

A RIDGE IN THE SKY.....SCOTT THOMPSON

The Cheatgrass Monoculture

I call the dominant political and economic system the "Cheatgrass Monoculture." Cheatgrass is a relentlessly invasive species of grass from Eurasia that sucks away soil moisture, thus obliterating native species. And when Cheatgrass dies in midsummer it becomes a fire hazard. That's a fair description of how our mainstream culture is functioning and the future it's heading for.

There is featurelessness all across our country now. A gross example: the restaurants, gas stations, motels, and mega-stores off the exits from the interstates are virtually the same. If you don't read the road signs and aren't familiar with the flora and terrain, you won't know where the hell you are. That's our Cheatgrass Monoculture.

Our politicians are featureless as well. While there is flamboyance in their personal quirks, rhetoric, and marital infidelities ("I did not have sexual relations with that woman"), their policy positions slide along oiled, familiar grooves. To paraphrase William Butler Yeats: the best of the Democrats lack all conviction in public (lest they piss off their corporate backers), while the worst of the histrionic right wingers are full of passionate vitriol (which protects rather than threatens their monied backers).

Even the Tea Party, which is cast as revolutionary, features the same peckerwood resentment and entitlement we've always known.

One change: their "N" words for President Obama are "Socialist" and "Muslim" (their version of political correctness).

In using "peckerwood" I mean it in a tragic rather than a disparaging sense. What's tragic is the self-destructive psychological denial this kind of politics employs: that by obliterating social safety nets such as food stamps, social security disability, government-funded health care, and so on, true believers can pretend they are not "the kind of people" who will ever need them; that by identifying with the wealthy few and propitiating them with tax cuts, they can pretend that extraordinary wealth might come to them as well; and that they can neglect the poor and the vulnerable all around them, while at the same time believing that they are righteous religious people (perhaps awaiting the Rapture). Wealthy rightists have always understood the psychological vulnerabilities of such people and exploited them to the hilt.



There is featurelessness all across our country now.

A gross example: the restaurants, gas stations, motels, and mega-stores off the exits from the interstates are virtually the same.

But what convinced me that "Cheatgrass Monoculture" is a viable metaphor (it was the last straw, I guess) is that the cap and trade climate bills that have thus far gained traction in Congress were either proposed by multinational corporations or had the fingerprints of corporate lobbyists all over them. I'm convinced that even if Congress had passed a cap and trade bill it would have been ineffective in curbing global warming. It would have been surgically precise, however, in shielding energy companies from tumultuous change and protecting the profitability of the global growth economy.

That's mongo featurelessness.

What is the problem at the base of all this? Simple: multinational corporations and key wealthy elites dominate our government or, at a minimum, exercise gross undue influence over its key processes. And through the most sophisticated public relations techniques and advertising ever known, they shape our collective cultural, political, and economic agenda so that it functions to perpetuate their own interests. They have succeeded in keeping the public divided and confused, leaving people numbed out on television and consuming the planet's natural resources like they're lines of cocaine.

Energetic political activism in recent decades has done little or nothing to alter the economic basis of our society, upon which the Cheatgrass Monoculture thrives. The purveyors of its wealth and power have snuffed out such activism with brilliantly cohesive and subtle counterstrokes. We shouldn't have been surprised: never in history has a society offered the super-sized golden hog trough that ours does. I guess a lot of people feel like every planet needs one.

In spite of the Cheatgrass Monoculture's domination, an alternative paradigm has grown up in special places and it's seeming insignificance may be an adaptive advantage. To explain, I need to take you to a biological island of peculiar beauty in the heart of Big Bend National Park.

Boot Canyon

I first saw the Chisos Mountains at 4 a.m. in the spring of 1975. They rose like a purple wall above the immensity of the Chihuahuan Desert.

On a winter afternoon in 2001, gazing westward from the Rio Grande River near Boquillas Canyon, they looked like a long, blue and slate-gray cloud floating above the bosques and low canyon walls along the river. From that distance, the foothills and low mountains beneath the spread-out array of higher peaks resembled a cloud of beige cosmic dust. From the north, near the Grapevine Hills, in the solar intensity of the low desert, the mountains shone amber in the late afternoon light. From that angle the igneous peaks were warped, convoluted, bent, crude, gnarled; hypnotic.

Late the following morning I loped along the Boot Canyon Trail at 6,900 feet, up on the high rim in the center of the mountains. A comforting tangle of Emory and Gray oaks sheltered me; beneath them was a single Sotol plant perched above the trail. Over my shoulder pinyon pines and Alligator Junipers grew up a steep hillside to a rock outcrop

at the top. A quarter mile farther along I found a Beargrass agave in a patch of sunlight. What struck me was that Sotol and Beargrass agave are mainline Chihuahuan Desert plants; up this high they were clearly pushing their luck.

