

THE LANDSCAPE OF THE FUTURE: A BRIEFING FOR THE GRANDCHILDREN

The American Constitution was designed for

a limited-franchise republic instead of a mass-franchise democracy;

a predominantly agrarian way of life instead of a digitalized, globalized, post-industrial economy;

a dispersed, isolated, and largely self-sufficient rural population hewing to traditional values instead of a media-saturated social environment dominated by cosmopolitan, secular elites dwelling in massive urban agglomerations.

Little wonder then that American political institutions at the national level are largely ineffective. Corrupted by money, mired in partisanship, and captured by special interests, our antiquated constitutional regime is less and less capable of accomplishing routine business, much less handling emergencies or preparing for society's future needs. Such across-the-board dysfunction would be alarming at any time, but this is not an ordinary time. For we confront two world-historical trends that threaten to overwhelm civilization as we know it.

First, humanity is reaching the end of its ecological tether. Industrial civilization's transgressions against nature are redounding upon it with ever increasing force. The global warming and consequent climate change caused by fossil-fuel consumption is by itself an existential threat that has the potential to cause a sixth mass extinction—a devastation in which virtually all higher forms of life would disappear, humanity not excluded. Avoiding this fate may still be possible, but it will require a heroic effort beginning now. Every year of delay magnifies the problem, making a cascade of

catastrophe more likely. And no matter what we do now, we will continue to experience the consequences of our ecological sins—pollution in myriad forms, topsoil loss, glacial melting, extended droughts, flooding, megafires, violent storms, endocrine disruption, epidemics, and so forth. The ability of our current political institutions to meet this level of challenge is effectively nil.

Second, industrial civilization is also reaching the end of its tether across the board. In common with every past civilization, it confronts not just ecological limits but also physical limits, such as the problems thrown up by sheer size and complexity. It has also accumulated thermodynamic debts in the form of depletion, degradation, decay, and disorder—that is, all the “external costs” of mass production and consumption. The burden of servicing this debt continually increases, along with the cost of maintaining existing infrastructure. In effect, despite technological advances industrial civilization’s return on investment gradually diminishes. Thus it must run faster and faster to stay in the same place. Morale and morals decline in step with a growing inability to cope, and the civilization collapses, at first gradually but then suddenly.

What can we expect as the crisis deepens? Probably the outcome foreseen by Oswald Spengler. Although cyclical theories of history, and Spengler’s in particular, are disdained by professional historians, they have a long provenance going back to Plato, who observed that there seemed to be a lawful succession of political regimes with each creating the preconditions for its successor. Thus, for example, the disorderliness of democracy tends to produce a turmoil that opens the way for tyranny.

Such theories make intuitive sense. According to Spengler, a civilization is like an organism that is born in spring, flourishes in summer, declines in autumn, and dies in winter. And his description of a civilization transitioning from autumn into winter seems remarkably prescient: a formerly liberal-democratic polity enjoying an abundance of worldly goods along with an extended period of peace slowly descends into chaos. This prepares the ground for an “Imperium” ruled by a “Caesar”—a regime characterized by hierarchy, inequality,

and authoritarian rule, even if the populace retains certain civil rights. And we should not be surprised at such a development, for autocracy in one form or another is the historical norm, democracy the exception.

Recent events, both in the United States and in other parts of the world, would seem to suggest that existing institutions are largely incapable of resisting a slide toward authoritarian rule. In short, even if we forestall ecological catastrophe, which is looking less and less likely, the political landscape will be irrevocably altered for the worse. If democracy survives, it will be in name only.

THE DEEPER ROOTS OF POLITICAL FAILURE

The inadequacy of the American Constitution for current conditions is not the only cause of the current crisis of governance. Equally important is the decay of the civil society that is the indispensable ground of a liberal-democratic polity. To make a long story short, without some authoritative standard of virtue, the combination of individual rights and mass democracy causes society to unravel.

Individuals and groups increasingly go their own way, rejecting any form of central authority. With less and less in common, they tend to see their viewpoints and interests as separate from, if not entirely opposed to, those of others. Compromise becomes difficult or even unthinkable. The upshot is that Americans are now deeply divided along religious, cultural, intellectual, and political lines, so much so that taking care of current business is almost impossible and preparing for the future is out of the question.

