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Reviews

Surviving oil and gas depletion

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The End of the Oil Age

By Dale Allen Pfeiffer

Self–Published through [Lulu](#); ISBN 1-4116-0629-9

266 Pages, \$14.24USD

High Noon for Natural Gas: The New Energy Crisis

By Julian Darley

[Chelsea Green Publishing](#); ISBN 1931498539

266 Pages, \$18.00USD

Powerdown: Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World

By Richard Heinberg

[New Society Publishers](#); ISBN: 086571-510-6

209 Pages, US \$16.95/CAN \$22.95

December 10, 2004—In reporting on Peak Oil and Gas, I have discovered that the people offering solutions to the upcoming global energy shortages fall into two camps. There are those who are looking to preserve the industrial way of life made possible, first by coal, and then by cheap oil and natural gas. Then there are those who see global peak of production (Peak), which signals the beginning of the end of the industrial age, as presenting not only an opportunity to remake industrial societies, but the imperative to do so.

The three authors whose books I am reviewing jointly here hail from the second camp. Indeed, they know each others' work intimately, and they know mine as well; I have interviewed them all more than once for projects of my own.

Richard Heinberg teaches courses in a program called "Culture, Ecology and Sustainable Community," at New College of California, Santa Rosa. He also writes essays online at www.museletter.com. Heinberg's *Powerdown: Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World* is a follow-up to the book he published last year called *The Party's Over: Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Societies*. ([my review](#)). In *The Party's Over*, Heinberg describes Peak, the shortcomings of energy alternatives, and the political, economic and social implications of Peak.

Powerdown offers a further look at various paths that can be taken when there's no more denying that Houston has a problem. (With crude oil prices dancing around the \$50 level, more corporate media have been mentioning the prospect of oil production decline, though they have been most reluctant to acknowledge that the decline will begin soon and will be permanent).

In *Powerdown*, Heinberg says that there are "four principal options available to industrial societies during the next few decades:

Last One Standing – The path of competition for remaining resources.

Powerdown – The path of cooperation, conservation, and sharing.

Waiting for a Magic Elixir – Wishful thinking, false hopes and denial.

Building Lifeboats – The path of community solidarity and preservation. “

Heinberg argues for a combination of severe Powerdown and Lifeboat-building to “preserve the most worthwhile cultural achievements of the past few centuries. “ But he acknowledges that the options currently being employed are Last One Standing and Waiting for a Magic Elixir.

Is Heinberg the one engaging in “wishful thinking, false hopes and denial”? Will populous developing nations, such as Brazil, China, India, and Indonesia, agree to severe global Powerdown after the global North and West have told them repeatedly that industrialization is the road to prosperity? For example, now that private car ownership has become a status symbol in China, will the Chinese people be able to hear that China is industrializing on a base of dwindling hydrocarbons, and that there will be a time, possibly just a decade away, when there won't be enough energy to mass produce the cars they want?

Heinberg's subtitle, *Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World*, makes reference to the work of Julian Darley, director of the [Post Carbon Institute](#). Darley's book, *High Noon for Natural Gas: The New Energy Crisis*, shows us that moving from oil to natural gas is not an answer to Peak Oil. Natural gas (NG) is also a finite resource. (Jean Laherrere of ASPO, the Association for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas, predicts global NG production to peak in about 30 years). While some parts of the world, such as Russia, still have a lot of NG, others, most notably North America, are going to get caught short soon. With Dick Cheney saying that the American way of life is not negotiable, an NG shortage in North America has grave implications for world politics, as the Bolivians can tell you.

High Noon for Natural Gas is strikingly similar to Heinberg's *The Party's Over*. (In fact, Heinberg wrote the foreword to *High Noon*). Darley explains what natural gas is, where it comes from, and what the limitations are of various NG sources and alternatives, such as methane hydrates, coal gasification, coalbed methane and liquefied natural gas (LNG). Then he briefly describes the centerpiece of his post-carbon world: “Global Relocalization” or as he's called it in some speeches, “globalization in reverse.”

Darley calls for a foot economy, which means to “get your daily needs within walking distance of where you live. Live close to where you work or study and close to those you love and those who care about you.”

The latter is easier said than done. Migration, around the world and even within the United States, has often been triggered by the need to find work. Perhaps some readers of this review will recall the phenomenon of people wearing Detroit Tigers baseball caps in places far from Michigan. No, it was not a tribute to actor Tom Selleck, who wore one in the TV series *Magnum, P.I.*; it reflected the fact that many people who lived in the areas where one would normally expect Tigers fans had moved during the mid-west “Rustbelt” era of the 1980s. They had taken their hats, and their loyalties with them, but they must have left family and friends behind. Will we see major migrations, a la the Rustbelt days and a la the Dustbowl days of the Great Depression, in the economic upheaval which many, including these authors expect when oil and gas production goes into decline? How many loved ones will be left behind?

Dale Allen Pfeiffer of Holly, Michigan is, among other things, a geologist, novelist, activist and the Science Editor of the Los Angeles-based newsletter, *From the Wilderness* (FTW). His book, *The End of the Oil Age*, is an anthology of articles written mostly for FTW. Since these articles were written in response to specific news developments, the anthology serves as a history of the recent politics, economics, war and science of oil and gas.

