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# All-Consuming

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The power of the very rich prevents us from addressing our two greatest existential threats.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 15<sup>th</sup> July 2023

According to Google's news search, the media has run more than 10,000 stories this year about Phillip Schofield, the British television presenter who resigned over an affair with a younger colleague. Google also records a global total of five news stories about a [scientific paper](#) published last week, showing that the chances of simultaneous crop losses in the world's major growing regions, caused by climate breakdown, appear to have been dangerously underestimated. In mediaworld, a place that should never be confused with the real world, celebrity gossip is thousands of times more important than existential risk.

The new paper explores the impacts on crop production when meanders in the jet stream (Rossby waves) become stuck. Stuck patterns cause extreme weather. To put it crudely, if you live in the northern hemisphere and a kink in the jet stream (the band of strong winds a few miles above the Earth's surface at mid-latitudes) is stuck to the south of you, your weather is likely to be cold and wet. If it's stuck to the north of you, you're likely to suffer

escalating heat and drought.

In both cases, the stuck weather, exacerbated by global heating, affects crops. With certain meander patterns, several of the northern hemisphere's major growing regions – such as western North America, Europe, India and east Asia – could be exposed to extreme weather [at the same time](#), hammering their harvests. We rely for our subsistence on global smoothing: if there's a bad harvest in one region, it's likely to be counteracted by good harvests elsewhere. Even small crop losses occurring simultaneously present what the paper calls “systemic risk”.

Already, regional climate shocks have helped cause a disastrous reversal in the trend of global chronic hunger. For many years, the number of hungry people fell. But in 2015 the trend turned and has been [curving upwards](#) since. This is not because of a lack of food. The most likely explanation is that the global food system has [lost its resilience](#). When complex systems lose resilience, instead of damping the shocks that hit them, they tend to amplify them. The shocks amplified across the system so far have landed most heavily on poor nations that depend on imports, causing local price spikes even when global food prices were low.

If this happens when harvests are affected in just one country or one region, we can only imagine the results if extreme weather simultaneously hits several major growing regions.

Other papers have been published with similar themes, showing, for example, the impacts of the rising frequency of [“flash droughts”](#) and [concurrent heatwaves](#) in grain-producing regions, and how global heating [hits food security](#). All have been largely or entirely ignored by the media.

We face an epochal, unthinkable prospect: of perhaps the two greatest existential threats – environmental breakdown and food system failure – converging, as one triggers the other.

There are plenty of signs, some of which [I've tried to explain](#) in the Guardian and, with a sense of rising urgency, [in a presentation to parliament](#), suggesting that the global food system may not be far from its tipping point, for structural reasons similar to those that tanked the financial sector in 2008. As a system approaches a critical threshold, it's impossible to say which external shock could push it over. Once a system has become fragile, and its resilience is not restored, it's not a matter of if and how, but when.

So why isn't this all over the front pages? Why, when governments know we're facing existential risk, do they fail to act? Why is the Biden administration allowing enough [oil and gas drilling](#) to bust the US carbon budget five times over? Why is the UK government [scrapping the £11.6bn](#) international climate fund it promised? Why has Labour [postponed its £28bn](#) green prosperity fund, while Keir Starmer is [reported to have remarked](#) last week "I hate tree huggers" (a pejorative term for environmental campaigners)? Why are the Sun, the Mail, the Telegraph and the Express competing to attack every green solution that might help to [prevent climate chaos](#)? Why does everything else seem more important?

The underlying problem isn't hard to grasp: governments have failed to break what the economist Thomas Piketty calls the [patrimonial spiral](#) of wealth accumulation. As a result, the rich have become ever richer, a process that seems to be accelerating. In 2021, for example, the ultra-rich captured almost two-thirds of all the [world's new wealth](#). Their share of national income in the UK has almost doubled since 1980, while [in the US it's higher](#) than it

was in 1820.

The richer a fraction of society becomes, the greater its political power, and the more extreme the demands it makes. The problem is summarised in one sentence in the [resignation letter](#) of the UK environment minister Zac Goldsmith: instead of attending a crucial environment summit, Rishi Sunak went to Rupert Murdoch's summer party. We cannot work together to solve our common problems when great power is in the hands of so few.

What the ultra-rich want is to sustain and extend the economic system that put them where they are. The more they have to lose, the more creative their strategies become. As well as the traditional approach of buying media outlets and [pouring money](#) into the political parties that favour them, they devise new ways of protecting their interests.

Corporations and oligarchs with massive fortunes can hire as many junktanks (so-called thinktanks), troll farms, marketing gurus, psychologists and micro-targeters as they need to devise justifications and to demonise, demoralise, abuse and threaten people trying to sustain a habitable planet. The junktanks devise new laws [to stifle protest](#), implemented by politicians funded by the same plutocratic class.

It could scarcely be more screwed up. The effort to protect Earth systems and the human systems that depend on them is led by people working at the margins with tiny resources, while the richest and most powerful use every means at their disposal to stop them. Can you imagine, in decades to come, trying to explain this to your children?

Looking back on previous human calamities, all of which will be

dwarfed by this, you find yourself repeatedly asking “why didn’t they ... ?” The answer is power: the power of a few to countermand the interests of humanity. The struggle to avert systemic failure is the struggle between [democracy and plutocracy](#). It always has been, but the stakes are now higher than ever.

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