To make matters worse, established community norms are increasingly disregarded, Hence the growing coarseness, incivility, demoralization, and barbarization of American life. To use more formal language, America has lost its mores, the traditional code of behavior governing social life directly and political life indirectly. The best way to understand the peril is by illustration:

Tattoos, formerly the province of sailors, outlaws, and primitives now adorn much of the younger generation;

Hook-up culture has overthrown the taboo against “promiscuity”;

Drowning a crucifix in urine is now “art.”

Are tattoos intrinsically “bad”? No, but they represent a significant departure from what was once considered “good.” Likewise, the taboo on pre-marital sex may have been prudish, but restrictions on behavior are an intrinsic part of the norms that constitute a society. Thus a radical departure from what was once considered “proper” is no mere offense against decorum. It signifies social breakdown. Similarly, nothing is intrinsically sacred or profane; it is culture that makes it so. But deliberately to desecrate a revered symbol of Christianity is much more than a “transgression”: it is a cannon shot in a war against tradition.

Once civil society and the mores that undergird it have decayed, they can hardly be reconstituted, any more than the energy in a lump of coal can be recaptured after it has burned. Societies too are subject to entropy, to the universal force that over time turns order into chaos unless checked by a countervailing force. Thus the original élan, morale, and morals of a society will tend to dissipate over time leaving it increasingly delusional and disordered, precisely our predicament.

The failure of the American education system at every level to inculcate a common culture and foster deep learning is both a cause and a consequence of this antinomian trend. At too many colleges and universities, the “deconstruction” of all forms of value or authority has become the predominant mode of discourse, a perspective that has slowly filtered down even to the elementary-school level. According to this perverse school of thought, history and tradition are at best irrelevant, outmoded, and obsolete; at worst they reflect the prejudicial ideas of a particular class, race, generation, or epoch and are therefore worthless. But a society unhinged from tradition, a

society in which anything goes, must soon realize the prophecy of William Butler Yeats:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

.....
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Unfortunately, mere anarchy and passionate intensity are precisely what prepare the ground for Spengler's Imperium.

Turning now to ecology, it is not just an existential threat in its own right; it also contradicts the founding principle of modern political economy. When politics was secularized by Thomas Hobbes and his philosophical heirs, including the framers of the American Constitution, Western civilization switched its focus from spiritual reward in the afterlife to material happiness in this one, to what Hobbes called "commodious living" and Adam Smith called "opulence"—in other words, becoming wealthy through "economic development." And a long era of ecological abundance did enable "progress" and "prosperity" defined in material terms.

That era is effectively over, and a new one of ecological scarcity has begun. But once scarcity replaces abundance, modern governance loses its *raison d'être*. A flood tide of economic growth lifting all boats gives way to an ebb tide marooning the majority, causing each new generation to be worse off. As inequality increases and is cemented in place, resentment rises. The result is a crisis of legitimacy exacerbating every existing political division. Civil unrest and political turmoil are bound to follow, with the populist chaos of the Trump era being a portent of worse to come.

In consequence, the 350-year-old era of modern politics is ending. The eternal political questions of who gets what, when, how, and, most important, why now require radically new answers. Because revolutionary change tends to emerge from battlefields rather than congresses, we can expect the future to be a time of troubles in which the latent civil war of politics becomes ever more manifest.

THE TRAJECTORY OF ECOLOGICAL COLLAPSE

The first response of a technological civilization using instrumental rationality to foster perpetual economic growth has inevitably been technological, rational, and economic—in other words, doubling down on its basic strategy. For instance, instead of understanding that an automotive civilization is an ecological impossibility in the long term, it aims instead to substitute electric vehicles using renewable energy for ones running on fossil fuels. This hair-of-the-dog approach, even if it were completely successful, would do little to reduce the ecological impact of humankind. One form of pollution would be replaced by another, and resource demand would shift from one sector to another, but the overall burden on nature would change little. What the ecological crisis demands is not better mousetraps but instead a top-to-bottom revisioning and restructuring of our way of life including its technological base.

