

An ineffective virus kills its host*

*“You can fuel all the people some of the time
and
You can fuel some of the people all of the time
but
You can’t fuel all the people all of the time”*
Peter (Jake) Chapman 1975

Every so often a privileged few are offered a luxury opportunity. It comes in the form of time to think about what we want, need and require motivated by rising suspicion that current prospects are less fulfilling than alternative paths. In raw survival terms we would surely require little more than Sufficiency - Shelter, Safety and Sustenance – if contemplating the direction of our current activities offers only Disaster - Discomfort, Danger and Deprivation. But sectors of 21stC humankind have not been exposed to years of *Bake Off and Strictly* to think only in subsistence terms. Nor should we deny ourselves the opportunity to think big. Not “*survival of the fittest*” big or “*survival of the richest*” big but “*self fulfillment, delight, glee, dance, bake, well-being, expansive*” big – more a sort of “*you are a long time dead!*” big.

What if we start with what we value, how we preserve and nourish it? Perhaps move along to where we want to be, what we might need when we get there? Then, how we get there, when, who with? I’ll temporarily leave you to contemplate your basic needs whilst I meander to a different part of this grand forest of opportunity to consider resources of energy and imagination that might support us and also what we mean by progress in the run up to COP26.

In 1975 Peter Chapman wrote his seminal book, *Fuel’s Paradise*, in which he postulates a satisfied well-fed populace of a fuel resource poor, skills rich, island (Erg) with an established democratic governance system. The islanders repeatedly vote down a lobbying group of business people/ interlopers seeking to encourage enhanced consumption. They do this because it adds no value to their satisfied lives.

The islands’ currency is based on energy resources - thinly disguised as Kwats - (Geddit?) to which all exchanges relate. That is the cost of all commodities, other than those within a thriving barter system, are directly related to their fuel cost. Energy related impacts on climate are understood and a managed risk within this energy conscious society. High-energy materials are rare. Low impact travel routine. Amenities are local. Full employment the norm and human skills highly regarded. Land tax is high but reduced incrementally by evidence of use for housing, agriculture, collecting water, generating clean energy and other environmental and societal benefits. This intentionally uber-hypothesized utopian ideal had many recognisable flaws but arguably fewer than those of the extant unreliable dystopian economic system that Chapman was spotlighting. I was lucky that the limited traction Chapman received was a driving force behind my engineering degree. I

could readily comprehend, compare and interpret the energy content of a loaf of bread or an insulation option. The contemporary implications are breathtaking.

Recent COVID19 experience highlighted that many of our needs can be satisfied using less transport energy. This came as a shock to many, particularly politically. A desire for life quality is resonating due to a dawning realization that our economic system is not socially or environmentally benign. For example, time and energy spent commuting can be detrimental to ourselves, friends and family but benefits some lobbyists. More astonishing is that our pre-COVID19 lives were clearly not as optimized as we thought. Some enforced lifestyle choices were positive. We combined our need for a babysitter with a bubble walk, exchanged sloes for the delayed gratification of sloe gin and enjoyed a bike ride in preference to the drive to the gym. It also seems that time is an elastic quality and not just a tradable good. Our lives may still be sub-optimal but we have sniffed an opportunity for change.

Recent price shocks mean that any change management thinking might embrace asking, as Chapman does, not how can we get more energy and at what cost but how much energy do we actually need? If the impacts of energy use are adverse balance of payments and environmental risk then we should be intensely mindful of its use. Home improvements to reduce long-term dependency make infinitely more sense than more oil fields, nuclear power stations and gas pipelines. Straw bales / hemp / light earth and unfired bricks are more competitive building materials than steel and concrete when the price correlates directly with embodied energy and climate impact – even without subsidies. Land banking becomes unviable and allows instead for promotion places for individuals and communities to flourish, food growing, biodiversity enhancement, outdoor education and life skills. A barter economy is as unlimited as our glorious imaginations.

Energy - be it gravitational, human or chemical - can only be converted, never destroyed and the built environment is a massive energy store. Yet policy makers – intent on turnover and with little technical literacy fail to appreciate it. When Metzstein and MacMillan formed the 'Rubble Club' (later the Macallan) to offer support to designers with buildings demolished in their life-time, such experiences were rare. Like idiots in space it is increasingly the norm.

What if, like the people of Erg, we decide to look at the world through the lens of energy mindfulness? What if an interpretation of the Sisyphean Myth is that in two or three generations we have used global resources to push a tiny sector of global society up a hill to a point where it is bound to crash definitively and noisily to earth taking everyone with it. Perhaps then the best use of our human resources of energy and imagination might be to let ourselves down slowly. It is a heavy weight on our shoulders, which could be painful to bear, but would offer some upsides. Perhaps this is where our contemplation might take us to new horizons. The fact that time and choice is a luxury offered to only a few in wealthy democratic resource rich environments is important because it is these same few who can draw us back from the brink.

These thoughts might provide a useful backdrop to COP26, motivated as they were by a book written two decades before its inception. Meanwhile, let us hope that Glasgow does not become the world's biggest theatre of bulls\$*t bingo. I will be watching through my fingers and from behind the sofa. Of course we can also take a tip from COVID19 as we observe its evolution and reflect on our global responsibility.

* The Gaia Hypothesis.

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