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# endgame

VOLUME I

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THE PROBLEM  
OF CIVILIZATION

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# endgame

VOLUME I

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THE PROBLEM  
OF CIVILIZATION

derrick jensen

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## Premises

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**PREMISE ONE:** Civilization is not and can never be sustainable. This is especially true for industrial civilization.

**PREMISE TWO:** Traditional communities do not often voluntarily give up or sell the resources on which their communities are based until their communities have been destroyed. They also do not willingly allow their landbases to be damaged so that other resources—gold, oil, and so on—can be extracted. It follows that those who want the resources will do what they can to destroy traditional communities.

**PREMISE THREE:** Our way of living—industrial civilization—is based on, requires, and would collapse very quickly without persistent and widespread violence.

**PREMISE FOUR:** Civilization is based on a clearly defined and widely accepted yet often unarticulated hierarchy. Violence done by those higher on the hierarchy to those lower is nearly always invisible, that is, unnoticed. When it is noticed, it is fully rationalized. Violence done by those lower on the hierarchy to those higher is unthinkable, and when it does occur is regarded with shock, horror, and the fetishization of the victims.

**PREMISE FIVE:** The property of those higher on the hierarchy is more valuable than the lives of those below. It is acceptable for those above to increase the amount of property they control—in everyday language, to make money—by destroying or taking the lives of those below. This is called *production*. If those below damage the property of those above, those above may kill or otherwise destroy the lives of those below. This is called *justice*.

**PREMISE SIX:** Civilization is not redeemable. This culture will not undergo any sort of voluntary transformation to a sane and sustainable way of living. If we do not put a halt to it, civilization will continue to immiserate the vast majority of humans and to degrade the planet until it (civilization, and probably the

planet) collapses. The effects of this degradation will continue to harm humans and nonhumans for a very long time.

**PREMISE SEVEN:** The longer we wait for civilization to crash—or the longer we wait before we ourselves bring it down—the messier the crash will be, and the worse things will be for those humans and nonhumans who live during it, and for those who come after.

**PREMISE EIGHT:** The needs of the natural world are more important than the needs of the economic system.

Another way to put Premise Eight: Any economic or social system that does not benefit the natural communities on which it is based is unsustainable, immoral, and stupid. Sustainability, morality, and intelligence (as well as justice) require the dismantling of any such economic or social system, or at the very least disallowing it from damaging your landbase.

**PREMISE NINE:** Although there will clearly someday be far fewer humans than there are at present, there are many ways this reduction in population may occur (or be achieved, depending on the passivity or activity with which we choose to approach this transformation). Some will be characterized by extreme violence and privation: nuclear Armageddon, for example, would reduce both population and consumption, yet do so horrifically; the same would be true for a continuation of overshoot, followed by a crash. Other ways could be characterized by less violence. Given the current levels of violence by this culture against both humans and the natural world, however, it's not possible to speak of reductions in population and consumption that do not involve violence and privation, not because the reductions themselves would necessarily involve violence, but because violence and privation have become the default of our culture. Yet some ways of reducing population and consumption, while still violent, would *consist* of decreasing the current levels of violence—required and caused by the (often forced) movement of resources from the poor to the rich—and would of course be marked by a reduction in current violence against the natural world. Personally and collectively we may be able to both reduce the amount and soften the character of violence that occurs during this ongoing and perhaps long-term shift. Or we may not. But this much is certain: if we do not approach it actively—if we do not talk about our predicament and what we are going to do about it—the violence will almost undoubtedly be far more severe, the privation more extreme.

**PREMISE TEN:** The culture as a whole and most of its members are insane. The culture is driven by a death urge, an urge to destroy life.

**PREMISE ELEVEN:** From the beginning, this culture—civilization—has been a culture of occupation.

**PREMISE TWELVE:** There are no rich people in the world, and there are no poor people. There are just people. The rich may have lots of pieces of green paper that many pretend are worth something—or their presumed riches may be even more abstract: numbers on hard drives at banks—and the poor may not. These “rich” claim they own land, and the “poor” are often denied the right to make that same claim. A primary purpose of the police is to enforce the delusions of those with lots of pieces of green paper. Those without the green papers generally buy into these delusions almost as quickly and completely as those with. These delusions carry with them extreme consequences in the real world.

**PREMISE THIRTEEN:** Those in power rule by force, and the sooner we break ourselves of illusions to the contrary, the sooner we can at least begin to make reasonable decisions about whether, when, and how we are going to resist.

**PREMISE FOURTEEN:** From birth on—and probably from conception, but I’m not sure how I’d make the case—we are individually and collectively enculturated to hate life, hate the natural world, hate the wild, hate wild animals, hate women, hate children, hate our bodies, hate and fear our emotions, hate ourselves. If we did not hate the world, we could not allow it to be destroyed before our eyes. If we did not hate ourselves, we could not allow our homes—and our bodies—to be poisoned.

