



29th January 2018
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published in the Guardian 24th January 2018

System Failure

Is complex society on the brink of collapse?

It's a good question, but it seems too narrow.

"Is Western civilisation on the brink of collapse?", the lead article in this week's *New Scientist* asks.

The answer is probably. But why just Western?

Yes, certain Western governments are engaged in a frenzy of self-destruction.

❑ In an age of phenomenal complexity and interlocking crises, the Trump administration has embarked on a mass deskilling and simplification of the state. Donald Trump might have sacked his strategist Steve Bannon, but Bannon's professed intention, "the deconstruction of the administrative state", remains the central – perhaps the only – policy.

❑ Defunding departments, disbanding the teams and dismissing the experts they rely on, shutting down research programmes, maligning the civil servants who remain in post, the self-hating state is ripping down the very apparatus of government. At the same time, it is destroying the public protections that defend us from disaster.

❑ A series of studies published in the past few months have started to explore the wider impact of pollutants. One, published in the *British Medical Journal*, suggests that the exposure of unborn children to air pollution in cities is causing "something approaching a public health catastrophe". Pollution in the womb is now linked to low birth weight, disruption of the baby's lung and brain development, and a series of debilitating and fatal diseases in later life.

❑ Another report, published in the *Lancet*, suggests that three times as many deaths are caused by pollution as by AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined. Pollution, the authors note, now "threatens the continuing survival of human societies."

❑ A collection of articles in the journal *PLOS Biology* reveals that there is no reliable safety data on most of the 85,000 synthetic chemicals to which we may be exposed. While hundreds of these chemicals "contaminate the blood and urine of nearly every person tested", and the volume of materials containing them rises every year, we have no idea what the likely impacts may be, either singly or in combination.

❑ As if in response to such findings, the Trump government has systematically destroyed the integrity of the *Environmental Protection Agency*, ripped up the *Clean Power Plan*, vitiated environmental standards for motor vehicles, reversed the ban on *chlorpyrifos* (a pesticide now linked to the impairment of cognitive and behavioural function in children), and rescinded a remarkable list of similar public protections.

❑ In the UK, successive governments have also curtailed their ability to respond to crises. One of David Cameron's first acts on taking office was to shut down the government's early warning systems: *the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution and the Sustainable Development Commission*. He did not want to hear what they were telling him. Sack the impartial advisers and replace them with toadies: this has preceded the fall of empires many times before. Now, as we detach ourselves from the European Union, we degrade our capacity to solve the problems that transcend our borders.

But these pathologies are not confined to "the West". The rise of demagoguery (the pursuit of simplistic solutions to complex problems, accompanied by the dismantling of the protective state) is everywhere apparent.

Environmental breakdown is accelerating worldwide.

❑ The **annihilation of vertebrate populations**, **Insectageddon**, **the erasure of rainforests**, mangroves, **soil**, aquifers, the degradation of entire Earth systems, such as the atmosphere and the oceans, proceed at astonishing rates. These interlocking crises will affect everyone, but the poorer nations are hit first and worst.

❑ The forces that threaten to destroy our well-being are also everywhere the same: primarily the lobbying power of big business and big money, that perceive the administrative state as an impediment to their immediate interests. Amplified by the persuasive power of campaign finance, **covertly-funded thinktanks**, embedded journalists and tame academics, these forces threaten to overwhelm democracy. If you want to know how they work, read **Jane Mayer's book *Dark Money***.

❑ Up to a certain point, connectivity increases resilience. For example, if local food supplies fail, regional or global markets allow us to draw on production elsewhere. But beyond a certain level, connectivity and complexity **threaten to become unmanageable**. The emergent properties of the system, combined with the inability of the human brain to encompass it, could spread crises rather than contain them. We are in danger of pulling each other down. *New Scientist* should have asked "is complex society on the brink of collapse?".

Complex societies have collapsed many times before. We live in a sort of civilisational interglacial, a brief respite from social entropy. It has always been a question of when, not if. But "when" is beginning to look like "soon".

The collapse of states and social complexity has not always been a bad thing. As James C Scott points out in **his fascinating book *Against the Grain***, the dissolution of the earliest states, that were founded on slavery and coercion, is likely to have been experienced by many people as an emancipation. When centralised power began to collapse, through epidemics, crop failure, floods, soil erosion or the self-destructive perversities of government, its corralled subjects would take the chance to flee. In many cases they joined the "barbarians".

This so-called "secondary primitivism", Scott notes, "may well have been experienced as a marked improvement in safety, nutrition and social order. Becoming a barbarian was often a bid to improve one's lot."

The dark ages that inexorably followed the glory and grandeur of the state may, in that era, have been the best times to be alive.

But today there is nowhere to turn.

The wild lands and rich ecosystems that once supported hunter gatherers, nomads and the refugees from imploding early states who joined them **now scarcely exist**.

Only a tiny fraction of the current population could survive a return to the barbarian life. (Consider that, according to one estimate, the maximum population of Britain during the Mesolithic, when people survived by hunting and gathering, was 5000). In the nominally democratic era, the complex state is now, for all its flaws, all that stands between us and disaster.

So what we do?

Next week, barring upsets, I will propose a new way forward.

The path we now follow is not the path we have to take.

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