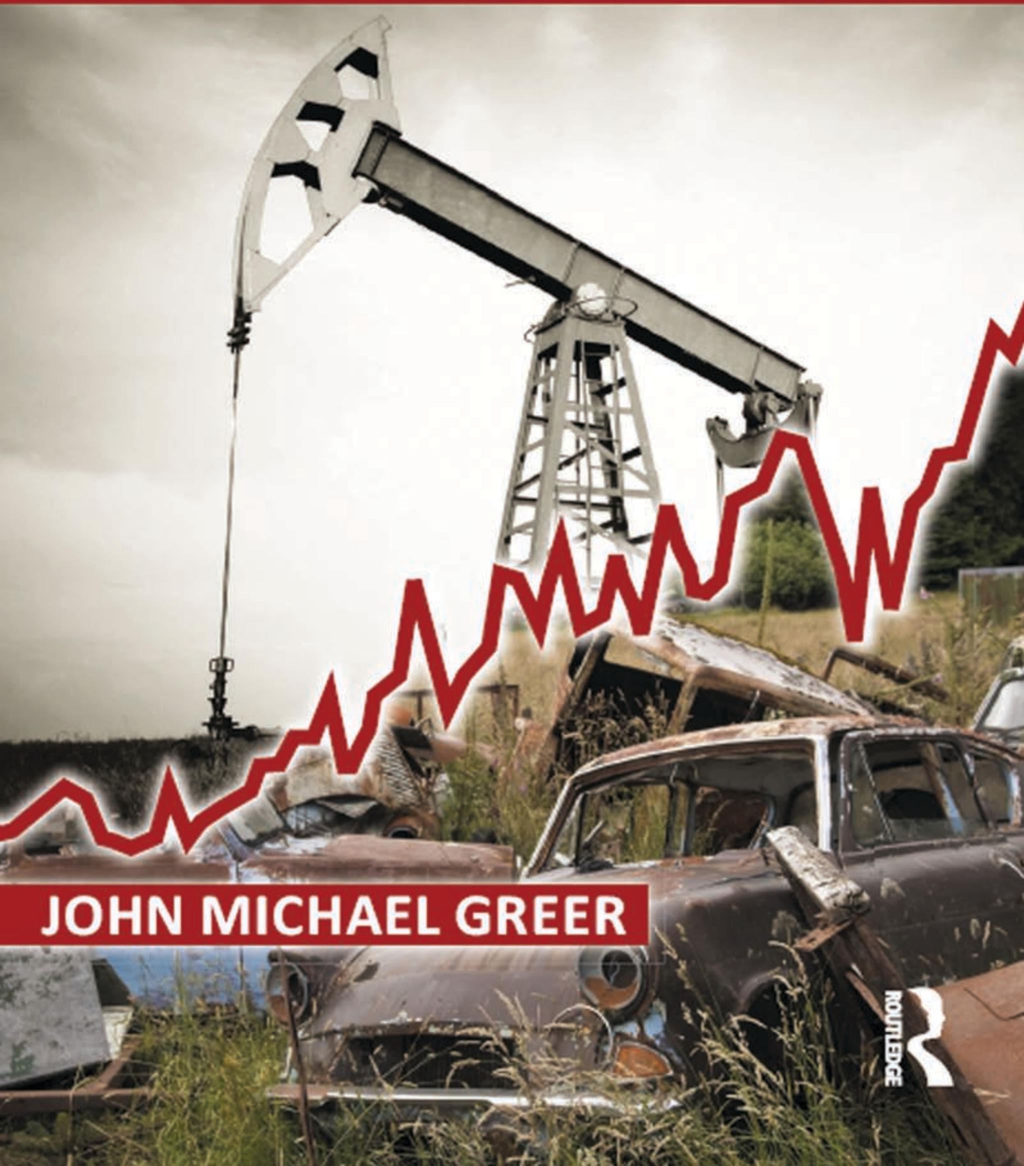
NOT THE FUTURE WE ORDERED

PEAK OIL, PSYCHOLOGY, AND THE MYTH OF PROGRESS



JOHN MICHAEL GREER

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ONE
The unmentionable crisis

It is a curious and recurring reality in social history that the crises that come to define entire eras are very often those that, until they burst into the forefront of public attention, no one affected by them was willing to discuss at all. Betty Friedan's cogent description of depression and anomie among post-war American women as "the problem that has no name" (Friedan, 1963) could have been applied with equal justice to the symptoms of other imminent crises—for example, the social costs of slavery in the antebellum South. In these and many other cases, a reality that would shortly become the focus of explosive controversy and dramatic social change remained unmentioned and unmentionable among those who were in the closest contact with it.

