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The Falling Apart of Things

Lincoln Stoller, PhD., 2012
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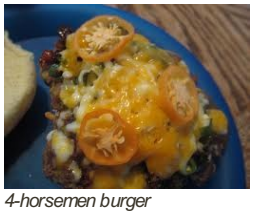
Tomorrow Liz and I give our two talks at the Old Glenford Church. Her talk is on Rudolf Steiner's Biodynamics. Mine is on the politics of ADHD. If you're local and want to attend you'll find more information here.

I was impressed by the coalescence of news items today, topics that fit together without much commentary. The theme is How Things Fall Apart. They fall apart not with a bang, but with whimper.

Things are not good, but no one near the top of the pyramid wants to admit it. The popular press and their "trusted voices" paddle public opinion toward complacency and happiness. Why? Because it is the movement of public opinion that ultimately makes manifest the condition of the system. Worry is rebranded as hope. Threats become aliens, entertainment, or ... food.



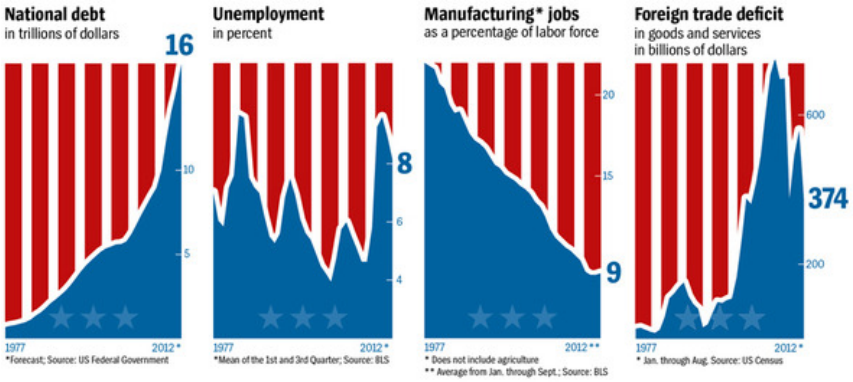
4-horsemen burger

"Renounce citizenship" is now one of the fastest growing search terms in Google.

Simon Black, stalwart advocate of citizenless life, reports that Obama's reelection has caused a huge spike in Google searches on the string "renounce citizenship." Read his commentary at his Sovereign Man web site.

Perhaps related to this, or simply a coincidence, is "Race for the White House 2012," in which Der Speigel reports:

"The United States is frittering away its role as a model for the rest of the world. The political system is plagued by an absurd level of hatred, the economy is stagnating and the infrastructure is falling into a miserable state of disrepair. On this election eve, many Americans are losing faith in their country's future."



But then what does Der Speigel know? They lost WWII so they've got an ax to grind. Right?

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Suxnet, a computer virus created by the CIA-Mosad alliance to cripple Iranian computer networks, seems to have escaped its bounds to quietly infect the networks of an unknown number of global corporations. Read, "**Stuxnet goes out of control: Chevron infected by anti-Iranian virus, others could be next**."

In "**HSBC investigation: Drug dealers, gun runners and Britain's biggest bank**" the Telegraph reports on the nature of money laundering facilitated by the offshore accounts of Britain's largest bank. If the established system serves to support those who undermine it, where does positive change come from?

Then, but some mistake, Fox News honestly reported on the events in a foreign country, Greece. Their piece titled "**Ripped apart by financial crisis, Greek society in free-fall**" says:

"To the casual observer, all might appear well in Athens. Traffic still hums by, restaurants and bars are open, people sip iced coffees at sunny sidewalk cafes. But scratch the surface and you find a society in free-fall, ripped apart by the most vicious financial crisis the country has seen in half a century."

Moving along to the theme of natural disaster, no one understands how the New York City subway system survived hurricane Sandy as well as it did. Whole tunnels, built over 100 years ago, were entirely submerged in sea water for days and then, with little repair, have popped back into service.

Things were built much more solidly at the start of the industrial era than they are today because there was much larger variance in material and quality. The systems still operating today are the high-quality tails of components that had widely varying reliability.

Read about the dazed and clueless bluster of NYC officials in the New York Times article "**New York Subway Repairs Border 'on the Edge of Magic**'". The conclusion they'll draw will most likely be that because the system held up so well there is less need to refurbish it.

Challenging this is Gregor Macdonald, an oil markets observer and journalist who writes on the challenge of energy transition. He says we're just at the beginning of a resurrection of the American rail system. In a piece called "Getting On The Train" he writes:

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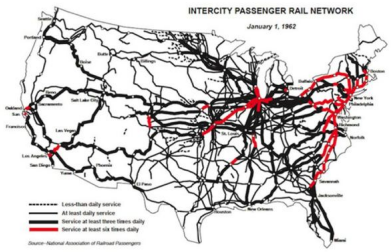
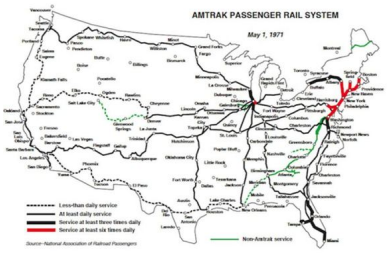
"Given emerging data in 2012, it's becoming increasingly clear that the postwar automobile era in the United States is now in well-articulated decline. Accordingly, it makes sense to note the beginning of a long-term supertrend that is just getting started: the resurrection of America's rail system.