**PREMISE FIFTEEN:** Love does not imply pacifism.

**PREMISE SIXTEEN:** The material world is primary. This does not mean that the spirit does not exist, nor that the material world is all there is. It means that spirit mixes with flesh. It means also that real world actions have real world consequences. It means we cannot rely on Jesus, Santa Claus, the Great Mother, or even the Easter Bunny to get us out of this mess. It means this mess really is a mess, and not just the movement of God’s eyebrows. It means we have to face this mess ourselves. It means that for the time we are here on Earth—whether or not we end up somewhere else after we die, and whether we are condemned

or privileged to live here—the Earth is the point. It is primary. It is our home. It is everything. It is silly to think or act or be as though this world is not real and primary. It is silly and pathetic to not live our lives as though our lives are real.

**PREMISE SEVENTEEN:** It is a mistake (or more likely, denial) to base our decisions on whether actions arising from them will or won't frighten fence-sitters, or the mass of Americans.

**PREMISE EIGHTEEN:** Our current sense of self is no more sustainable than our current use of energy or technology.

**PREMISE NINETEEN:** The culture's problem lies above all in the belief that controlling and abusing the natural world is justifiable.

**PREMISE TWENTY:** Within this culture, economics—not community well-being, not morals, not ethics, not justice, not life itself—drives social decisions.

Modification of Premise Twenty: Social decisions are determined primarily (and often exclusively) on the basis of whether these decisions will increase the monetary fortunes of the decision-makers and those they serve.

Re-modification of Premise Twenty: Social decisions are determined primarily (and often exclusively) on the basis of whether these decisions will increase the power of the decision-makers and those they serve.

Re-modification of Premise Twenty: Social decisions are founded primarily (and often exclusively) on the almost entirely unexamined belief that the decision-makers and those they serve are entitled to magnify their power and/or financial fortunes at the expense of those below.

Re-modification of Premise Twenty: If you dig to the heart of it—if there is any heart left—you will find that social decisions are determined primarily on the basis of how well these decisions serve the ends of controlling or destroying wild nature.

**For Tecumseh**



We have spent too much time in thinking, supposing that if we weigh in advance the possibilities of any action, it will happen automatically. We have learnt, rather too late, that action comes not from thought, but from a readiness for responsibility.

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer, written while in prison  
for resisting the Nazis<sup>1</sup>*

Cowardice asks the question, “Is it safe?” Expediency asks the question, “Is it politic?” And Vanity comes along and asks the question, “Is it popular?” But Conscience asks the question, “Is it right?” And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must do it because Conscience tells him it is right.

*Martin Luther King, Jr.*



## **APOCALYPSE**

When a white man kills an Indian in a fair fight it is called honorable, but when an Indian kills a white man in a fair fight it is called murder.<sup>2</sup> When a white army battles Indians and wins it is called a great victory, but if they lose it is called a massacre and bigger armies are raised. If the Indian flees before the advance of such armies, when he tries to return he finds that white men are living where he lived. If he tries to fight off such armies, he is killed and the land is taken anyway. When an Indian is killed, it is a great loss which leaves a gap in our people and a sorrow in our heart; when a white is killed three or four others step up to take his place and there is no end to it. The white man seeks to conquer nature, to bend it to his will and to use it wastefully until it is all gone and then he simply moves on, leaving the waste behind him and looking for new places to take. The whole white race is a monster who is always hungry and what he eats is land.

*Chiksika*<sup>3</sup>



AS A LONGTIME GRASSROOTS ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST, AND AS a creature living in the thrashing endgame of civilization, I am intimately acquainted with the landscape of loss, and have grown accustomed to carrying the daily weight of despair. I have walked clearcuts that wrap around mountains, drop into valleys, then climb ridges to fragment watershed after watershed, and I've sat silent near empty streams that two generations ago were "lashed into whiteness" by uncountable salmon coming home to spawn and die.

A few years ago I began to feel pretty apocalyptic. But I hesitated to use that word, in part because of those drawings I've seen of crazy penitents carrying "The End is Near" signs, and in part because of the power of the word itself. Apocalypse. I didn't want to use it lightly.

But then a friend and fellow activist said, "What will it take for you to finally call it an apocalypse? The death of the salmon? Global warming? The ozone hole? The reduction of krill populations off Antarctica by 90 percent, the turning of the sea off San Diego into a dead zone, the same for the Gulf of Mexico? How about the end of the great coral reefs? The extirpation of two hundred species per day? Four hundred? Six hundred? Give me a specific threshold, Derrick, a specific point at which you'll finally use that word."



Do you believe that our culture will undergo a voluntary transformation to a sane and sustainable way of living?