His chapters on food production--“Eating Fossil Fuels” is the title of one chapter--should be a wake-up call to those who just think of food as something they buy in the supermarket. One of the most interesting chapters the one called “Diffusing the Hype” in which Pfeiffer directly responds to a San Francisco

Chronicle article written by Daniel Yergin, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power*. In "Diffusing the Hype," Pfeiffer describes Yergin as "a true cornucopian. He will not recognize any data which might shake his faith in neoliberalism or free market economic theory."

One would hope that high school and college economics teachers would use *The End of the Oil Age*, as well as *The Party's Over*, *Powerdown*, and *High Noon for Natural Gas*, in their classes. Traditional economic theories tell you nothing about the long-term supply of a finite resource. Market prices tell you only about the relationship between supply and demand at the current moment; they are lagging (and much manipulated) indicators of crises in finite resources. People need to start thinking about and planning for depletion of finite resources: oil, natural gas, and a semi-renewable resource that is rapidly dwindling, fresh water. They also need to start thinking, not only of the dollar cost of various forms of energy, but of their energy cost. It takes energy to make energy. Darley, Heinberg and Pfeiffer are acutely aware of that.

All three books are well-sourced, and written in styles accessible to the general public. Yet, in reading these books and interviewing the authors, I have gotten to the point where I feel they are pulling punches. Consider the following quotes from each of the books:

The U.S. food system consumes ten times more energy than it produces in food energy. This disparity is made possible by non-fossil fuel stocks. —Dale Allen Pfeiffer, *The End of the Oil Age*, p. 178.

World population before the onslaught of industrial agriculture was around one and a half billion people. We may not even be able to support that number now, without oil and gas, because the very use of the chemicals derived from them has had so many damaging effects on the natural productive capacity of the soil and its related systems. —Julian Darley, *High Noon for Natural Gas*, p. 9

By any reasonable assessment, the Earth has already exceeded its carrying capacity for humans: every basic means of life-support (including the world's oceans, topsoils, and fresh water systems) appears to be in the beginning stages of collapse. The depletion of fossil fuels will put much more pressure on the global ecosystem's ability to sustain a large human population, since currently much of that population is supported by industrial agriculture and the long distance transportation of food and other resources from regions where they are abundant to places where they are scarce; and, transportation and industrial agriculture are highly vulnerable to reduced fuel inputs. —Richard Heinberg, *Powerdown: Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World*, p. 174.

If overpopulation is the key problem, then many of the suggestions in these books, such as: sell your car, stop watching television, grow and eat organic homemade food, dance to live musicians, take courses, get involved in local politics, save seeds, etc., seem rather beside the point right now.

They are all good suggestions for us to slow our squandering of resources. They are morally good things to do if you believe that we are stewards of the earth. And they may make for psychologically healthier communities. But these suggestions seem to be ready-made for Darley's Post-Carbon world; they are too puny to stave off the disasters we are facing when oil and gas go into terminal decline. Or even before then, as countries vie, often militarily, for what's left.

If we manage not to poison the earth with radiation, a big if, given an American Empire that uses depleted uranium weapons and is researching tactical "mini-nukes," some portion of humanity will survive the chaos to come as global decline in oil and gas production brings down industrial civilization as we know it today.

The suggestions in these books could be useful in remaking post-industrial societies. Yet I wonder what will come of those suggestions.

Take, for instance, Heinberg's option of building lifeboats. How many lifeboats there can be and what will go into them? Who will make the decisions? How much energy can be devoted to preserving the past in an energy-uncertain future? How much energy will be devoted to artistic achievements as opposed to scientific ones? To the achievements of non-whites as opposed to whites? To the achievements of women as opposed to men? Will what is preserved be accessible to all, or only to an elite? (NB: I'm writing this after the newly redesigned Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City opened with a controversial \$20 admission fee). Will what is preserved be left in museums and libraries for arcane research or will it be a form of dynamic knowledge incorporated into future ways of life?

And ironically, Darley, who writes about "global relocalization," the "foot economy" and living near the people you love, is himself a British environmental researcher now living in Vancouver, Canada; he routinely travels far, e.g., to California, Washington, DC, and Europe, for his work as a journalist and to spread his ideas on "global relocalization." In Darley's post-carbon world, will traveling (as opposed to commuting or forced migration in search of work and food) again become a privilege of the elite?

As I have read these books, I've begun to ask myself, "Can the urban poor survive oil and gas depletion?" Although Pfeiffer lives in the very small town of Holly, Michigan, he's giving some thought to urban areas as well. In a [September 20, 2004 interview](#) on KPFA, I asked him about solutions for people who live in cities. He said he hadn't gotten much information at his "[survivingpeakoil.com](#)" web site about cities and would like to hear from people who have ideas for those who live in highly urbanized places.

Read any or all of these books: *Powerdown*, *High Noon for Natural Gas* and *The End of the Oil Age*, then think about cities. Perhaps you have one of the answers.

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