Central to the process of inattention that kept these issues out of the sphere of public discussion was an act of reframing that transformed a collective crisis into an individual pathology. Physicians in the slave states before the Civil War, for example, argued that people of African origin suffered from a peculiar mental illness called "drapetomania", an irrational compulsion to run away from home. This convenient theory allowed the efforts of slaves to escape to freedom in the North to be understood, not as a response to the unmentionable social realities of slavery, but, rather, as a personal pathology that could be discussed and treated without reference to its collective context.

In the same way, the women Betty Friedan interviewed in her research by and large identified the collapse of meaning and value in their lives as a personal problem rather than a reflection of dysfunctional social realities. In this assessment, they were supported by a galaxy of authority figures, mostly male, for whom any sign of mismatch between a woman and her social setting inevitably reflected the psychological or moral inadequacies of the woman. Drapetomania thus had its precise equivalent in "housewife syndrome", a hard-to-define neurotic condition that was generally treated with daily doses of tranquilizers such as Newtown. Here again, symptoms of a collective crisis were reframed as the problems of individuals, so that any discussion of the crisis and its implications for the broader social setting could be put off as long as possible. Psychiatrists, physicians, and other members of the helping professions of the time who accepted this reframing—as most did—became unwitting enablers of the act of collective inattention that was creating the problems they thought they were treating.

A similar reframing of collective problems as individual inadequacy, driven by a similar unwillingness to face a pervasive but unmentionable social reality, plays a massive role in today's industrial societies. Throughout Europe, North America, and the developed nations of East Asia, hundreds of millions of people who grew up expecting steady improvement in standards of living, upward mobility, and a social safety net to protect them against the threat of poverty find themselves struggling to cope with an economic and political reality that more and more often fails to provide these things. Year after year, more former workers join the ranks of the permanently jobless; outside the narrowing circle of the very rich, wages and benefits shrink; costs of energy, food, and other necessities ratchet upwards; governments struggle to pay for public services that were amply funded ten or twenty years ago. Such markers of systemic crisis are everywhere, but very few people are willing to take the risk of addressing them as symptoms of a collective reality.

Instead, these problems are redefined in personal terms, as a lack of appropriate skills or sufficient motivation on the part of individuals. The political sphere is particularly committed to redefinitions of this sort. In America today, for example, one set of politicians promotes job training as a cure-all for unemployment, as though training people for jobs that do not exist will make those jobs magically appear. Another set of politicians insists that those who fall behind in the struggle to stay out of poverty are wholly responsible for their own condition. Right-wing media personality Neal Boortz, arguing along these latter lines, has gone so far as to invent a precise current equivalent of drapetomania and "housewife syndrome" by insisting that poverty is a mental disease (Boortz, 2007).

The redefinition of collective crisis in personal terms takes another, equally unhelpful form among those who see the current troubles of industrial society as the result of deliberate malignity on someone's part. Searching for scapegoats is a common habit in troubled times, especially when the source of the trouble is either unknown or unmentionable, and that habit has accordingly seen plenty of exercise in recent years. Bankers, speculators, immigrants, Muslims, Jews, labour unions, the selfish rich, the welfare-dependent poor, politicians of the left, politicians of the right—there is no shortage of candidates for blame, and the fact that some members of each of these categories (and every other category of human beings, of course) behave from time to time in some reprehensible fashion or other simply feeds the counterproductive but deeply human desire to put a face upon the otherwise faceless experience of crisis.

A constellation of potent psychological needs rooted in the subjective experience of powerlessness makes this personalization of collective crisis difficult to resist. To insist that the jobless could find jobs if only they got the right training, or that the poor would not be poor if they would simply work harder and save more, is to insist that human agency trumps the realities of a contracting economy. To insist that a troubled economy is troubled only because of the misdeeds of greedy speculators, corrupt governments, or some other scapegoat *du jour* is equally an affirmation of agency, since it implies that changes in economic conditions occur only in obedience to the will of certain human beings. The belief that the economy might be directed by a malevolent Other, appalling though that suggestion may seem to be, is arguably easier to face than the possibility that important features of economic life are not subject to human control—that, in effect, nobody is in charge at all.