For the last several years I've taken to asking people this question, at talks and rallies, in libraries, on buses, in airplanes, at the grocery store, the hardware store. Everywhere. The answers range from emphatic *nos* to laughter. No one answers in the affirmative. One fellow at one talk did raise his hand, and when everyone looked at him, he dropped his hand, then said, sheepishly, "Oh, voluntary? No, of course not." My next question: how will this understanding—that this culture will not voluntarily stop destroying the natural world, eliminating indigenous cultures, exploiting the poor, and killing those who resist—shift our strategy and tactics? The answer? Nobody knows, because

we never talk about it: we're too busy pretending the culture will undergo a magical transformation.

This book is about that shift in strategy, and in tactics.



I just got home from talking to a new friend, another longtime activist. She told me of a campaign she participated in a few years ago to try to stop the government and transnational timber corporations from spraying Agent Orange, a potent defoliant and teratogen, in the forests of Oregon. Whenever activists learned a hillside was going to be sprayed, they assembled there, hoping their presence would stop the poisoning. But each time, like clockwork, helicopters appeared, and each time, like clockwork, helicopters dumped loads of Agent Orange onto the hillside and onto protesting activists. The campaign did not succeed.

“But,” she said to me, “I’ll tell you what did. A bunch of Vietnam vets lived in those hills, and they sent messages to the Bureau of Land Management and to Weyerhaeuser, Boise Cascade, and the other timber companies saying, ‘We know the names of your helicopter pilots, and we know their addresses.’”

I waited for her to finish.

“You know what happened next?” she asked.

“I think I do,” I responded.

“Exactly,” she said. “The spraying stopped.”

## **FIVE STORIES**

Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings.

*Ben Okri*<sup>4</sup>

Unquestioned beliefs are the real authorities of a culture. Therefore, if an individual can express what is undeniably real to him without invoking any authority beyond his own experience, he is transcending the belief systems of his culture.

*Robert Combs*<sup>5</sup>



LAST TUESDAY THE TWIN TOWERS OF THE WORLD TRADE CENTER collapsed, killing thousands of people. That same day a portion of the Pentagon also collapsed, killing more than a hundred. In addition, a jet airliner crashed in Pennsylvania.

*Let's tell this story again:* Last Tuesday nineteen Arab terrorists unleashed their fanaticism on the United States by hijacking four planes, each containing scores of innocent victims. These terrorists, who do not value life the way we Americans do, slammed two of the planes into the World Trade Center and a third into the Pentagon. Courageous men and women in the fourth plane wrestled with their attackers and drove the plane into the ground, sacrificing themselves rather than allowing the killers to attack the headquarters of the CIA or any other crucial target. Our government will find and punish those who masterminded the attack. This will be difficult because, as President George W. Bush said, "This enemy hides in shadows and has no regard for human life. This is an enemy that [*sic*] preys on innocent and unsuspecting people and then runs for cover."<sup>6</sup> When we find them, we must kill them. This killing will not be easy on us. We must steel ourselves against the possibility—inevitability—that we may be forced to kill even those whose guilt we cannot finally establish. As former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger said, "There is only one way to begin to deal with people like this, and that is you have to kill some of them even if they are not immediately directly involved in this thing."<sup>7</sup> Many politicians and journalists have spoken yet more directly. "This is no time," syndicated columnist (and bestselling author) Ann Coulter wrote, "to be precious about locating the exact individuals directly involved in this particular terrorist attack. . . . We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity."<sup>8</sup>

*Here is another version of the same story:* Last Tuesday nineteen young men made their mothers proud. They gave their lives to strike a blow against the United States, the greatest terrorist state ever to exist. This blow was struck in response to U.S. support for the dispossession and murder of Palestinians, to the forced installation of pro-Western governments in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and many other countries, to the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians killed by U.S. bombs, to the nine thousand babies who die every month as a direct

result of U.S. sanctions on Iraq, and to the irradiation of Iraq with depleted uranium. More broadly, it was a response to the CIA-backed murder of 650,000 people in Indonesia, and to the hundreds of thousands murdered by U.S.-backed death squads in Central and South America. To the four million civilians killed in North Korea. To the theft of American Indian land and the killings of millions of Indians. To the imposition of business-friendly dictators like Mobutu Sese Seko, Augusto Pinochet, the Shah, Suharto, or Ferdinand Marcos. (As Secretary of Defense William Cohen said to a group of *Fortune* 500 leaders, “Business follows the flag. . . . We provide the security. You provide the investment.”<sup>9</sup>) It was a response to an American foreign policy driven by the needs of industrial production—as manifested through the unnatural logic of the bottom line—not life. This was a blow delivered not only against the United States but against a murderous global economy—a half a million babies die each year as a direct result of so-called debt repayment<sup>10</sup>—that is a continuation of the same old colonialism under which those who exploit get rich and the rest get killed. The poor of the world would all be better off if the global economy—run by transnational corporations backed by the military power of the United States—disappeared tomorrow. When a country, an economy, and a culture are all based on the systematic violent exploitation of humans and nonhumans the world over, it should come as no surprise when at long last someone fights back. We can only hope and pray that the organizations behind this have the resources and stamina to keep at it until they bring down the global economy.