What is worse, merely technocratic “solutions” to the ecological crisis lead directly to Spengler’s Imperium. This is clearly implied in the writings of those who tout a future in which algorithms rule and even human biology is transformed. The human race might not go extinct, but it would largely cease to be human as we understand that term today. Given personal recalcitrance and social inertia, digital dictatorship is probably not the most immediate threat to human welfare. To the contrary, the likelier outcome of current trends is a loss of

control leading to growing chaos and misery as the ecological crisis bites ever more deeply.

Although the gravity of the situation is slowly altering public opinion and has also begun to impact government policies, there is little appetite for a complete restructuring of industrial civilization. Unfortunately, as in the case of the automobile, challenges to a reigning paradigm almost always lead to redoubled efforts to preserve it, so fundamental change becomes a last resort to be undertaken only when all else has failed.

Hence we can expect governments beholden to popular will and restrained by vested interests to muddle their way through the oncoming surge of crises by making grudging concessions to reality that fall far short of the need. A recent headline in the **New York Times** captures the extent of the shortfall: “Global Action Is ‘Very Far’ From What’s Needed to Avert Climate Change.” “Very far” turns out to be distant indeed: the pledges made by parties to the Paris Agreement would produce a mere one percent reduction in CO₂ emissions by 2030 versus the 50 percent scientists say is essential.

Recent, belated recognition of this yawning gap between actions and aspirations has spurred the U. S. and some other governments redouble their efforts, but the momentum of a colossal industrial civilization is not so easily checked. Thus changes for the better will necessarily be gradual and marginal.

What this means in practice is that large amounts of CO₂ will continue to be added to the atmosphere, pollution of every kind will increase, biodiversity will decline even further, extreme weather events will become more common, sperm counts will fall further, and so on. In other words, every existing negative ecological trend will continue or, more likely, increase. Hence

famines, mass migrations, resource wars, and other calamities may become the norm. Above all, it seems almost inevitable that some climate tipping points will be breached, setting in motion inexorable long-term trends that threaten posterity, either immediately or in the long term.

Because the unaided human mind is ill-adapted to deal with exponential growth, positive feedback loops, and long lag times, we must employ models to comprehend our climate's complex dynamics. Unfortunately, for a multitude of reasons, the models lag reality. That is, they tend to understate the rate of real-world change—and therefore the degree of risk associated with it, as well as the urgency of dealing with the climate emergency sooner rather than later. In consequence, both the public and the policymakers believe we have more time to deal with the threat than we actually have. Our response to the climate crisis is therefore fated to be a day late and a dollar short.

To illustrate our predicament, when atmospheric CO₂ was at current levels 3.2 million years ago, sea level was 80 feet higher than today. And if atmospheric CO₂ were to grow by 25 percent over the next decade or so, which now seems unavoidable, that would imply a sea level rise approaching 150 feet in the long term. And even more drastic changes in climate and habitability cannot be excluded, because the rate of CO₂ increase today is unprecedented in geological history, and our models cannot predict exactly when we might breach critical thresholds and set off a tipping cascade leading to an uninhabitable earth.

Thus although the worst-case scenarios may not happen soon — they are more likely to play out over decades and centuries—the possibility of more radical change in the short term cannot be excluded. At best, humanity is faced with an across-the-

board challenge of adaptation to the growing impact of the ecological crisis, above all the consequences of climate disruption on every sphere of life. At worst, it could confront serial catastrophes leading to a collapse of complex civilization.

THE GEOPOLITICAL PROSPECT

To have any reasonable chance of overcoming the ecological challenge will require an unprecedented degree of international cooperation. Unfortunately, as the European response to its recent migration emergency and the international reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic both reveal, when push comes to shove “sovereign” national governments are likely to go their own way, at least at first. As ecological and climatic trends favor or disfavor nations, international tensions will run high, and diplomats will struggle to keep the peace.

