

Vinyl 2010 Essay Competition Submission Template

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Summary:

While the energy crisis threatens modern lifestyles, the recent rise of food prices has thrown many more humans closer or beyond the survival limit. After examining the two problems individually, I show that both are only symptoms of overconsumption and inequality, embedded in dominant and spreading modes of life and organization. Noting that current consumption levels are fundamentally unsustainable, that reinforcing adverse trends are converging and that the behavior of relevant contemporary institutions is inadequate, I argue that citizens must engage radically different paths. I conclude by advocating for volunteering as a mean for reaching such alternative worlds and for fostering individual and collective well-being.

Essay:

A single kilogram of fossil fuel contains as much energy as tens of thousands of days of human labour. With the once considerable abundance of this resource, this fact largely explains its intensive and pervasive usage in modern life. Over time, fossil fuels have become deeply embedded in and intertwined with contemporary technology, individual habits and modes of organization. However, consumption rates of this non-renewable resource have reached the point where demand cannot possibly be met by supply and existing reserves are being exhausted. While a diversity of replacement technologies is being developed to tap in new sources, there is considerable doubt about the possibility to fulfil current demand levels without generating considerable new risks. For example, in the case of electricity: wind or hydro electricity can only provide a small share of conventional demand of electricity; much more could be produced with nuclear energy but the technology is based on non-renewable minerals and generates considerable accidental and intentional risks. The exhaustion of fossil fuels will also require adapting or replacing of considerable equipments that only work with this form of energy. In my opinion, the near exhaustion of this exceptional resource, the limited maturity of alternative technologies and the lack of any clear plan to practically shift toward new forms of energy announce a major turning point. In particular, the routine affluent earthlings have become accustomed to will be disrupted and, at best, we will all be forced to adopt less energy-intensive modes of life and organization.

The food crisis is an old and now permanent problem. Indeed, for a long time, hundreds millions of earthlings have been hovering at the survival limit. Nevertheless, more recently, the rise of food prices has aggravated the situation, pushing away a hundred million beings deeper into poverty and bringing the number of undernourished close to a billion.

Without action far more effective, adequate and ambitious than what has ever been done, demographic trends alone condemn humanitarian disasters to repeat¹. It is also known

that the combined effects of the forthcoming water crisis and climate change will have a substantial adverse effect that will particularly hit the poor and the least developed regions.

Beyond their *outrageous* humanitarian dimension, such food crises will not only repeat but aggravate and broaden. In particular, they already and will increasingly undermine global stability and security. Indeed, while people may do with little or no energy, depriving them from food makes them, quite understandingly, desperate. This despair will manifest itself in various forms, such as unprecedented migrations, violence between ethnic groups, riots against established institutions, etc.

Contemporary global issues – and the food crisis in particular – are generally associated to the notion of overpopulation. The idea is that “we would be too many” to fulfil the needs of all inhabitants on this planet. However, earthlings’ affluence is very uneven: on the one hand, there are gargantuan consumers at the origin of the energy crisis and on the other hand, individuals who can barely afford enough resources to subsist as manifested by the ongoing food crisis. Furthermore, the recent aggravation has been driven by a reduction of produces supply as larger cultivation surfaces became used to grow cereals for biofuel production. This shows that the two problems have now become directly connected to each other: the energy consumption of some now deprives others of the food they need to survive. Thus, not only the crises are two illustrations of the *extreme inequalities* that characterize our time; they also manifest that the deep cause of our current situation is not overpopulation but *overconsumption* by a few accepting and sometimes fostering or aggravating abject *inequalities*. Indeed, almost ten planets would be needed if all earthlings would consume like an average US inhabitant, whereas twice the current world’s population could cohabit by living as Afghans².

Current prospects are dire. Not only overall consumption levels have already overshoot the planet’s carrying capacity by thirty percent³ but several adverse mega trends *multiply* with each other. In particular, the boom of emerging economies will increase the demands of humans on the ecosystem. The diffusion of materialist cultural models will further accelerate the trend by increasing average individual consumption levels. The forthcoming water crisis will not only be its own humanitarian catastrophe but also reduce food supply. Similarly, climate change is not only a threat on its own but will also adversely affect food supply. Moreover, the posture and actions of contemporary institutions is at best insufficient. Simply put, it is “business as usual” as if these problems were only marginally relevant. Given that nothing sufficient is done to prevent those trends, let alone revert them, it is very plausible that such trends unfold into a series of disruptive humanitarian, economic, social and political crisis. Indeed, based on a comprehensive analysis of environmental, social and economic trends, the Global Scenario Group has demonstrated that unless citizens actively engage pervasive transitions, the world will be precipitated into a global dystopia⁴.

In such a context, how can well-being be possibly improved, let alone maintained? Scientific studies as well as numerous individual experiences actually show that well-

being can be achieved with limited levels of material affluence. One human activity, the practice of volunteering, seems of particular interest to the current situation. Indeed, giving one's time and skills for a meaningful purpose consumes little or no natural resources and, as psychological research has shown, fosters substantial individual well-being.

Volunteering is a productive activity that can be used for the benefit individuals, specific groups or to produce public goods. It can also be used for political ends to influence individuals and institutions or even to generate the variety of alternatives solutions that will be needed to address the multitude of large and small problems that lie ahead.

¹ From 6.5 bn today, the world's population is expected to increase by 2.6 bn in 2050:
http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/pop_challenges/Population_Challenges.pdf (↑)

² http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/data_sources/ (↑)

³ <http://www.footprintnetwork.org/download.php?id=107> (↑)

⁴ See the study of the Global Scenario Group:
http://www.tellus.org/seib/publications/Great_Transitions.pdf (↑)