*Here’s another version:* Last Tuesday was a tragedy for the planet, and at least a temporary victory for rage and hatred. But let us not seek to pinpoint blame, nor meet negativity with negativity. The terrorists were wrong to act as they did, but to meet their violence with our own would be just as wrong. Violence never solves anything. As Gandhi said, “An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind.” Even if you believe the United States and the global economy are fundamentally destructive, you cannot use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house. The most important thing any of us can do is eradicate the anger that lies within our own hearts, that wounds the world as surely as do all the hijackers in Arabia and all the bombs in the United States. If I wish to experience peace, I must provide peace for another. If I wish to heal another’s anger, I must first heal my own. I know that all of the terrorists of the world are, beneath it all, searching for love. It is the task of those of us who’ve been granted this understanding to teach them this, simply by loving them, and then by loving them more. For love is the only

cure. I deplore violence, and if the United States goes to war, I will oppose that war in whatever peaceful ways I can, with love in my heart. And I will love and support our brave troops.



*Or how about this:* It should be clear to everyone by now—even those with a vested interest in ignorance—that industrial civilization is killing the planet. It's causing unprecedented human privation and suffering. Unless it's stopped, or somehow stops itself, or most likely collapses under the weight of its inherent ecological and human destructiveness, it will kill every living being on earth. It should be equally clear that the efforts of those of us working to stop or slow the destruction are insufficient. We file our lawsuits; write our books; send letters to editors, representatives, CEOs; carry signs and placards; restore natural communities; and not only do we not stop or slow the destruction, but it actually continues to accelerate. Rates of deforestation continue to rise, rates of extinction do the same, global warming proceeds apace, the rich get richer, the poor starve to death, and the world burns.

At the same time that we so often find ourselves seemingly helpless in facing down civilization's speeding train of destruction, we find that there's a huge gap in our discourse. We speak much of the tactics of civil disobedience, much of the spiritual politics of cultural transformation, much of the sciences of biotechnology, toxicology, biology, and psychology. We talk of law. We also talk often of despair, frustration, and sorrow.

Yet our discourse remains firmly embedded in that which is sanctioned by the very overarching structures that govern the destruction in the first place. We do not often speak of the tactics of sabotage, and even less do we speak of violence. We avoid them, or pretend they should not be allowed to enter even the realm of possibility, or that they simply do not exist, like disinherited relatives who show up at a family reunion.

Several years ago I interviewed a long-term and well-respected Gandhian activist. I asked him, "What if those in power are murderous? What if they're not willing to listen to reason at all? Should we continue to approach them nonviolently?"

He responded, reasonably enough, "When a house is on fire, and has gone far beyond the point where you can do anything about it, all you can do is bring lots of water to try to stop its spread. But you can't save the house. Nonviolence is a precautionary principle. Before the house is on fire you have to make sure you

have a fire hydrant, clearly marked escape routes, emergency exits. The same is true in society. You educate your children in nonviolence. You educate your media in nonviolence. And when someone has a grievance, you don't ignore or suppress it, but you listen to that person, and ask, 'What is your concern?' You say, 'Let's sit down and solve it.'"

I agreed with what he said, so far as it went, but that didn't stop me from understanding that he'd sidestepped the question.

Before I could bring him back, he continued, "Say a father beats his children. Once he has already reached that stage, you have to say, 'What kind of a childhood did he have? How did he not learn the skills of coping with adverse situations in a calm, compassionate, composed way?'"

This Gandhian's compassion, I thought, was entirely misplaced. Where was his compassion for the children being beaten? I responded that I believed the first question we need to ask is how we can get the children to a safe place. Once safety has been established, by any means possible, I said, and once the emotional needs of the children are being met, only then do we have the luxury of asking about the father's emotional needs, and his history.

What happened next is really the point of this story. I asked this devoted adherent of nonviolence if in his mind it would ever be acceptable to commit an act of violence were it determined to be the only way to save the children. His answer was revealing, and symbolizes the hole in our discourse: he changed the subject.

After I transcribed and edited the interview, I sent it to him with a new question inserted, attempting once again to pin him down. What did he do this time? He deleted my question.

Too often this is the response of all of us when faced with this most difficult of questions: when is violence an appropriate means to stop injustice? But with the world dying—or rather being killed—we no longer have the luxury to change the subject or delete the question. It's a question that won't go away.



