

On Thom Hartmann and *The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight*

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A Summary of Hartmann's Views

I noticed a reference a few weeks ago to Thom Hartmann's book, *The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight*, and I just finished reading it. It is a very good summary of the state of the world. I recommend that you read it. A number of the observations that Hartmann makes are similar to those presented in my book, *Can America Survive?* The purpose of this article is to summarize some of Hartmann's key points, compare his views to mine, and show how some of his desires for human society might be brought about.

The title of Hartmann's book, "Ancient Sunlight," refers, of course, to fossil fuels, and the "Last Hours" refers to the fact that we will soon exhaust this source of energy. Hartmann observes that human population began to grow to today's extreme size when mankind began to tap the energy of fossil fuel, about 1650. Prior to that time, the global population of human beings was on the order of 250 million. The six billion people that are now alive owe their existence to fossil fuels, and when those fossil fuels are gone, most of the people alive on the planet at that time will die of starvation (if global war or global warming or some other global catastrophe does not kill them first). Current world reserves of oil are about 1,000 billion barrels, and that amount is expected to be consumed within 45 years.

Hartmann cites Richard Leakey's book, *The Sixth Extinction*, and notes that, while the "normal" rate of extinction of species is about 25 species every century, mankind's large numbers and activity are causing the extinction of between 17,000 and 100,000 species every year – the sixth mass species extinction in the history of the planet.

Hartmann compares the cultures of today's world (the "Younger Cultures") with the cultures prior to the rise of civilizations, i.e., prior to 10,000 years ago (the "Older Cultures"). He observes that Older Cultures controlled their populations peacefully, and he asserts that Older-Culture ancient tribes did not engage in annihilation of other tribes, e.g., as practiced by the Younger-Culture Jews in their conquest of the Promised Land. He posits that the desire of Younger Cultures to acquire material possessions, to grow, and to dominate other groups is responsible for much oppression, human misery, and violence (including "genocidal" wars of extermination). His points in this regard are illustrated well by the following passage from his book.

"The story of the Toradjas tribe is a good example, and fairly typical. The Dutch had "conquered" the Celebes Islands (now known as Sulawesi), and there lived in the Poso district of these islands a hilltop-dwelling people known as the Toradjas. They grew a dry variety of rice, and hunted, gathered, and lived tribally. Their economy had no money or other means of exchange beyond social courtesy and obligation, and hunger was unknown to them. They were quite happy with their lifestyle, which they had maintained even thousands of years before Holland first was occupied by dominators from Rome, and they had no particular interest in planting crops for export to Holland or in working for the Dutch lowland owners on their coffee plantations.

“This situation was intolerable to the Dutch, who observed that under such circumstances development and progress were impossible; and unless something was done quickly these tribal people were bound to remain at the same level of primitive lifestyle.

“So in 1892, the Dutch governor sent in missionaries to destroy tribal culture. This effort, however, was a total failure. Even offering ‘free education’ in the mission schools for the Toradjas’ children wasn’t enough to convince them that they should give up their religion or way of life. They simply had no interest in buying goods from the Dutch-owned stores, or in planting and growing coffee or rice for the Dutch export business, or in worshipping the gods of the Dutch. Without cheap native labor, the local Dutch industries were hardly as profitable as they could be.

“After thirteen years of diligent effort by the church, the Dutch government implemented Plan B. They brought in the army, and forcibly moved the Toradjas from their ancestral lands on the hilltops and redeposited them in the lowlands. They took Toradjas men for slave labor (they called it ‘conscriptio’) and used them to build roads, then imposed a head tax on each of their citizens. In order to pay the tax, the Toradjas had to go to work in the coffee plantations, and by 1910 they were ‘converted,’ sending their children to the mission schools, buying western clothing and appliances, smoking tobacco and drinking alcohol, and adopting Christianity. Although their mortality rates had soared, and they’d exchanged the healthy, leisurely life that was lived by their ancestors for ten thousand years for one of frantic and grinding poverty, they were now, the Dutch government pronounced, ‘civilized’.”