Still, there is more going on in the current situation than this, just as there was more to the evasions surrounding the condition of women in 1950s America or the condition of slaves in the antebellum South. In both these latter cases, evasion of the collective and inescapable nature of crisis was driven by the collision between an emotionally powerful and widely accepted cultural narrative and a set of intrusive realities that failed to conform to it. In 1950s America, the narrative claimed that women naturally found their personal fulfilment in a set of social roles that valued them only as a support system for husbands and children. In the antebellum South, the narrative claimed that people of African descent were contented with their lot as slaves and were unfit for any other role in American society. In both cases, the gap between the narrative and the everyday realities of experience in the society that the narrative sought to justify turned into a fault line along which tectonic social changes eventually took place.

Today's industrial world faces a similar gap between a compelling cultural narrative used to justify core elements of modern society, on the one hand, and a universe that shows no interest in conforming to the narrative's core assertions, on the other. That gap is becoming a central social fact of our time, and its widening impact on individual lives and relationships makes it a psychological fact as well, one that deserves close attention from members of the helping professions as well as students of social psychology.

The cultural narrative in question is the belief in progress, which in our age has provided the normative vision of the shape of humanity's future The inconvenient realities with which that narrative fails to deal are a collection of hard physical and geological limits to the perpetual economic and technological growth central to most iterations of the belief in progress, and, in particular, one such limit: the phenomenon of peak oil. The nature of the narrative, the facts that refuse to fit it, and the likely impacts of the conflict between them on society and individuals alike—these are the central themes of this book.

HUBBERT'S CURVE

To begin exploring the gap between narrative and reality central to our society's current predicament, it will be helpful to start with an otherwise unremarkable meeting of the American Petroleum Institute in San Antonio, Texas, in 1956. At that meeting, Marion King Hubbert, a geologist then employed by Shell Oil, presented a paper announcing that petroleum production in the United States would peak and go into permanent decline around 1970 (Hubbert, 1956).

The context of that paper needs to be recalled. In the 1950s, the United States produced more oil annually than any other nation on earth—at some points during that decade, more than every other nation on earth put together. The American oil industry had immense petroleum reserves that had already been found, and it also had the world's most advanced and innovative technologies for finding new reserves. Oil could be discovered and produced so easily that the federal government quietly tolerated a technically illegal price-fixing scheme, managed by the Texas Railroad Commission, that set production limits on American oil companies to keep the price of oil from crashing to ruinously low levels. The idea that geological limits might restrict US oil production in the relatively near future seemed absurd enough that Hubbert's superiors at Shell Oil tried to talk him out of presenting his findings to the conference.

Still, Hubbert was not a man who backed down easily. He had already earned a reputation as one of the most innovative petroleum geologists of his time, and he had developed a variety of important mathematical models still much used in the oil industry, particularly the Hubbert curve, which accurately anticipates the lifetime yield of an oil well from its first few months of production. By the time he began work on the 1956 paper, he had already shown that similar calculations could be applied just as successfully to the output of an oilfield, forecasting the production of wells not yet drilled from the yield of the first few wells. His presentation to the American Petroleum Institute meeting applied the same logic to work up a rough estimate for the future production curve for the entire United States. The exact volume of oil that would eventually be produced was less important than the central point he hoped to make, which was that oil production on any scale—from a well, a field, or a country—rises, peaks, and falls over time, for reasons that are rooted in the geology of petroleum itself.

It is important to understand the logic behind Hubbert's prediction, partly because that logic will play a central role in defining the future that all of us will shortly inhabit, and partly because most of the arguments currently being used to dismiss the implications of Hubbert's work begin by misstating the reasoning that underlies it. The starting point for the Hubbert curve is the simple fact that petroleum in the ground is found in pores in permeable rocks and can only move through those rocks so fast. The details differ from one oilfield to another, depending on a galaxy of factors, but for every well there is an optimum rate at which oil can be extracted from the ground; exceeding that rate causes a larger fraction of the total oil in place to stay trapped in the rock, and so buys short-term gains at the cost of long-term losses. Thus, the lifetime production curve from a competently managed oil well resembles a plateau with one steep side and one sloping side: production rises rapidly from