I had two reasons for telling the four versions of the World Trade Center bombing.<sup>11</sup> The first was to point out that all writers are propagandists. Writers who claim differently, or who otherwise do not understand this, have succumbed to the extremely dangerous propaganda that narrative can be divorced from value. This is not true. All descriptions carry with them weighty presumptions of value. This is as true for wordless descriptions such as mathematical formulae—which

value the quantifiable and ignore everything else—as it is for the descriptions I gave above. The first version, by giving only current actions—“the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsed, killing hundreds of people”—devalues (by their absence) cause and context. Why did the towers collapse? What were the events surrounding the collapse? This neat excision of both cause and context is the standard now in journalism, where, for example, we often hear of devastating mudslides in the colonies killing thousands of people who, seemingly unaccountably, were foolish enough to build villages beneath unstable slopes; toward the end of these articles we sometimes see sidelong references to “illegal logging,” but nowhere do we see mention of Weyerhaeuser, Hyundai, Daishowa, or other transnational timber companies, which cut the steep slopes over the objections—and sometimes dead bodies—of the villagers. Or we may read of the rebel group UNITA slaughtering civilians in Angola, with no mention of two decades of U.S. financial and moral support for this group. So far as the bombing of the World Trade Center, despite yard after column yard of ink and paper devoted to the attacks, analyses of potential reasons for hatred of the United States rarely venture beyond, “They’re fanatics,” or “They’re jealous of our lifestyle,” or even, and I’m not making this up, “They want our resources.”

The second, patriotic version carries with it the inherent presumption that the United States did nothing to deserve or even lead to the attack: if the United States kills citizens of other countries, and survivors of that violence respond by killing United States citizens—even if the casualty counts of the counter-strikes are by any realistic assessment much smaller—the United States is then justified in killing yet more citizens of those other countries. As Thomas Jefferson put it, “In war, they will kill some of us; we shall destroy all of them.”<sup>12</sup> Another presumption of the patriotic version is that the lives of people killed by foreign terrorists are more worthy of notice, vengeance, and future protection than those killed, for example, by unsafe working conditions, or by the turning of our total environment into a carcinogenic stew. Let’s say that three thousand people died in those attacks. In no way do I mean to demean these lives once presumably full of love, friendship, drama, sorrow, and so on, but more Americans die each month from toxins and other workplace hazards, and more Americans die each *week* from *preventable* cancers that are for the most part direct results of the activities of large corporations, and certainly the results of the industrial economy.<sup>13</sup> The lack of outrage over these deaths commensurate to the outrage expressed over the deaths in the 9/11 bombings reveals much—if we care to reflect on it—about the values and presumptions of our culture.

The third version, from the perspective of the bombers or their supporters, presumes that there are conditions under which it is morally acceptable to kill noncombatants, to kill those who themselves have done you no direct harm.<sup>14</sup> It also presumes that to kill people within the United States (by bombs, of course, since carcinogens spewed in the service of production evidently do not count as causes of atrocity) may cause those who run the governments of the United States—both nominal, that is, political, and de facto, that is, economic—to re-think their position of violently dominating the rest of the planet.

The fourth version presumes it is possible to halt or significantly slow violence through nonviolent means.



Here's a question I've been asking: can the same action seem immoral from one perspective and moral from another? From the perspective, for example, of salmon or other creatures, including humans, whose lives depend on free-flowing rivers, dams are murderous and immoral. To remove dams would, from this perspective, be extremely moral. Of course the most moral thing would have been to not build these or any other large dams in the first place. But they're built, and they continue to be built the world over, to the consistent short-term fiscal benefit of huge corporations and over the determined yet usually unsuccessful resistance of the poor. The second most moral thing would be to let the water out slowly, and then breach the dams more or less gently, taking the survival needs (as opposed to the more abstract requirements of the dominant economic system) of all humans and nonhumans into account as we let rivers once again run free. But the dams are there, they're killing rivers—because of dams in the Northwest, for example, salmon and sturgeon are fast disappearing, and in the Southwest, I'm not sure what more I need to say except that the Colorado River no longer even reaches the ocean—and the current political, economic, and social systems have shown themselves to be consistently unresponsive to and irredeemably detrimental to human and non-human needs. Faced with a choice between healthy functioning natural communities on one hand and profits on the other (or behind those profits, and motivating them, the centralization of power) of course those in power always choose the latter. What, then, becomes the moral thing to do? Do we stand by and watch the last of the salmon die? Do we write letters and file lawsuits that we know in our hearts will ultimately not make much difference? Do we take out the dams ourselves?

Here's another question: What would the rivers themselves want?

I'm aiming at a far bigger and more profound target than the nearly twelve million cubic yards of cement that went into the Grand Coulee Dam. I want in this book to examine the morality and feasibility of intentionally taking down not just dams but all of civilization. I aim to examine this as unflinchingly and honestly as I can, even, or especially, at the risk of examining topics normally considered off-limits to discourse.