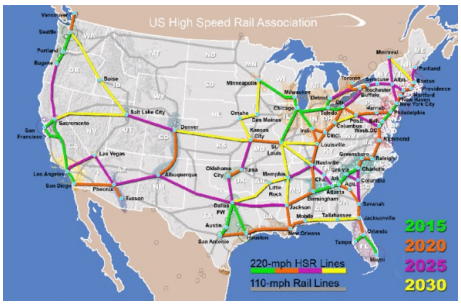
"To get a sense of what the country lost as it eagerly built out a vast highway infrastructure and foolishly stopped investing in rail, let's look at two historical maps showing a veritable collapse of passenger route miles over just a ten-year period. The first map shows that in 1962 intercity passenger rail network still covered 88,710 route miles.



"Just ten years later, however, with intrusive highways bisecting American cities and ruining the integrity of their downtowns, the number of passenger route miles had collapsed by over 75%(!), to just 19,366 miles."

He goes on to say that rail infrastructure investment has been occurring locally in cities throughout the country, and that Amtrak's ridership has increased by 50% in the last 10 years. That is growth but it's not a trend by itself and, unfortunately, the crux of Macdonald's argument is only available to paid subscriber's of Chris Martenson's Peak Prosperity newsletter. It's an interesting idea, but if you're interested in taking the train today it's usually impractical.

I could not find hard evidence for growth in the US rail system, but I did find big plans in industry journals. Here's a map of the high speed rail system planned for the year 2030. That's less than 20 years away and currently there is nothing at all. One has to be skeptical. You can see what the US Department of Transportation has to say in their "Vision for High Speed Rail in America."



Macdonald does make a point I find interesting as we are considering Oregon as a place where we might move.

"By moving to Portland, we completely shifted the core of our energy consumption to natural gas and also electricity, which in the Pacific Northwest is largely sourced through hydropower. Electricity rates in the Pacific Northwest are either the lowest or among the lowest in the United States. Also, because of the rich offerings in public transportation choices, we were able to drop one of two cars."

"I have long held the opinion that the amount of noise that anyone can bear undisturbed stands in inverse proportion to his mental capacity and may therefore be regarded as a pretty fair measure of it." - Arthur Shopenhaur

The topic of noise leads to a piece about Claude Shannon titled "**Signal 2 Noyz**" that appears in Grant William's "Things That Make You Go Hmmm.." Shannon was famous for his work in understanding how to encode and decode signals on telephone lines. Williams' uses Shannon's "signal to noise ratio" to discuss economic information consisting of noise generated by partisan elements, and signals generated by nonpartisan ones "willing to countenance all possibilities".

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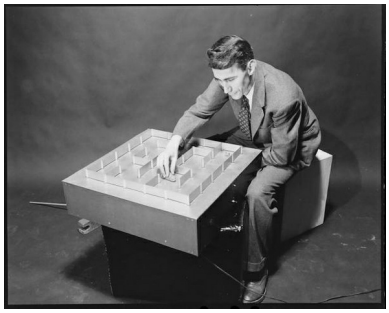
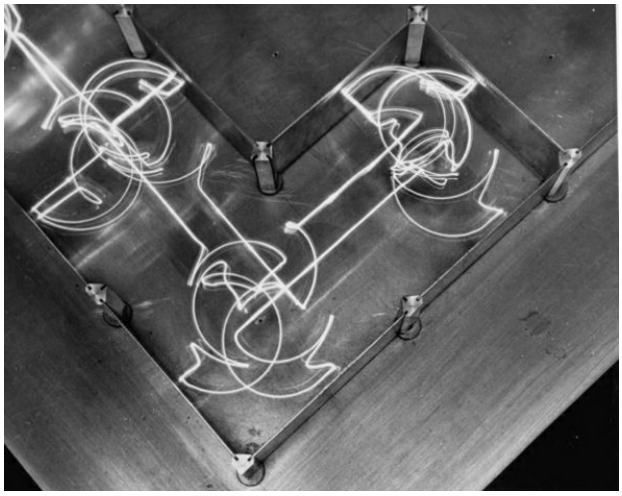
But it's Shannon's approach to his work, and not his work per se, that should be our inspiraiton. Called "the father of information theory" he was a scientist who did not take himself so seriously. He recognized that most of what he wanted to know he didn't.



These pictures show show him with his solid-state and vacuum tube maze-solving mouse machine named "Theseus". The machine consisted of a reconfigurable set of maze walls and a motorized mouse with an electrically conductive nose. However he configured the maze, the mouse would find its way through the maze. The algorithm is not hard in theory -- just slide your hand along one wall and do not lift it -- but Shannon built the machine himself in 1952, at a time when there was no such thing as an off-the-shelf computer, a circuit board, or a mechanical mouse.

I never met Claude Shannon but his son Andy, who was my college dorm-mate, gave me a tour of his home outside of Boston. It was full of his father's hand-made toys and whimsical creations. Theseus was under the coffee table in the living room.



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