Hartmann observes that, contrary to popular misconception, the life of hunter-gatherers was generally not brutal and short, but leisurely and healthy. Even when Older Cultures lived under severe conditions (e.g., the Eskimos), their existence was not oppressive and miserable, as under the oppression of tribal cultures by the Younger Culture.

He contrasts the *modus operandi* of Older Cultures to Younger Cultures. The Younger Cultures engage in wars of conquest and extermination. For Older Cultures, warfare is more in the nature of a pastime, rather than for conquering and subduing enemies.

He compares the structure of the city-states of civilization with the structure of primitive tribes. “Tribes are characterized by five primary traits: (1) political independence; (2) egalitarian structure; (3) get their resources from renewable local sources; (4) have a unique sense of their own identity; (5) respect the identity of other tribes.”

“A member of a tribe is born into that tribe. The tribe defines his or her identity. Tribes do not evangelize (go out trying to get others to convert to their ways), and do not accept ‘converts’ or ‘new residents,’ and are convinced that their way of life, their stories of the world, and their gods are the best *for them*.”

City-states, by contrast, are hierarchically organized, with a concentration of power at the top. “Contrast tribal characteristics with the structure and nature of city-states: (1) political dominance; (2) hierarchical: clear authority structures; (3) get their resources through trade and conquest; (4) absorb other cultures into their own identity; (5) genocidal warfare against others.

Hartmann discusses that genetics is the basis for the traditional tribal community, that the tribe is an extended family – a “genetic community.” “In modern America, it is popular to call this concept ‘racist.’ When Malcolm X talked about people of African ancestry establishing their own sense of identity and their own rituals and culture instead of simply trying to be a part of ‘white culture,’ he was branded a racist by many, both blacks and whites. Similarly, those in the ‘white supremacist movement’ virtually define the term ‘racist’ in their belief that races should live apart and not mix. The reason why ‘racist’ is a negative term, and why this sort of separation of peoples is often disastrous in modern America, is because of our culture of domination, the culture in which it takes place.

“In the Native American Older Cultures (cooperative cultures), it’s perfectly acceptable (in fact, it’s *desirable*) to be tribally/genetically different, and to retain that separate identity....

“Our Younger Culture is an absorptive one, eating everything in its path (as Malcolm X identified) and turning everything and everyone to not just its own use but, in particular, to the use of those who control it.”

Ancient Sunshine is in three parts: (1) We’re Running Out of Ancient Sunlight; (2) Younger and Older Cultures: How Did We Get Here? (3) What Can We Do About It? The first part is concerned with the fact that the world’s population is so large solely because of our use of fossil fuel, and that this will soon be gone. The second part compares the Younger Cultures of the last 10,000 years (of “civilization”) with Older Cultures of prehistoric times. The third part is concerned with what we might do to live sustainably on the planet. Hartmann offers a number of suggestions, including the following:

- Use our remaining oil to help us develop the next energy solution
- Conservation
- Reempower women
- Renounce war against any living thing
- Turn off the television
- Establish “intentional communities”
- Reinvent rituals
- Practice small acts of anonymous mercy
- Meditate
- Recognize the interconnectedness of all things
- Become fully alive, alert, aware, conscious of or surroundings and the divinity everywhere
- Reconnect with God directly.

Some Observations and Comparisons

I suppose that I enjoyed reading *Ancient Sunlight* a lot because in numerous instances the points that Hartmann makes are in agreement with my own views. I view that the crisis facing mankind began with the dawn of civilization, when mankind began to abandon the primitive hunter-gatherer way of life. It is my opinion that mankind began to “overshoot” the planet’s carrying capacity for human beings as soon as it began to use fossil fuels in a large way, i.e., about 1650. I have written that when fossil fuels exhaust,

by 2050, the human population will drop back to the levels at which it operated for millions of years, i.e., on the order of 200-500 million or less (Hartmann's figure is 250 million).