I am not the first to make the case that the industrial economy, indeed, civilization (which underpins and gives rise to it), is incompatible with human and nonhuman freedoms, and in fact with human and nonhuman life.<sup>15</sup> If you accept that the industrial economy—and beneath it, civilization—is destroying the planet and creating unprecedented human suffering among the poor (and if you don't accept this, go ahead and put this book down, back away slowly, turn on the television, and take some more *soma*: the drug should kick in soon enough, your agitation will disappear, you'll forget everything I've written, and then everything will be perfect again, just like the voices from the television tell you over and over), then it becomes clear that the best thing that can happen, from the perspective of essentially all nonhumans as well as the vast majority of humans, is for the industrial economy (and civilization) to go away or, in the shorter run, for it to be slowed as much as humanly possible during the time we await its final collapse. But here's the problem: this slowing of the industrial economy will inconvenience many of those who benefit from it, including nearly everyone in the United States. Many of those who will be inconvenienced identify so much more with their role as participants in the industrial economy than they do with being human that they may very well consider this inconvenience to be a threat to their very lives. Those people will not allow themselves to be inconvenienced without a fight. What, then, is the right thing to do? Is it possible to talk about fundamental social change without asking ourselves the question the Gandhian refused to answer?



# **CIVILIZATION**

Civilization originates in conquest abroad and repression at home.

*Stanley Diamond*<sup>16</sup>



IF I'M GOING TO CONTEMPLATE THE COLLAPSE OF CIVILIZATION, I need to define what it is. I looked in some dictionaries. *Webster's* calls civilization "a high stage of social and cultural development."<sup>17</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary* describes it as "a developed or advanced state of human society."<sup>18</sup> All the other dictionaries I checked were similarly laudatory. These definitions, no matter how broadly shared, helped me not in the slightest. They seemed to me hopelessly sloppy. After reading them, I still had no idea what the hell a civilization is: define *high*, *developed*, or *advanced*, please. The definitions, it struck me, are also extremely self-serving: can you imagine writers of dictionaries willingly classifying themselves as members of "a low, undeveloped, or backward state of human society"?

I suddenly remembered that all writers, including writers of dictionaries, are propagandists, and I realized that these definitions are, in fact, bite-sized chunks of propaganda, concise articulations of the arrogance that has led those who believe they are living in the most advanced—and best—culture to attempt to impose by force this way of being on all others.

I would define a civilization much more precisely, and I believe more usefully, as a culture—that is, a complex of stories, institutions, and artifacts—that both leads to and emerges from the growth of cities (*civilization*, see *civil*: from *civis*, meaning *citizen*, from Latin *civitatis*, meaning *city-state*), with cities being defined—so as to distinguish them from camps, villages, and so on—as people living more or less permanently in one place in densities high enough to require the routine importation of food and other necessities of life. Thus a Tolowa village five hundred years ago where I live in Tu'nes (*meadow long* in the Tolowa tongue), now called Crescent City, California, would not have been a city, since the Tolowa ate native salmon, clams, deer, huckleberries, and so on, and had no need to bring in food from outside. Thus, under my definition, the Tolowa, because their way of living was not characterized by the growth of city-states, would not have been civilized. On the other hand, the Aztecs were. Their social structure led inevitably to great city-states like Iztapalapa and Tenochtitlán, the latter of which was, when Europeans first encountered it, far larger than any city in Europe, with a population five times that of London or Seville.<sup>19</sup> Shortly before razing Tenochtitlán and slaughtering or enslaving its

inhabitants, the explorer and conquistador Hernando Cortés remarked that it was easily the most beautiful city on earth.<sup>20</sup> Beautiful or not, Tenochtitlán required, as do all cities, the (often forced) importation of food and other resources. The story of any civilization is the story of the rise of city-states, which means it is the story of the funneling of resources toward these centers (in order to sustain them and cause them to grow), which means it is the story of an increasing region of unsustainability surrounded by an increasingly exploited countryside.

German Reichskanzler Paul von Hindenburg described the relationship perfectly: “Without colonies no security regarding the acquisition of raw materials, without raw materials no industry, without industry no adequate standard of living and wealth. Therefore, Germans, do we need colonies.”<sup>21</sup>

Of course someone already *lives* in the colonies, although that is evidently not of any importance.

But there’s more. Cities don’t arise in political, social, and ecological vacuums. Lewis Mumford, in the second book of his extraordinary two-volume *Myth of the Machine*, uses the term *civilization* “to denote the group of institutions that first took form under kingship. Its chief features, constant in varying proportions throughout history, are the centralization of political power, the separation of classes, the lifetime division of labor, the mechanization of production, the magnification of military power, the economic exploitation of the weak, and the universal introduction of slavery and forced labor for both industrial and military purposes.”<sup>22</sup> (The anthropologist and philosopher Stanley Diamond put this a bit more succinctly when he noted, “Civilization originates in conquest abroad and repression at home.”<sup>23</sup>) These attributes, which inhere not just in this culture but in all civilizations, make civilization sound pretty bad. But, according to Mumford, civilization has another, more benign face as well. He continues, “These institutions would have completely discredited both the primal myth of divine kingship and the derivative myth of the machine had they not been accompanied by another set of collective traits that deservedly claim admiration: the invention and keeping of the written record, the growth of visual and musical arts, the effort to widen the circle of communication and economic intercourse far beyond the range of any local community: ultimately the purpose to make available to all men [*sic*] the discoveries and inventions and creations, the works of art and thought, the values and purposes that any single group has discovered.”<sup>24</sup>