In the long run, climate change will fundamentally alter the geopolitical map. As the South becomes increasingly uninhabitable, and even countries in the Northern temperate zone struggle, Scandinavia, Russia, Alaska, and Canada will benefit from a warming climate and become the new great powers, largely displacing China, the European Union, and a radically diminished United States. It may be that these geopolitical changes will take place gradually and peacefully, but history does not offer grounds for optimism; major changes to the international order have usually been marked by turbulence if not war. For example, it seems possible or even likely that an increasingly desperate China would try to wrest control of Siberia from Russia. To reiterate a point made above, the future will be a time of troubles across the board. Not only is history not over, it is just getting started.

A TRIPLE TRAGEDY

The essence of tragedy is that there is a truer understanding or a better course of action, but the protagonist does not, cannot see it until too late to forestall destruction. Blinded by hubris, he forges ahead certain of being in the right until the denouement, the moment of revelation that precipitates the final fatal act. This is where we now stand. The error of our ways over many years and across many dimensions is being revealed, and we are about to suffer the consequences.

First, the tragedy of democracy. It is in the nature of democratic polity to foster individual freedom, and as freedoms compound they eventually produce an unstable and increasingly disorderly society in which passion and folly predominate. The center no longer holds, precipitating a crisis out of which emerges a charismatic leader who restores order, by force if necessary.

Next, the tragedy of ecology or “the tragedy of the commons.” Economic actors, including ordinary consumers, seeking only their own satisfaction receive the benefit of exploiting the environment but mostly succeed in avoiding the ecological costs, which are “externalized.” That is, they are foisted on others—on nature, downstream neighbors, the poor, other nations, and, above all, future generations. Except in small settings that allow actors to negotiate agreements for sharing a common resource safely and equitably, they are trapped in a perverse dynamic. The benefits of exploitation are immediate and large compared to costs that are either borne entirely by others or are relatively small and remote in time and space. Thus they have no incentive to refrain—in fact, quite the contrary. Since people are not saints, competitive overexploitation of nature is the tragic result. Again, individual freedom produces collective ruin, creating a chaos propelling us toward an Imperium that will restore ecological order.

Finally, the tragedy of civilization. By their very nature, civilizations are Molochs that live by devouring their hinterland

and borrowing from the future. This creates a temporary and fictitious surplus that enriches and empowers some while dispossessing and dominating others. Thus the poet Pablo Neruda standing above Machu Picchu sees not its indisputable magnificence, but instead the blood and bones of the slaves who raised its walls. Eventually, however, a civilization's very greatness conspires against it: grown too large and complex to be manageable, unable to devour and borrow as in days of yore, it struggles to afford its own existence and enters terminal decline. A voracious industrial civilization driven by the implacable logic of capitalism—grow or die—is the epitome of this tragic course. Having exceeded ecological limits more than any previous civilization, having waxed greater than all previous civilizations, modern civilization's fate now hangs in the balance. If it can be preserved at all, it will only be by an Imperium that discovers some nobler basis for our common life than the satisfaction of appetite.

CODA

The age of ecological abundance, like any age, has brought both benefits and costs. While these have never been equitably distributed, and some have experienced extreme suffering, it seems fair to say that compared to previous ages industrial civilization has conferred enormous advantages on the majority of humankind, especially since World War II. Over time, however, the ratio of benefits to costs has shifted; the latter have begun to prevail and now threaten to overwhelm us.

The shadow price of industrial civilization has also grown in proportion. For example, noise and light pollution, traffic congestion, the rat race, over tourism, lost privacy, and other unpleasant and stressful "externalities" to which it is difficult or impossible to attach a price tag. One particular aspect of that shadow price is the impact decades of ease, pleasure, comfort, convenience, and luxury have had on people's fitness,

character, and morale. A long run of good times has engendered a pervasive sense of entitlement and a notable lack of grit. The current pandemic has revealed just how ill-prepared many are for even modest sacrifice or hardship.

The coming time of troubles will not be so kind. Those lacking in mental fortitude and physical prowess will suffer accordingly. We cannot choose the history we get, but by exercising wisdom and foresight we can prepare ourselves for the history we are likely to get. Ahead is an existential test. Try not to fail.