

20.1 Societal Collapse and Common Wealth

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For 5,000 years, humans lived in the past tense: "Yesterday was the same as tomorrow." For the next 500 years people lived in the present tense: "Today can be whatever we want it to be." But now, for the next 50 years we must start living in the future tense: "Tomorrow's social, economic and political constraints must become today's reality."

We should not be talking about climate change; it is an invisible force we cannot directly experience. What we should be talking about is connecting the dots between using more resources and creating more wastes each year than the planet can replace or absorb and the social and economic costs of environmental collapse. These are tangible things we can understand and do something about.

There are many human examples from the past where an isolated society thrived in a lush environment, grew in population, depleted their natural resources and then slowly declined or even perished -- as in the story of Easter Island in Chapter 21.

The process is not new; there are similar lessons in nature. Without a predator, rabbits rapidly multiply in new farmland. Introduce foxes and the population of foxes multiplies until there is a shortage of rabbits, then the foxes starve and their population declines until a balance point is reached. Nature is a dynamic system; we understand that. Unfortunately, the words "Climate Change" does not capture the life and death struggle that goes with societal collapse when there is an imbalance between environmental supply and human demand.

Societal Collapse

The difference between those past societies and the present is that this time people are not just destroying an isolated geographic area, but rather are destroying the planet itself. There is no other place for humans to go. We have an economic system and social life style dependent on continuous and unlimited growth, without regard for the consequences. We have been consuming trees, water and the resources of the planet as if, like the rabbits, there was an endless supply.

It is not just the weather that will change. Once there is not enough food and water, there will be refugees, civil strife and unmet basic human needs. We should be talking about the consequences of killing the planet -- of being the foxes. The people on Easter Island ended up with nothing to eat but each other. Societal collapse is ugly.

The Economic

Most of the know carbon reserves will need to stay in the ground if we are to avoid exceeding the capacity of the planet to support a growing world population of 7.4 billion

people. Yet, the current value of these reserves is included in the total financial assets of the world economy. This is stranded wealth that cannot be recovered. Once the bubble breaks – similar to the worthless mortgages – financial products such as pension funds will have shortfalls, stranding ordinary people – similar to the mortgage foreclosures.

But, the world economy becoming poorer through the necessity of abandoning fossil fuels is only a small part of the economic problem. In the past, economic growth has been fueled by deferring some of the true cost of goods by consuming resources (such as trees) without replacing them and by dumping waste (such as greenhouse gasses) into the environment. These debts have been passed on to the future, and now need to be paid. The past damage needs to be repaired and new damage avoided by creating a new alternative economy.

The wealth from deferred costs has been increasing concentrated into fewer and fewer hands. The 20 richest people in the US now have as much wealth as the bottom half of the nation; 1% of the world's population has as much wealth as the rest of the world. The redistribution of this wealth is the necessary alternative to the continual decline of economic security for the middle class in America, the rise of ultra-nationalism in Europe and massive inequality in the Middle East breeding the rise of terrorism.

In order to meet the demands of responding to climate change... "It is impossible to point to any precedent other than abolition that an existing set of political and economic interests be forced to say goodbye to trillions of dollars of wealth."

Naomi Klein captured the magnitude of coming to terms with societal collapse with the title of her book: *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. The shift to a new, green economy will require a fundamental shift in some well-entrenched economic beliefs and values.

Common Wealth

The biggest adjustment is how we must come to think about the planet and its resources as *Common Wealth*, Jeffery Sachs' subtitle of the *New Economics for the Twenty-first Century*. The question of our time is how to live peacefully and sustainably on a crowded planet in the 21st century. The first step is to acknowledge that we live in a new era, the Anthropocene: The time since industrialization in which the world has experienced a tenfold increase in the population and a tenfold increase in the productivity per person. The result has been a change in the relationship of humans to the planet, one where human activity has come to dominate nature's natural ecological process.

This is a global problem, requiring global problem solving. No individual nation has the solution within their individual economic, military or social processes. The resources of the planet increasing need to be managed collectively as common wealth.



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