Much as I admire and have been influenced by Mumford’s work, I fear that when he began discussing civilization’s admirable face he fell under the spell

of the same propaganda promulgated by the lexicographers whose work I consulted: that this culture really is “advanced,” or “higher.” But if we dig beneath this second, smiling mask of civilization—the belief that civilization’s visual or musical arts, for example, are more developed than those of noncivilized peoples—we find a mirror image of civilization’s other face, that of power. For example, it wouldn’t be the whole truth to say that visual and musical arts have simply *grown* or become more highly advanced under this system; it’s more true that they have long ago succumbed to the same division of labor that characterizes this culture’s economics and politics. Where among traditional indigenous people—the “uncivilized”—songs are sung by everyone as a means to bond members of the community and celebrate each other and their land-base, within civilization songs are written and performed by experts, those with “talent,” those whose lives are devoted to the production of these arts. There’s no reason for me to listen to my neighbor sing (probably off-key) some amateurish song of her own invention when I can pop in a CD of Beethoven, Mozart, or Lou Reed (okay, so Lou Reed sings off-key, too, but I like it). I’m not certain I’d characterize the conversion of human beings from participants in the ongoing creation of communal arts to more passive consumers of artistic products manufactured by distant experts—even if these distant experts are *really* talented—as a good thing.

I could make a similar argument about writing, but Stanley Diamond beat me to it: “Writing was one of the original mysteries of civilization, and it reduced the complexities of experience to the written word. Moreover, writing provides the ruling classes with an ideological instrument of incalculable power. The word of God becomes an invincible law, mediated by priests; therefore, respond the Iroquois, confronting the European: ‘Scripture was written by the Devil.’ With the advent of writing, symbols became explicit; they lost a certain richness. Man’s word was no longer an endless exploration of reality, but a sign that could be used against him. . . . For writing splits consciousness in two ways—it becomes more authoritative than talking, thus degrading the meaning of speech and eroding oral tradition; and it makes it possible to use words for the political manipulation and control of others. Written signs supplant memory; an official, fixed, and permanent version of events can be made. If it is written, in early civilizations [and I would suggest, now], it is bound to be true.”<sup>25</sup>

I have two problems, also, with Mumford’s claim that the widening of communication and economic intercourse under civilization benefits people as a whole. The first is that it presumes that uncivilized people do not communicate

or participate in economic transactions beyond their local communities. Many do. Shells from the Northwest Coast found their way into the hands of Plains Indians, and buffalo robes often ended up on the coast. (And let's not even mention noncivilized people communicating with their nonhuman neighbors, something rarely practiced by the civilized: talk about restricting yourself to your own community!) In any case, I'm not certain that the ability to send emails back and forth to Spain or to watch television programs beamed out of Los Angeles makes my life particularly richer. It's far more important, useful, and enriching, I think, to get to know my neighbors. I'm frequently amazed to find myself sitting in a room full of fellow human beings, all of us staring at a box watching and listening to a story concocted and enacted by people far away. I have friends who know *Seinfeld's* neighbors better than their own. I, too, can get lost in valuing the unreality of the distant over that which surrounds me every day. I have to confess I can navigate the mazes of the computer game *Doom 2: Hell on Earth* far better than I can find my way along the labyrinthine game trails beneath the trees outside my window, and I understand the intricacies of Microsoft Word far better than I do the complex dance of rain, sun, predators, prey, scavengers, plants, and soil in the creek a hundred yards away. The other night, I wrote till late, and finally turned off my computer to step outside and say goodnight to the dogs. I realized, then, that the wind was blowing hard through the tops of the redwood trees, and the trees were sighing and whispering. Branches were clashing, and in the distance I heard them cracking. Until that moment I had not realized such a symphony was taking place so near, much less had I gone out to participate in it, to feel the wind blow my hair and to feel the tossed rain hit me in the face. All of the sounds of the night had been drowned out by the monotone whine of my computer's fan. Just yesterday I saw a pair of hooded mergansers playing on the pond outside my bedroom. Then last night I saw a television program in which yet another lion chased yet another zebra. Which of those two scenes makes me richer? This perceived widening of communication is just another replication of the problem of the visual and musical arts, because given the impulse for centralized control that motivates civilization, widening communication in this case really means reducing us from active participants in our own lives and in the lives of those around us to consumers sucking words and images from some distant sugar tit.

