or so. After which their production will decline. And after that most of the oil in the world will be produced by people who hate us. How does that work for us economically?

JJ: Well, you see all my life I have been hearing that the oil was going to run out. It never happens. They keep discovering new oil fields. The world is apparently floating in oil fields.

JHK: Well, it's possible that my proposition is a fallacy. But what if it's not?

JJ: I basically don't think that the way we do things is that dependent on one resource, such as oil. There can be different kinds of engines for cars. I think that solar heating, wind heating can substitute for a lot of uses for oil. I'd like to see those things happen because they are more sustainable in any case. But I do not think that running out of oil is not going to bother us that much. I think we have got to be rescued by something or we really are going down a slippery slope.

JHK: If its not petroleum then what is it that is putting us in peril?

JJ: I don't think probably any one thing. Nothing is so clear in history that is it happens for any one thing. It seems that a lot of things come together to make great changes. And I think that one of the things is a reaction against Modernism in this case and everything associated with it

Here's a [review of her latest book "Dark Age Ahead"](#), which seems to be more a view that sociologically civiliation is breaking down (geez add in an energy crisis and we're deep do-do):

Jane Jacobs sees five pillars of modern society in jeopardy. The chapter titles alone give a thumbnail picture of the problems. I'll add brief summaries:

The Hazard -- A historical overview of what happens to societies whose "internal jolts" have led to a dark age.

Families Rigged to Fail -- Communities and families are inextricably intertwined, and families have come under great economic and social strain in the 20th century because of the Great Depression and World War II.

Credentialing versus Educating -- Universities have turned to a mass-production model that has substituted credentialing for education.

Science Abandoned -- Science becomes irrelevant when it is done by drones who do not understand the scientific method, and technology is adversely affected.

Dumbed-Down Taxes -- Government succeeds with "subsidiarity," that is, working responsibly, responsively and closely with the people it represents. It also depends on fiscal accountability; that is, transparency in its transactions. Anything less leads to economic and social distortions and, ultimately, failure.

Self-Policing Subverted -- Professions that fail to police their members' ethics -- including not only accountancy but notably police forces, which are notoriously self-protective -- lapse into endless corruption and scandal.

Unwinding Vicious Spirals -- Cultural and political mistakes are interlocking cause and effect, but they can be corrected.

Dark Age Patterns -- Paradigms of civilization have succeeded one another. Hunter-gathering was replaced by agriculture, which is being replaced in turn by an age of "ingenuity" that includes the Industrial and post-Industrial eras.

She's a real deep thinker. For me she really puts peak oil into the context of a deep societal slide. A socially cohesive and functional society has a better chance of making the tough choices peak oil



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