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Review

The Party's Over: Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Societies

By Richard Heinberg

[New Society Publishers](#); ISBN: 0865714827

242 Pages. US \$17.95/CAN \$26.95

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May 14, 2003—*America's military and espionage budgets represent a gargantuan investment in an eventual Armageddon. The U.S. portrays itself as the global cop keeping order in an otherwise chaotic and dangerous world, but in reality America uses its military might primarily to maintain dominance over the world's resources.* —Richard Heinberg

The comment above should have been put on the first page of this book, rather than buried on page 229. It is a truth that must be heeded by the flag-wavers who think the invasion of Iraq was about ridding the world of an evil dictator and his alleged weapons of mass destruction.

Petrogeology is a complex and, to me at least, a rather dry subject. In *The Party's Over: Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Societies*, Richard Heinberg, a member of the core faculty at New College of California at Santa Rosa, does an excellent job of conveying some very essential information to the reader: oil is a finite resource, and the world is rapidly reaching peak production, after which there will be an inexorable decline in the availability of the fuel that made industrialism possible.

There are people and organizations, most notably the U.S. Geological Survey, that dispute these claims. According to the optimists, as Heinberg calls them, we don't have to worry about reaching peak production until mid-century. By then new technologies and renewable energy sources will stretch out remaining oil supplies or replace the need for them. But Heinberg deftly exposes the flaws in the arguments of the optimists, including the failure of the political will necessary to promote conservation and renewables, a failure that goes back to the politically-created oil crises of 1973. And he shows us how this failure stands us in poor stead for when future oil shortages will be natural and permanent, rather than political and temporary. To those of us used to an oil-rich, industrialized way of life, the implications of a permanent decline in the availability of fossil-fuels is nothing short of stunning, especially when the information is packed into the space of a modestly sized book like *The Party's Over*.

Heinberg on Food and Agriculture: "If food-production efficiency is measured by the ratio between the amount of energy input required to produce a given amount of food and the energy contained in that food, then industrial agriculture is by far the least efficient form of food production ever practiced."

On The Environment: "As fossil fuels become scarce, it will become increasingly difficult to protect trees in old-growth forest preserves, and perhaps even along the sides of city streets... The reduced availability of oil and natural gas will likely provoke both electrical energy producers and politicians to call for a reduction of pollution controls on coal plants and for the building of new nuclear plants. But these strategies will entail serious environmental costs. Increased reliance on coal, and any relaxation on emissions controls, will result in more air pollution and more acid rain. And increased reliance on nuclear power will only exacerbate the unsolved problem of radioactive waste disposal."

And a collapse of fossil fuel-based electrical grids may make what you are doing at this moment impossible. "...unless an alternative renewables-based electrical infrastructure is already substantially in place," writes Heinberg, "the information infrastructure of industrial societies will collapse and virtually all electronically coded data will become permanently irretrievable." (Now, there's something for the Total Information Awareness people to think about!)

Still, with regard to human nature, Heinberg is something of an optimist himself. He sees the possibility of managing the decline in available energy so as to limit human suffering. But by his own admission, the prospect is daunting, as it would require major changes in the political, economic and energy structures of industrial societies simultaneously. And it would require developing, or as he calls them, "less-consuming" nations, especially China, to forego full industrialization.

Nonetheless, Heinberg has included short lists of resources in the later chapters of the book so that individuals can make changes in their lifestyles, and activists can work on social change locally and globally.

Heinberg is a man who practices what he preaches. He drives a 20-plus-year old biodiesel-fueled car, teaches a course called "Culture, Ecology and Sustainable Community, which includes classes on seed-saving and energy-efficient homebuilding, and he eats locally-grown food, much of it raised by dint of the gardening skills of his wife, Janet Barocco. In *New Society*, he also has found a publisher in tune with the message of his book. The book is printed on acid-free paper made of 100 percent post-consumer recycled material, is processed chlorine-free and printed with vegetable-based inks. Such examples of earth-friendly living give us hope that life after the party will not be entirely grim.

Kéllia Ramares will interview Richard Heinberg for KPFA-FM's Cover-to-Cover" on Monday, June 2, 2003, at 3:30 p.m. Pacific Time. The program can be heard on the Internet at <http://www.kpfa.org>, and in the San Francisco Bay Area at 94.1 FM. Heinberg's web site is <http://www.museletter.com>. Ramares' web site is <http://www.rise4news.net>.

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