I have another problem with Mumford's statement. In claiming that the widening of communication and economic intercourse are admirable, he seems to have forgotten—and this is strange, considering the sophistication of the rest of his analysis—that this widening can only be universally beneficial when all

parties act voluntarily and under circumstances of relatively equivalent power. I'd hate to have to make the case, for example, that the people of Africa—perhaps 100 million of whom died because of the slave trade, and many more of whom find themselves dispossessed and/or impoverished today—have benefited from their “economic intercourse” with Europeans. The same can be said for Aborigines, Indians, the people of pre-colonial India, and so on.

I want to re-examine one other thing Mumford wrote, in part because he makes an argument for civilization I've seen replicated so many times elsewhere, and that actually leads, I think, to some of the very serious problems we face today. He concluded the section I quoted above, and I reproduce it here just so you don't have to flip back a couple of pages: “ultimately the purpose [is] to make available to all men [*sic*] the discoveries and inventions and creations, the works of art and thought, the values and purposes that any single group has discovered.” But just as a widening of economic intercourse is only beneficial to everyone when all exchanges are voluntary, so, too, the imposition of one group's values and purposes onto another, or its appropriation of the other's discoveries, can lead only to the exploitation and diminution of the latter in favor of the former. That this “exchange” helps all was commonly argued by early Europeans in America, as when Captain John Chester wrote that the Indians were to gain “the knowledge of our faith,” while the Europeans would harvest “such riches as the country hath.”<sup>26</sup> It was argued as well by American slave owners in the nineteenth century: philosopher George Fitzhugh stated that “slavery educates, refines, and moralizes the masses by bringing them into continual intercourse with masters of superior minds, information, and morality.”<sup>27</sup> And it's just as commonly argued today by those who would teach the virtues of blue jeans, Big Macs™, Coca-Cola™, Capitalism™, and Jesus Christ™ to the world's poor in exchange for dispossessing them of their landbases and forcing them to work in sweatshops.

Another problem is that Mumford's statement reinforces a mindset that leads inevitably to unsustainability, because it presumes that discoveries, inventions, creations, works of art and thought, and values and purposes are transposable over space, that is, that they are separable from both the human context and landbase that created them. Mumford's statement unintentionally reveals perhaps more than anything else the power of the stories that hold us in thrall to the machine, as he put it, that is civilization: even in brilliantly dissecting the myth of this machine, Mumford fell back into that very same myth by seeming to implicitly accept the notion that ideas or works of art or discoveries are like tools in a toolbox, and can be meaningfully and without

negative consequence used out of their original context: thoughts, ideas, and art as tools rather than as tapestries inextricably woven from and into a community of human and nonhuman neighbors. But discoveries, works of thought, and purposes that may work very well in the Great Plains may be harmful in the Pacific Northwest, and even moreso in Hawai'i. To believe that this potential transposition is positive is the same old substitution of what is distant for what is near: if I really want to know how to live in Tu'nes, I should pay attention to Tu'nes.

There's another problem, though, that trumps all of these others. It has to do with a characteristic of this civilization unshared even by other civilizations. It is the deeply and most-often-invisibly held beliefs that there is really only one way to live, and that we are the one-and-only possessors of that way. It becomes our job then to propagate this way, by force when necessary, until there are no other ways to be. Far from being a loss, the eradication of these other ways to be, these other cultures, is instead an actual gain, since Western Civilization is the only way worth being anyway: we're doing ourselves a favor by getting rid of not only obstacles blocking our access to resources but reminders that other ways to be exist, allowing our fantasy to sidle that much closer to reality; and we're doing the heathens a favor when we raise them from their degraded state to join the highest, most advanced, most developed state of society. If they don't want to join us, simple: we kill them. Another way to say all of this is that something grimly alchemical happens when we combine the arrogance of the dictionary definition, which holds this civilization superior to all other cultural forms; hypermilitarism, which allows civilization to expand and exploit essentially at will; and a belief, held even by such powerful and relentless critics of civilization as Lewis Mumford, in the desirability of cosmopolitanism, that is, the transposability of discoveries, values, modes of thought, and so on over time and space. The twentieth-century name for that grimly alchemical transmutation is genocide: the eradication of cultural difference, its sacrifice on the altar of the one true way, on the altar of the centralization of perception, the conversion of a multiplicity of moralities all dependent on location and circumstance to one morality based on the precepts of the ever-expanding machine, the surrender of individual perception (as through writing and through the conversion of that and other arts to consumables) to predigested perceptions, ideas, and values imposed by external authorities who with all their hearts—or what's left of them—believe in, and who benefit by, the centralization of power. Ultimately, then, the story of this civilization is the story

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of the reduction of the world's tapestry of stories to only one story, the best story, the real story, the most advanced story, the most developed story, the story of the power and the glory that is Western Civilization.

