



Gypsies at the peak

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The Roma (or Rroma) of Italy are probably the poorest fraction of the residents in the country. They normally live in segregated camps, in trailers or in self built sheds. Only about half of the 150,000 Roma in Italy are Italian citizens; in most cases, they have no stable job and live a very precarious existence as the target of hatred and of open racism. The image above, from [Excite Magazine](#), shows the Roma camp in the suburb of Ponticelli, in Naples, as it was before being burned to the ground by an angry mob in 2008.

Here I am, in front of the whole class. Romani men and women; about 20 people; all coming from the same camp, nearby. They are in their late 20s and early 30s, and they have dressed up for the occasion. Not that they can afford expensive clothes, of course, but the men look smart in their informal attire. The women like to dress in bright colors. They wear the almost obligatory long skirt, as well as earrings and necklaces. They seem to be very happy to have found a way to leave the routine of the camp where they spend their time cooking and looking after young children.

Over the past months, a group of teachers have been lecturing to this group as part of an initiative of the county government. The idea is to help them gain skills that could be useful for them to find a job and integrate better in society. So, we told them how to manage a cooperative, how to manage their personal finances, safety in the workplace, garbage collection and recycling, permaculture, how to surf the web and much more. They have absorbed most what we told them with ease. After having seen them listen attentively to two hours of lessons on the biological carbon cycle and ask intelligent questions afterwards, I was impressed. So, I told myself; why not peak oil? And here I am.

Telling people about peak oil takes different approaches depending to whom you are talking. I

understood long ago that most people can't read even a simple Cartesian graph. Graphs are a language and they never learned it. If you show them the bell shaped curve, they'll see it as a hill or a mountain of some kind. They'll feel that it is hard to climb up and easy to descend. Not the way peak oil should be understood.

The Roma I'll be talking to are at one of the extremes of the spectrum in terms of culture. None of the men went beyond 3rd or 4th grade of schooling; most of the women never went to school at all. The men can usually read, but rarely can write; the women can neither read nor write. They don't read newspapers and don't watch the news in TV. They love movies and spend lots of time chatting. It is from these sources that they gather most of what they know. What would be a good way to explain peak oil to them?

Communication is never one way. If I want them to understand me, I must understand them as well. So, for this talk, I have developed an extreme version of the presentation that I give when I know that the people listening are not at the top level in terms of scientific literacy. It is all based on vivid images shown on screen; pictures of oil wells, for instance. No graphs, no text, and no numbers. I have to rely on my voice, on my ability to catch their attention.

So, I tell them of peak oil based on the example of a person. When we are born, I say, we are very small, but with time we grow and we can do more things. But we also become old. In time, we can do less and less and, eventually, we must die. In a way, I continue, it is the same with oil. When oil is young, there is a lot of it. As it gets older, we use it up and there is less and less of it. We must work harder to get as much of it as we used to. It is the same with many things you are doing - haven't you noticed that you must work harder? They look at me and nod. They understand the concept.

From here on, I show them pictures of oil fields, of oil refineries, of tankers and of everything related to oil. I tell them that gasoline for their cars comes from crude oil (they knew that, but vaguely). I tell them that the tires of their cars are made from crude oil (they didn't know that, and it makes them worry). I tell them that it takes oil to power the trucks that bring food to the supermarkets. This makes the women worried; they are in charge of the task of preparing food for the family.

When I speak to the *gadje* (the non Roma) there is always at least someone in the audience who sleeps through the talk or who is clearly not listening. But the Roma are all awake and listening. The message is getting through, I can see that. I tell them about the future, about what to expect when there will be less and less oil available. There will be fewer jobs, fewer opportunities, less money and less food. Even welfare payments, on which many of them rely for survival, may disappear. It will be a hard time for everyone. They clearly understand the problem. They remember where they come from-- former Yugoslavia. They are used to hard times.

When the talk is over, they ask me questions. How much is gasoline going to cost? I tell them that it will be more expensive, sure, but that may not be the problem. The real problem will be to find it. Long lines at the gas stations, very probably. They understand the point: apparently it was the way things were in former Yugoslavia. They ask me what kind of car is best to buy and to use. I know that there doesn't exist a Mercedes that a Rom won't like, and when I tell them that they should buy a cheap car with a good mileage, they are not happy. They ask me what they should do. I say that they should try to adapt and be flexible. They nod; that is a strategy that they know very well. In the end, they ask me if the end of the world will be in 2012. I laugh, they laugh, too. But they seem to be relieved: they were a little worried.

In the days that follow, I inquire with the social workers and with the Roma themselves. What was the impact of my talk? Everyone tells me that they have been discussing what I said; that they have been impressed. But I didn't expect anything to happen and, indeed, that is final result. Nothing changes in the life of the camp.

When you present peak oil to someone who is middle class, the reaction may be denial or mobilization. But rarely you see people who have understood peak oil who are indifferent to it. There are good reasons for that. If you are middle class, you can see right away how peak oil can hurt you. You depend on a salary and, if your job vanishes because of peak oil, you'll be in deep trouble. You have to pay your mortgage, your health insurance plan, instruction for your children, and all the rest. Peak oil can destroy you. But, as a middle class person, you may think that you can prepare for peak oil, that you have spare resources to do something about it. Probably it is a wrong perception but it may lead you to do such things as installing solar panels, insulating your home, buying a smaller car, that kind of thing. If, instead, you think that you don't have that kind of resources, or you don't want to use them in this way, your reaction may very well be to shut off the concept from your consciousness as well as you can.

But think of your situation as a Romani person. You have no stable job; so you can't lose it. You don't own a house, so you can't be evicted. Nobody will give you credit, so you'll never be in debt. You have no retirement plan, so you rely on your children for support when you'll be old. You depend on welfare, sure, but you also know that you can live with very little. Finally, you live in a close-knit community formed of family clans. You quarrel with your neighbors and relatives all the time but you know that in a difficult situation, they'll help you if they can.

Peak oil will be hard on the Roma, just as it will be on us, but they have a fighting chance of surviving it. In several ways, they are already post peak.

A few days after my talk on peak oil, a Roma of the camp, one of the married men, tells me something like this:

You see, professor, I think you were right with your lesson. Yeah, you told us that things are not going to be so easy as they used to be. Right, we saw that, too. It is what's happening. You know, I remember when we came here from Yugoslavia. I was a child; I was 10 years old but I remember that very well. It was so different, here. We saw so much wealth: lights and cars and houses and stuff in the supermarkets. Yeah, we had never seen anything like that. In Yugoslavia there was nothing. And so, we were all very happy, but I think we made a big mistake. You know; I remember my grandfather. He was a good man; he could work metals; he could fix pots and pans and sharpen knives. So, he told me that I should learn his job; but I didn't want to. I was very young; I wasn't that smart but, see, professor, I think we all made the same mistake. Many of the old folks could do things. Like singing or playing instruments, buying and selling horses. But we can't do that any more. We didn't want to learn. We saw all this wealth, here, and we thought that there was no need of working so hard. If there was so much wealth; why couldn't we share a little of it? We didn't want to be rich; we just wanted a little - enough to live in peace. And we thought it would last forever. But, you are right, professor, it is not going to last forever. And now we are in trouble.

I find that impeccable. Isn't that the same mistake we made with crude oil?



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