Hartmann's views on the importance of race and family are very similar to my own (see discussion in *Can America Survive?*), i.e., there is nothing intrinsically "wrong" in identifying ("standing up for," preserving, maintaining) your family, race, tribe, nation, or other cultural or genetic group into which you were born. Hartmann views that the diversity associated with maintaining distinct racial and tribal groups is beneficial. He observes, "Diversity supports survival, and we're losing it."

At times, Hartmann is a little generous in his praise and characterization of the ecological sensitivity of tribal cultures. If a culture stays in one place and grows, it inevitably collapses. The tribal cultures that survived for a long time in one area were generally nomadic cultures that simply moved on after "trashing" part of their domain (e.g., hunting it out). The reason why they survived is that they did not cause damage to the entire ecosystem. By moving on from one area to another, they allowed the previous location to regenerate. All of their waste was biologically degradable. Also, and this is crucial, they did not engage in massive deforestation. Tribal life is ecologically sustainable only if the population density remains very low.

On the issue of slavery, Hartmann implies that Judaism calls for the freeing of all slaves every fifty years (the "Jubilee" year – "... all debt was forgiven, slaves were freed...." In fact, Judaic law simply calls for the freeing of *Jewish* slaves every fifty years. Slaves taken from other tribes are retainable property.

Hartmann has, in my opinion, a strange view of what to do with the planet's remaining oil reserves (about half of the original total). He proposes to "use oil to not use oil." His view is that it is acceptable to use oil to build items that last for a few years (e.g., a long-haul truck, a solar panel), but not to use it to build weapons, which are used only "once." But in the long run, there is little or no difference between these two uses. Viewed from a thousand years from now, a long-haul truck that lasted for ten years will represent nothing more than a one-time use of the oil, and will have made no lasting beneficial difference to the planet's biosphere. (In fact, using the oil to produce weapons would probably benefit the biosphere more than using it to build long-haul trucks or solar panels, since in the former case the oil will contribute less to economic development, human population increase, energy and natural resource consumption, and associated species extinction.) After a few more decades, all of the oil will be gone, and all of these "useful" products will be gone, too – along with a million more species! As I have previously written on this topic, it *is* desirable to use the remaining oil to set up a better system of planetary management and bring a faster end to the mass species extinction, but Hartmann's proposals are not oriented toward this goal. As is the case with so many other New Age writers (e.g., Neale Donald Walsch), Hartmann's sole concern is with the current generation of human beings, and not with future generations of human beings, and not with other species at all.

If you have read some of my works at the Foundation web sites, you know that I propose as a long-term-sustainable human population a "minimal regret" population consisting of a single-nation high-technology population of five million people and a primitive, hunter-gatherer, population of five million people distributed over the globe. The purpose of the high-technology population is to control the size of the planetary population, by

prohibiting industrial activity (including commercial-scale agriculture) anywhere on the planet except within its single city-state. The purpose of the dispersed hunter-gatherer population is to reduce the likelihood of extinction of the human species from a local catastrophe. Hartmann makes the point that “When systems are small, local, and widely scattered, they’re relatively immune to failure.”

Hartmann is a keen advocate of tribal, small-community social organization, but he does not see how to bring about a return to it. In fact, he admits that a return to tribalism is probably not practical. “If it sounds like I’m advocating dismantling the modern city-state, I am not. We’ve gone too far for that to be practical or to happen, and the experience with Communism shows that when a dominator culture changes its economic or political system, what fills the void is merely a new form of domination. This book is not a call for revolution or anarchy.” “I’m not suggesting it has to be either/or, a return to tribalism or the destruction of what we call modern civilization. Instead, we need to wake up to the cold, clear reality of the situation we’ve created in our world, and the reasons behind why it is the way it is:

- The dominator city-state Younger Culture sees everything in the world as potential food or material for itself.
- It will grow and consume until there is nothing left to consume, and then our culture and our ecosystems will collapse, leaving billions of starving humans, polluted soil, air, and waters, and millions of dead species in its wake.
- By adopting some of the lessons and worldviews of our ancestors – who lived in a stable fashion on the planet for at least 100,000 years – we can change direction and create a sustainable and livable future for at least a portion of the planet.”

