

## Prometheus Shrugged

*A fanciful meditation on megafires and America's emerging fire plutocracy*

It's an economy in which 1% seemingly rules the rest. In fact, the proportion is closer to 0.1%. Not only does that tiny fraction dominate, but it is the part that has grown most vigorously over the past two decades, commandeering the most resources, distorting programs, sucking the rest dry. A small population feasts on ever more, while the rest, at best, get the table scraps. It's a galloping inequality that is profoundly deforming the national scene. And, no, this portrait does not refer to America's human economy. It refers to its fires.<sup>1</sup>

Those of us accustomed to understanding fire history and dynamics as the interaction of nature and culture will not be surprised to find parallels between fire history and human history. Societies have fire regimes that reflect their values, institutional choices, and collective personalities. Firescapes are as much an expression of cultures as skyscrapers, best-selling novels, or museum-housed paintings. The alignments are rougher – nature has its own logic and agency that steel girders and framed canvas lack. But one has only to compare how different nations manage fire in similar biotas to see how variously firescapes can shake out. Alaska's Yukon Valley displays a different dynamics than Siberia's Yakutia or Sweden's Norrland. The fires blackening Portugal's Tras-o-Montes look nothing like those in Italy's Tuscany, and neither resemble those roaming California's South Coast, though all are within comparably Mediterranean biomes. They reflect decisions, both those taken by deliberation and by default, about how people will live on the land and what kinds of fires they will accept.

The fire economy of contemporary America looks the way it does for reasons similar to America's economy overall. It's doubtful that Americans (even its fire officers) consciously chose to have a fire scene dominated by what they have come to call megafires any more than most citizens chose to replace a middle-class democracy with a Wall Street plutocracy. But that is what has happened. In most of the country America's middle landscapes are shrinking and taking what might be termed the middle methods of anthropogenic burning with them. How this occurred is amenable to analysis, even if it happened through the laws of unintended consequences. What it means for the future may well occupy the coming politics of wildland fire.

§ The consensus perspective on how the American economy morphed over the past 30 years points to globalization, an internal shift from manufacturing to services, and policies that aimed to liberate free-ranging capital from restraints and regulation. Eerily, analogous concepts can apply to its fire scene. For globalization, look to the global change suite that includes climatic warming and exotic invasives. For the leap to services, see the movement of private land from commodity production to amenities communities, and of public land to wilderness and nature protection. For policy, note the determination to restore free-burning fire to something like its earlier untrammled state, while removing firefighters from heedless harm and protecting the McMansions and recreation-home assets of America's privileged classes. Appropriate management strategy promises to reinstate a more laissez-faire order, what might be termed a trickle-down fire ecology, on the assumption that more fire will inevitably improve the functioning of ecosystems on a landscape scale. It's a faith-based environmentalism. All it lacks is an Ayn Rand to craft a manifesto in the form of a novel.

There is little doubt that America's fire scene around 1970 was too hegemonic, too shackled by rules and an assumption that control must precede any loosening of norms, that it had become both too single-minded and too cautious, even sclerotic, in practice. Too much of American fire lay under state sponsorship. The fire economy needed opening up. It hungered for a more pluralistic, experimental structure of governance.

But it's doubtful that the contemporary scene is what fire officers and strategists expected to replace it. That the wildland/urban interface was identified as a geographic entity and minted into

its own neologism in the mid-1980s deftly aligns the timing of the two economies, nature's and the nation's. It also captures exactly the growing bifurcation into two antagonistic groups that have progressively defined the American firescape. Between them they have abraded away not only the middle, working landscape but the middle methods by which people traditionally lived on them. More and more on the public lands fire was either suppressed or left to free-range as much as possible.

It's doubtful, too, that one might expect a protest movement to Occupy the San Bernardino or the Payette. The National Cohesive Strategy for Wildland Fire Management is a shrewd assessment of current trends, but its primary lapse – not part of its charge – is its inability to show how fire management will valence with the larger culture. This matters because the two economies, fire and national, like their two politics, are related by more than metaphor. The polarization of one is an echo of the other. The resources and decision processes of the national scene will determine those available to manage fire locally. That observation extends also to the amount of grey matter the community can allocate to the task.

Is the new order wrong, or unwise because it derives from a belief that over-regulating fire is a road to environmental serfdom? If "fire is fire," does it matter how that fire is arranged on the land, any more than how capital gets distributed among society? Does an intense concentration of burned area and costs into a fire plutocracy affect the outcome nationally? I think it does. But the country is undergoing an immense experiment, perhaps a kind of ecological shock treatment, which will test that idea, along with those of everyone else, about how we propose to distribute our assets and live with fire.

Steve Pyne  
December, 2011

---

<sup>1</sup> Jerry Williams, "Mega-Fires and the Urgency to Re-Evaluate Wildfire Protection Strategies through a Land Management Prism," unpublished paper presented to the *Exploring the Mega-fire Reality Conference*, Tallahassee, Florida, November 2011.