



Localism and some thoughts on Social Change

Posted by [Luis de Sousa](#) on June 5, 2007 - 3:00am in [The Oil Drum: Europe](#)

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A few days ago I attended a talk by Professor [David Hess](#), entitled “Rethinking the Sustainable City: Exploring the Potential of Local Social Enterprises”. It gave me a lot to thought about on the social questions raised by the Hubbert Peak, and how energy (or the lack of it) can shape the future of our Society. Less energy will likely mean less travel and more local networks. Reshaping our Society to the local level might seem both good and inevitable, but what problems may we encounter doing so?

Contrary to previous posts I'm adopting a more informal direct speech this time. This post is just a collection of thoughts on some social aspects of the Hubbert Peak's consequences, without the technical goals of previous writings. I just intend to lead you to think about it and discuss it.

The talk by prof. Hess was organized by a group of Sociology PhD students, from a kin Faculty, integrated in a series of thematic sessions; this one was called “Other Habitats”. The session call had the following abstract:

The problems of global warming, resource depletion, persistent pollution, and habitat destruction suggest that human civilization is no longer adapted to its global habitat. The technology for achieving a transformation to a more sustainable relationship with the environment already exists in the form of green buildings, renewable energy, public transportation, and sustainable agriculture. However, the implementation of the transformation is proceeding at a very slow pace, and it occurs alongside ongoing growth of environmental deposits and withdrawals. This talk examines the argument that an economic system based on the large, publicly traded corporation with its emphasis on short-term growth creates a growth logic that is not adapted to the global ecology. The emergence of the localist movement in the United States--around small businesses, nonprofits, and local government agencies--is examined for its potential to generate a more liveable human habitat and an economy that is more adapted to life within the planet's carrying capacity.

“Resource depletion” is a term hard to resist, especially when associated with someone with the curriculum of prof. Hess.

These subjects, that I'll give you a bit insight, are covered in prof. Hess' latest book, [“Alternative Pathways in Science and Industry”](#), from which the first chapter is available online ([here – pdf](#)).

First impressions

Prof. Hess started by surprising everyone who didn't knew him with a clean brasilian flavoured portuguese – he lived in Rio de Janeiro for some time – and used it throughout half of the

This was the first time prof. Hess visited Lisbon and he took his time touring. He was pretty impressed with the city, and said that comparing with the US this was Utopia. The words Lisbon and Utopia had never come to mind together, but prof. Hess explained how different it was from the American urban landscape built to the "scale of the automobile".



Lawless parking.

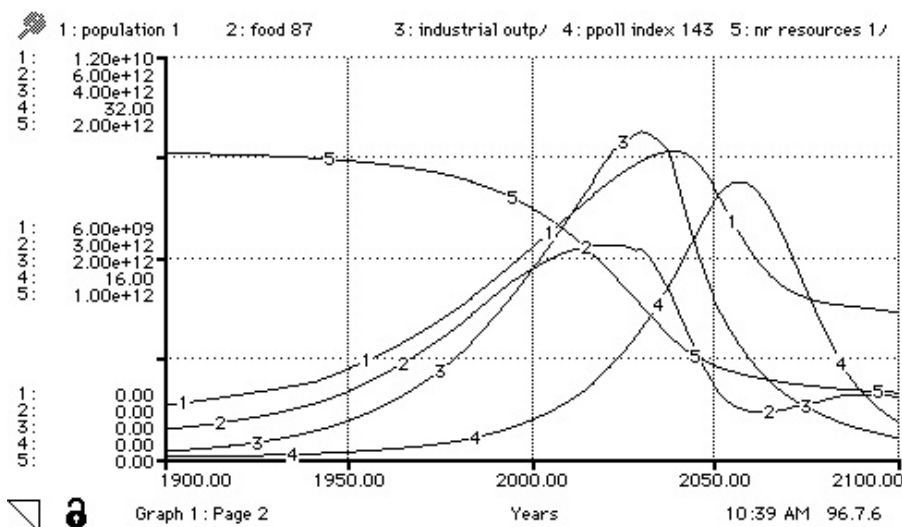
I usually think of over-traffic and lawless parking associated with Lisbon (half of the cars entering the city every day don't have a park place) and never really looked at it from the bright side. Like prof. Hess pointed, most of the commerce in the city is still controlled locally; in fact restaurants, snack-bars, bookstores, drugstores, tool-shops, etc, are all run by small family business. They exist because the center of the city cannot take in the big malls and warehouses, and believe me, local stores are convenient and people use them. Obviously they depend on immense supply lines and deal mostly goods from abroad, but this was a good starter for what prof. Hess had latter to say.



A brighter side of Lisbon.

The Limits and how Society faces them

The basic idea behind the talk was the concept of Overshoot – Mankind has exceeded the carrying capacity of its habitat and will have to face some sort of adjustment to go back into balance with it. Citing previous work by prof. Charles Hall, we were showed how the projections made in the early 1970’s by the [Meadows work-group at the MIT](#) have been essentially correct up to now. Mankind will face the Limits to Growth before mid-century.



The base case produced by World3 in the late 1980s.