Hartmann’s list of suggestions to help solve the world’s current crisis are nice things to do, and they will improve the spiritual quality of life for those who do them, but they are hardly sufficient to solve the problem. As Hartmann himself observes, when an Older Culture meets a Younger Culture, the Older Culture is invariably destroyed (either by extermination or by assimilation). My proposal for a synarchic government of a minimal-regret population recognizes this fact, and addresses it directly. The proposed system of planetary management consists of two parts – one of a Younger Culture (the synarchic city-state) and one of the Older Culture (the global population of hunter-gatherers). The city-state differs from all previous Younger Cultures, however, in that it is based on *synarchy* – a spiritual government, dedicated to the mission of responsible planetary management. Its goal is not to acquire material possessions or to grow, but rather to maintain a biologically diverse and ecologically sustainable planet.

The minimal-regret population is a viable and long-term-sustainable combination of both the Older Culture and the Younger Culture. With a global human population of just ten million people, mankind will no longer be in the position of making macroscopic changes to the planet’s environment and biodiversity. With the global hunter-gatherer population, most of the planet will be occupied by people living a decent tribal lifestyle of the sort that Hartmann glorifies.

With respect to spirituality, both the high-technology city-state and the hunter-gatherer population will represent a significant advance over current civilization. I have proposed a synarchic (Platonic-“Republic” city-state) government for the high-technology population component. Such a government was promoted and popularized in the late

1800's by the spiritualist St-Yves d'Alveydre, and is being promoted once again by New Agers. In either Plato's concept or St-Yves' concept, it is a form of government in which the leaders (Plato's Guardians, St-Yves' Initiates) are grounded in religion/spiritualism. Under a synarchic government of a minimal-regret global population of ten million people, both population components (the synarchic single-nation city-state and the globally distributed tribal population of hunter-gatherers) will operate on a spiritual basis and, it is expected, will develop spiritually.

I am in general agreement with Hartmann's description of the current state of the planet, the reasons for the crisis (tapping of fossil fuels), and the prognosis (population collapse by 2050, when oil runs out). I also agree with Hartmann on the advantages of tribal social organization. What Hartmann fails to show is how this can be achieved. The genie of technology is out of the bottle. Barring a total ecological collapse (e.g., nuclear winter), the planet will never voluntarily return to a global tribal system as it once had. Technology is here to stay. With a single-nation synarchic government, however, a rational system of planetary management can be implemented, and most of the world will once again enjoy the advantages of tribal social organization: a world of good health, happiness, and freedom from genocidal wars.

Afterword

The list of Hartmann's suggestions about what can be done to address the problem contains very "passive" items. In view of his observation that Younger Cultures always destroy Older Cultures, this list of items is unlikely to contain any item or combination of items that will solve the problem. Hartmann seems averse to recognize or accept that the Younger Culture is a natural evolutionary phenomenon, and that it is bound and determined (by its nature and desires) to destroy the planet, and that the challenge facing mankind today is to prevent this from happening. And this is not bad or wrong or unfortunate or unnatural. It would be unnatural (from an evolutionary point of view) for mankind to spend the next five billion years running around in caves, or in fighting local wars that were of no planetary significance. Human life, human physical existence, is made meaningful by challenge and conflict. In primitive times, the challenges and the conflicts were primitive. And now, in a more advanced time, the challenge is incredibly complex, and the conflict will be commensurately great. The stakes are no longer the life and death of civilizations, but of the biosphere itself.