Just afterward the trail twisted to the right, running along an upper wall of Boot Canyon, where I encountered a Ponderosa Pine sixty feet high. At the same elevation. It dwarfed the proliferation of oaks and pinyon pines, even though it was a young tree.

This was weird, because a Ponderosa Pine needs at least ten inches more rain each year than a Beargrass agave. Maybe Boot Springs makes the upper slopes of Boot Canyon a bit moister than the land just outside it; but on the other hand the Ponderosa Pine was on the south facing and therefore drier slope. No way could its location in the canyon explain a differ-

ence of ten inches in annual rainfall. On a strictly biological basis, the Ponderosa Pine and the Beargrass agave should not have been growing anywhere near each other.

Well, Big Bend is a strange place. Simply being there can trigger episodes of anxiety, as it did in a friend of mine years ago when we drove over Panther Pass and curled down into the Chisos Mountain Basin. Much of this feeling is explained by the place's geological incongruities, but gawking at this out-of-sync Ponderosa Pine, feeling spooked myself, gave me yet another explanation.

The climate in the Chisos Mountains during the last ice age, ending about 11,000 years ago, was colder and wetter, enabling Ponderosa Pine to grow all over these mountains. Today they survive in only two micro-pockets, the one in Boot Canyon and another on a north-facing slope near the top of Pine Canyon.

They're time capsules from the last ice age.

Boot Canyon is also a micro-pocket, or microrefuge, for Arizona Cypress. One of those mothers is over a hundred feet high, where the trail crosses the center of the canyon. Not far from that Ponderosa Pine. They grow on a nearby, north-facing ridge as well. Arizona Cypress is also found in a few isolated canyons in southwest New Mexico and Southeast Arizona; it's common in the Fronteriza Mountains of northern Coahuila in Mexico, forty miles in a beeline southeast of Big Bend.

Energetic political activism in recent decades has done little or nothing to alter the economic basis of our society, upon which the Cheatgrass Monoculture thrives.

At last count there was a lone packet of 225 Quaking Aspen trees near the top of the highest peak in the Chisos range. Another microrefuge.

(See Roland Wauer, *Naturalist's Big Bend*, 1980, pp.36-38; Janice Emily Bowers, *Shrubs and Trees of the Southwest Deserts*, 1993; Francis Elmore, *Shrubs and Trees of the Southwest Uplands*, 1976).

Microrefugia and Economic Change

The history of climate change through the ice ages shows us a great deal about how plants and animals survive in adverse circumstances. There are two essential strategies, which I believe also apply to human political environments.

One is the microrefugia, or micro-pockets, exemplified by the Ponderosa Pine, Arizona Cypress, and aspen at Big Bend. (See Thomas Lovejoy and Lee Hannah, *Climate Change and Biodiversity*, 2005, p. 389). Another example: 32,000 years ago, while most of North America was underneath massive ice sheets, Big Sagebrush survived in the Ajo Moun-

tains of southwest Arizona. More on that later.

The capacity of microrefugia to persist in adverse climates suggests, by analogy, that a fundamental strategy in seeking economic transformation in our culture is keeping alternative paradigms alive and healthy, especially when victory isn't in sight.

We Americans have a near-religious devotion to career and work. It may be why we blithely allow transnational corporations to run our government and shape our way of life, and why we don't shit in our drawers when they describe massive corporate subsidies as the "miracle of the free market." And it may be why it's so difficult to get meaningful change going in our economic system.

Here are Carl Jung's comments on this peculiarly American phenomenon, delivered in 1930 to his English-speaking students: "...the American [business] efficiency is...destructive...it is not only the psychological destruction of the individual, it is also physiological. Look at the men in Wall Street! At forty-five they are completely exhausted. Modern life in America is more efficient than in any place in the world, but it completely destroys the man...that is a monster, a dragon, which eats human life." (See William McGuire, Ed., *Dream Analysis: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1928-30* by C.G. Jung, 1984, pp. 621-622).

The first time I read this passage in the mid-1980s I felt like Jung had slapped me on the head. I realized that he had given me a crystalline explanation for the dumb anguish and confusion that had filled my professional life. There is nothing like a moment of clarity.

The public may think it is fed up, but it only seems keen on either continuing the corporate-sloshed Democratic agenda or plunging into a good ole right wing regression.

After that I devoted myself to paradoxical goals in my work; On the one hand, to labor conscientiously, responding alertly to the needs of other people; On the other, to carefully keep a small packet of my energy, maybe 10-15%, free from the flow of work. Jung called this shift "detachment" or "quietism." He added that while it may harm our efficiency on the job a little, it's a much healthier way to live. Maintaining that balance has taken as much awareness and self-discipline as anything I have ever done.

Work hums along well this way, but...after awhile I noticed a kind of suction on that 10-15% packet of energy. Thanks to Jung I knew to resist, and that's where determination and the self-discipline were essential.

