

Peak Oil and Future Shock
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The talk explored the impact of Peak Oil on the stability of today's societies as they begin to struggle with the many interconnected supply/demand pressures brought about by peak oil.

A look back at history shows that the availability of fossil fuels transformed human civilization in a way that goes well beyond economic measures of standard of living and such. The change from relying on muscle power, animal or human, to mechanical servants driven by fossil fuels had a profound impact on the relationship of people to each other and the natural world. It is against this background that Prof. Farrell discussed possible outcomes of Peak Oil from the perspective of social psychology. The talk thus complemented the many previous talks at CREF that focused on engineering or economics.

Although the timing of Peak Oil and rate of decline in supplies after the Peak is not known, it is apparent that the world is approaching an oil maximum. The adaptation to a era of declining oil is not likely to be easy. Without a catastrophe or emergency, political pressure is likely to resist change in the status quo until the last possible moment.

The talk sketched optimistic and grave scenarios. Ideally necessity will bring about a cultural change in which the current emphasis on growth would shift to sustainability. Today's economic engines - finance, the corporate military, and industrial entertainment - would move toward an economy based on research and production of new energy sources. Preliminary signs of such a change are evident around the world, especially in Europe and Asia, but such a transformation would require serious changes in cultural values. A shift away from the expectations of consumer utopia would require a deeper engagement with science education and new ways of thinking about self-esteem and purpose.

In a more pessimistic scenario, the inevitable decline in "easy" oil may arouse the survival anxiety that unleashes aggression. We can expect that demagogues of various persuasions will do their best to exploit feeling of injustice and betrayal, looking for scapegoats and fomenting conflicts in order to protect their own wealth and power. In the worst scenarios the most basic relationships that underlie civil society could be threatened. Since fossil fuels helped to eliminate slavery, the age-old struggles over labor justice would become more acute.

It is possible but hardly guaranteed that political leadership and organized citizens could dampen rather than amplify the stress of energy decline. One thing is certain: Since

energy shapes who we are and how we behave, scarcity will test the resilience and adaptability that our complex societies need for survival.