Conflict and challenge are essential aspects of life. Without them, life would be meaningless. Without conflict and challenge, we all may as well be nonphysical spirits. The whole purpose of life is life-and-death struggle. In mankind's earlier stage of development, the challenge and the conflict were less significant – the life of the individual, of the family, of the tribe, of the nation, of the civilization. At that time, that was all that mankind could handle. Now, the battle is for the very survival of the biosphere. The forces of modern technological civilization are determined, with the addiction and commitment to "growth," to destroy the planet. The challenge is to prevent this from happening. At this stage of our evolution, nothing less would be worthy of us.

War, in the general sense of organized conflict, will always be an essential part of physical existence. To be meaningful, the stakes must be "life and death." Not having the risk of death or extinction in our lives is like playing poker for pennies – the game isn't worth playing. Finding a cure for smallpox or AIDS or SARS is of far greater excitement and interest than finding a cure for the common cold. Sports may be useful

training for battle, but they can never be a permanent substitute for conflict in which the stakes are life and death / survival.

The greatest challenge ever to face mankind is now in process. It will not be solved by simple, easy things, such as meditation and prayer, or the other items of Hartmann's list. As the goddess Athena once observed, "The gods will not do for man what man can do for himself." God does not want to hear our prayers of supplication for the problem to go away. Do not pray for peace. He wants our action, our emotions, our excitement, our triumphs and tragedies, our agony and our ecstasy, our fear and our grief, our pride of accomplishment in our struggle and victory in the face of incredible odds. Meditation and prayer are wonderful and essential, but meditation should be for insight for the next step in the strategy, and prayer should be for strength to carry on the battle no matter how weary we become.

It would be a bitter disappointment if the struggle to save the planet were simply solved by the easy things that Hartmann suggests. The challenge is great, and the conflict will be great. The Aquarian Age, the Golden Age, will be ushered in with great change, including great conflict. And it should be understood that success is not at all guaranteed. Sometimes the sheriff gets killed in the shoot-out. Sometimes all a mother's prayers fail to save her son from death in battle or her child from death from fever. It does not matter that "right" is on your side. Sometimes the battle is lost. Sometimes a species does become extinct. Often, the Older Culture falls to defeat.

There would be no challenge if we went into battle knowing that we could not be killed, that our side could not lose, that we could not die. It does not matter to God whether you live or you die, or whether this planet is destroyed or not – he can simply create another one in its place. What matters to God is the experience and excitement of your trying to save it, in full knowledge that you may fail. In fact, the greater the likelihood of failure, the greater the challenge and the greater the excitement and the experience. We are almost bound to fail. All of modern civilization – its greed, its power, its economics, its technology, its addiction to growth – all are moving the planet inexorably to a complete ecological collapse. The struggle to save it may be likened to David versus Goliath, but in terms of odds it is more similar the student crushed beneath the tank in Tiananmen Square, or the American Indians being annihilated by the Europeans.

Most people alive on the planet today do not believe that an ecological disaster is underway; most people want a higher standard of living, and more economic development and more industrial activity, no matter what; most people do not want war; most people want to continue the status quo for a few more years, even though doing so will certainly cause the extinction of tens of thousands of species every year and destroy the biosphere as we know it; most people are unwilling to entertain the thought that six billion people will soon die of starvation; most people will burn every drop of oil on the planet to save their own lives or their children's lives, even if it means the total destruction of the biosphere twenty years from now. Few people are willing to recognize the situation as it is, and even fewer will be willing to make a commitment to do what is necessary to change the future from what is almost certain to happen. As Jesus said, the world will be your enemy.

Modern civilization, based on economics, liberal democracy, and free-market capitalism, has thrown down the gauntlet. It is committed to destroying the planet. The challenge is

to stop this from happening before the sixth mass species extinction is complete. Are you willing to accept the challenge to stop this from happening? What will you stand for? Will you speak for the Earth? Will you speak for the unborn millions who may never know the joy of a morning sunrise on a planet filled with unspeakable beauty and diversity? They call for you help. Do not deny them the birthright of human beings from millions of years in the past. Know the truth, and live it! The truth shall set you free!