What is that suction? I've come to believe that in many cases it's the self-perpetuating, frenetic pace of the Cheatgrass Monoculture. It sucks our collective energy bone dry each work day, pumping it through various hands before emptying it into the super-sized golden hog trough. In 1930 Carl Jung was stoking his American students, hoping they'd wake up and appreciate how strange this aspect of our culture is.

It has been eighty years since then, and overall the driven-but-exhausted look on the faces of American working people remains unchanged. The gender, race, and ethnic heritage of many of these people are different, but making a living in our culture seems, if anything, more draining than ever. That's why the definition of a societal microrefuge begins with hanging onto that 10-15% pocket of energy. Without it, our minds will dry up and be blown right into our television sets.

We need that energy for a variety of things. First of all, for critical thinking: to study science and to read relevant experts in order to develop a sharper picture of what's hap-

pening than the corporate-funded mainstream media is willing to give us. Second, we need that energy to hone our comic wits; there's nothing like a keen sense of the absurd to cut through the mono-cultural propaganda. And we need to read writers with fine poetic intuition: Edward Abbey, Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, Jim Stiles, Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams, Bill McKibben, and others.

I believe an important cultural microrefuge has grown up around the *Canyon Country Zephyr*. The people involved seem to feel that wild lands are sacred and places of spiritual refuge rather than recreational playgrounds, and that the standard growth economic models are flat-ass unsustainable. You can find people with this outlook in most places, especially out West, although on a percentage basis their numbers remain small. That's because they've dealt themselves out of mainstream environmentalism, owing to all the corporate money within it, and because they've spurned standard political liberalism, given its reliance on cornucopia economic growth.

My kind of folks.

Back to the Big Sagebrush, as promised. After it survived for thousands of years in its refuge in the Ajo Mountains, the North American ice sheets finally melted and a warmer climate opened up. Big Sagebrush spread far and wide, throughout the Great Basin Desert and the Western uplands to the fringes of the mountain pine forests. (See Janice Emily Bowers, p.19). Here we have a classical example of a range shift, the other major survival strategy for plants and animals, which involves massively spreading from one locale to another, or, when circumstances permit, spreading damn near everywhere. Big Sagebrush is a congenial example because of the silvery sheen it casts across expanses of desert and sweetly sloped uplands and because, unlike Cheatgrass, it pervades a landscape without obliterating other species.

By analogy, the tradition of vigorous political activism that has emerged in Western civilization aims to spread enlightened and compassionate life-ways as far, wide and rapidly as possible. In the past century, this approach has been effective in altering key social norms. Examples are the civil rights and women's movements.

But in the realm of economic and ecological change – you can't separate them - there is little indication that conditions are favorable for a rapid expansion of the perspective we have. The public may think it is fed up, but it only seems keen on either continuing the corporate-sloshed Democratic agenda or plunging into a good ole right wing regression. In other words, more of the Cheatgrass Monoculture. Thus far, momentum has not been gathering for a serious effort to keep humanity from stomping across the global warming tipping points or even to reform establishment environmentalism.

A danger is that we can be so eager for social change, for good reasons, that we forget about its paradoxical nature. An example from climate change biology: even though it has spread far and wide, Big Sagebrush has spent relatively little time as a species rapidly expanding its range. Mostly what it has done is simply survive from one generation to the next, as it did in the Ajo Mountains during the last ice age. Without that vigor to survive, as modest as it seems, none of us would have ever seen one.

If our perspective is sound, it will survive in the decades ahead if we both cultivate it within ourselves and vigorously advocate for it. Given the self-destructive proclivities of the Cheatgrass Monoculture, there is every chance that it will eventually discredit itself. At that point, our perspective will have a chance to become the dominant point of view, assuming we've kept it alive.

A final thought. We can be grateful for the continuing vitality of the First Amendment. We are fortunate to live in a system whose founders were wise enough to understand the value of a diversity of ideas. It's what makes the microrefugia possible.

SCOTT THOMPSON is a regular contributor to The Zephyr. Scott lives in West Virginia.



LIFETIME BACKBONER

STEVE RUSSELL
Moab, UT



THE FOOTPRINTS
Top 10 List
121 East 100 South...Moab, Utah 84532

Top 10 Tea Party Spinoffs

10. The See Party - "I can see Russia from my back yard" (membership is obvious).
9. The Geek Party - members trying to hack voting machines -- just for the challenge.
8. The TP Party - self explanatory (mostly teenagers in this party).
7. The Pee Party - committed to drinking beer -- seriously.
6. The Whee! Party - more dedicated members of the Pee Party.
5. The Zzzz Party - sleeping through the campaign but ready with an inane response to any issue.
4. The Gee Party - you mean there's an election?
3. The Me Party - mostly rich fat cats who already have everything they need (but not everything they want)
2. The Free Party - people who still believe in a free lunch but complain about the quality of it.
1. The Eeek! Party - people (like me) who can't believe how low we have sunk as a nation.