Eventually Mankind will have to shift the interaction with its Environment/Habitat to a

Sustainable fashion. And prof. Hess explicitly indicated that he was using [Herman Daly's](#) definition of Sustainability:

- Rates of use of renewable resources do not exceed regeneration rates;
- Rates of use of nonrenewable resources do not exceed rates of development of renewable substitutes;
- Rates of pollution emission do not exceed assimilative capacities of the environment.

Society can face Limits to Growth essentially with four different responses:

Turning to the Outside:

1. **War** – acquiring resources abroad;
2. **Trade** – exchanging internal surpluses by needed items from abroad;

Turning to the Inside:

3. **Innovation** – creating new processes and techniques that allow further exploitation of the habitat;
4. **Social Change** – rearrange Society in order to diminish its resource requirements;

You'll find in History examples for these four responses, but it is interesting to observe how today different countries are taking different paths: the US has clearly adopted response 1; China has opted for response 2; Europe has officially focused on response 3, but leaving the door open to responses 1 and 2.

But this time the Limits are being faced globally, responses 1 and 2 will eventually become ineffective, these options can promise much but they just adjourn the problem - after all the Earth is round. We may bring War to Mars and Trade to Venus, but that won't change much the picture either.

So we have the other two options (3 and 4) left. Here prof. Hess traced a line between those that favour Innovation and those that prefer Social Change, the belief that "Technology will save us" or that it won't. He pointed that Innovation is mostly preferred among Europeans whereas Social Change has been studied more deeply in the US. Naturally prof. Hess is an adept of Social adaptation bringing us to the concept of **Localism**.

Before we move on let me just tell you that there are in fact people studying Localism (or some resemblance of it) in Europe. Especially two gentleman that I had the fortune to met at ASPO-5, [Robert Hopkins](#) and [Folke Gunther](#), have some serious work in this vein. If you don't know their work, check it out, it's worth it.

Localism

The thesis put forward by prof. Hess is that Social Change is basically the only effective answer to the growth constraints we are facing. He doesn't see Innovation as a better option, for it may not

deliver on its promises, but above all because it implies sacrifices from the individual – wind energy, hybrid vehicles, they all represent extra burdens for those who opt for them.

But there's another issue not addressed by Innovation, the system that supports elderly people after retirement. Here prof. Hess focused on the US case where Pension Funds are either directly managed by Corporations or dependent on corporate results (through investment on stock markets). The individual becomes dependent on Corporations, and it's their growth that guarantees future pensions. Once growth constraints set in this system is bound to failure.

And so prof. Hess proposes a social rearrangement towards small communities where individuals create stronger bounds inside it and lessen dependence on larger organizations – something called **Localism**. Economic activity gets spatially constrained; goods and services are produced locally, mostly by small sized or family businesses, and consumed locally. Politically the governing responsibilities are concentrated locally and a local culture naturally emerges. Agriculture becomes the socio-economic center around which society gravitates, with communities becoming largely self-sufficient.



Local market.

These are the pillars of Localism, as laid down by prof. Hess:

- **Finish Corporations**, freeing individuals from corporate economic growth, making them reliant on the local community;
- Promote **Local Businesses**, creating economies independent of Corporations;
- **Sustainability**, provided by a local scale economy that makes sustainability issues self-evident;
- More **Local Power**, an improvement to Democracy.

Localism has its problems; the concentration of power at the local level can have perverse effects like racial segregation or nepotism. These subjects have been object of study and could eventually be mitigated through better education. Also, Localism has been traditionally associated with the political Left, which could cause reluctance among individuals with different political orientations. Prof. Hess explained that efforts have been made to integrate Conservative or Liberal communities and individuals on localist initiatives; Localism is mainly a social setting and doesn't necessarily compromise political choices.



Local transport.

Some thoughts and questions

First of all let me stress how refreshing it was to hear and see people from different scientific areas discussing the subjects surrounding the Hubbert Peak. Instead of the traditional technical/engineering talk, the social/political perspective can help you getting a boarder view of our future. It was really interesting to hear an attendant using the terms *Myth of Growth* during the Q&A.

Localism's advantages on an energy constrained world are quite evident: the long supply lines that feed and clothe us and that provide the fabric of our homes become expendable; and with it the gross of our energy needs. With the economy evolving at a local level transportation of people and goods becomes marginal.

In the case of the US, with a population density of 32 people per square km, Localism looks like a realistic option, but what about elsewhere? The EU has almost 4 times the population density of the US, around 112 people per square km. Think of the triangle made by Paris, Amsterdam and Frankfurt, or the London metropolitan area, can all these people go local? And what about Localism in Japan?

But I have other question marks. Is in fact Sustainability self-evident on a local scale? On the source side of the interaction with the environment this is pretty much the case, but is it so on the sink side of it? What stops me from sending my waste downstream? It'll disappear from my local environment, why bother further?

This last question takes me to a broader point: when going local it is easy to miss "the big

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picture”, you can see that your tree is healthy but at the same time miss that the forest is ill.
Think of a natural disaster, can local communities fare better in face of such events? And
Education, can local schools teach advanced skills to form doctors, architects, engineers, etc?

Don't take me as adverse to Localism, in fact I can concept life on small local communities as
better than how we live on the stressing hurrying metropolises. I just think that if our answer to
the Hubbert Peak goes through Localism, once more the Lone Ranger will have to pack his belt.

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