Is Collapse Inevitable?

Richard A Slaughter

By now even the sceptics, deniers and fossil fuel companies know that some form of global collapse is quite possibly just around the corner. A report from the Global Systems Institute in late 2023 confirmed the now undeniable fact that several major tipping points in the global system were about to be crossed.

Or, to put it another way: humanity was already well beyond what has been described as its safe operating space. Yep. Time's up folks. We're all about to discover that *homo sapiens* is not at all the master of this small planet, if it ever was.

But hang on there. If this is factually correct, why bother to put one's time and energy into futures-related work? Why not just "go for broke" and enjoy what's left of the ride? Two reasons might be, first, that what is meant by "collapse" is still not entirely clear and, second, knowing that the future is becoming ever more dangerous may help strengthen human motivation to "wake up" and actually do something about it.

Human agency is a powerful force in its own right -- or it could be -- which is probably why Rebecca Solnit refers to it as "a sleeping giant."

FIFTY YEARS OF OVERSHOOT AND COLLAPSE

The notion that human civilisation has set itself up for a hazardous "overshoot and collapse" future is at least half a century old. It features prominently in the work of many futurists, including my own. From *Recovering the Future* (1988) to *Deleting Dystopia* (2022), and other related publications, this theme has never been far from my awareness.

Perhaps I was "fortunate" (if that's the right word) in discovering Lewis Mumford's masterwork *The Pentagon of Power* (1971) in the first year of its UK publication. Then being gifted with a first edition copy of *The Limits to Growth* (1972) the following year. Living and working in Bermuda at the time, I found myself in the middle of a vast unplanned global experiment. The dilemmas of "growth" were already playing out on this once pristine 20-square-mile sub-tropical island some 1,000 Km (774 miles) south of New York City. The post-war years found this isolated fragment of British colonialism addicted to growth and the income it created. But, as with so many other places, it was also struggling to contain the accompanying pressures and dilemmas.

The notion that humanity might be subject to global limits with real consequences has tended to receive a frosty reception, or worse, whenever it appears. It was not, however, merely unpopular. It collided head-on with the underlying ideology and rationale of 20th Century politics and economics.

Stop growth? One might as well sprout wings and fly off into the sunset. Some of the early flak may have also been associated with the fact that using computers to build and run global models was new and untested. But the underlying problem was that reining in growth was simply unthinkable. Fifty years later many influential people and a

disturbingly large number of powerful organisations are still resisting the core challenge identified by the Meadows team back in 1972. Namely that growth can't continue for ever, and if humans can't figure out how to do it themselves the cold laws of physics will do it for them (Higgs, 2014; Bardi U. & Periera,C 2022).

FORESIGHT VERSUS SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

If the dilemmas of growth had been taken seriously even as late as the 1990s, there would still have been a chance that "overshoot" futures could have been minimised, if not avoided entirely. It is, however, a testament to the power of human obstinacy, and the dominance of special interests, that such futures have remained broadly unacknowledged.

Now, however, after a year with the highest global temperatures in thousands of years, the repetitive disasters of climate change are steadily making standard responses ever more counterproductive. To take but one example, estimates of the extent of expected sea level rises have risen from mere centimetres to well over a meter by the end of the century. Governments, local councils, and property owners all around the world are finally catching on to the fact the most the existing infrastructure was designed in an earlier era according to what are now clearly obsolete assumptions. The notion that foresight offers superior and far less costly pathways into the future than the rigours of social experience, is slowly gaining ground.

I've always been intrigued at how different organisations and groups respond to the dilemmas created by growth in what is clearly a finite system and produced a summary/evaluation of this topic back in 2010. A sufficiently aware wealthy minority take such on dilemmas as a personal and professional challenge. Others, the majority, in fact, continue to exercise all the many options available to deny, avoid or repress what is happening right before their eyes. An endless supply of diverting options provided by the tecch giants and global marketing industry have made this a compellingly attractive strategy for millions. A few very wealthy individuals and organisations have exercised a still more perplexing option by funding efforts to undermine any serious responses.

As a professional futurist, I sometimes find that simple metaphors can be helpful. For example, in a workshop context, I might ask a group to imagine that they are charged with taking a group of youngsters out into nature beyond the built environment for a couple of weeks. Key questions soon arise about provisioning and care. For example, what do the organisers need to do to keep them safe? Clearly, access to reliable maps (digital or otherwise) is essential.

We then ask: what hazards and dangers might be encountered and how would these be dealt with? You see where this is going. The point is that whatever maps are in use, some of the most vital questions relate to dangers and, by extension, strategies for avoiding or minimising them. It's obvious that no account, or 'map' of the near-term future, is worth a great deal if it's unable to clearly identify such contingencies. Which is why I've always appreciated Bertrand de Jouvenel's astute reminder that "the proof of improvidence is falling into the empire of necessity."

THE GLOBAL 'MEGA CRISIS'

Back in 2011 Michael Marien, Bill Halal and others drew attention to a number of serious inter-related issues that were beginning to loom large in their own highly credible views of the of the near-term future. They decided to organise a group session at a World Future Society conference in Toronto on the global "mega-crisis."
While perhaps a little ambitious, their focus on the combined implications of global issues could hardly have been more timely or relevant. Marien, Halal, Canadian author Thomas Homer-Dixon, and I fronted up for a crowded session and a clearly sympathetic, appreciative audience. The event was well organised and covered considerable ground in a fairly short time. The recordings are still available online.

Prior to the meeting, the December 2011 issue of the *Journal of Futures Studies* published no less than 15 short articles on the theme. After the event, the organisers quite reasonably assumed that producing a book on the topic would help maintain momentum and broaden the audience. But to no avail. Wider interest in the mega-crisis remained problematic. No-one beyond the small world of Futures was interested, so the project died. I was not entirely surprised, having had a similar experience with earlier works. For example, while *The Biggest Wake-Up Call in History* won a 'Best of the Year' award from the Association of Professional Futurists (APF), commercial publishers were resolute in their determined lack of interest (Slaughter, 2010).

People at every level, in all professions and all states of life, have yet to acknowledge that, in order to steer toward more positive futures, we need to be paying attention. Crucially, this includes training and putting in place highly trained people in purpose-designed institutional settings that would allow us to routinely scan our environment, our situation, our place in the global system. The output of such work then needs to be made directly available to the national (and international) councils of the day.

DIRTY TRICKS

One of the main blockages to real progress on these issues can be summarised in two words: corporate ideology. When something emerges that threatens its rather specific interests, it can respond rather like the human immune system and despatch an army of agents with one purpose: destroy the invaders. Such operations can be effective but, in a social context, there are obvious risks.

To see how this works in practice there are perhaps few better sources than Robert Manne's illuminating essay on how, a decade ago, an array of corporate interests came together with the declared purpose of defeating climate science. While covering a Heartland Institute conference in 2011, a *New York Times* reporter noted that it was "the most important denialist organisation in the US." Moreover, the event was said to display a tangible "air of victory."

Manne's final comment says it all -- it was "a victory that subsequent generations cursing ours may look upon as perhaps the darkest in the history of humankind." One of the corporations behind this kind of "institutional denialism" was the oil giant Exxon whose CEO spared no effort not only in deceiving the public but to silence its own scientists by closing down an internal research division. An article by Bill McKibben

provides a succinct [overview](#) of this disgraceful episode while Jane Mayer reveals details of the huge sums of "[dark money](#)" that were expended. Both demonstrate very clearly just how deeply this particular, real-world conspiracy went.

A BROADER, DEEPER CANVAS

Over the years it's become increasingly clear that common characteristics of the dirty tricks brigades of climate change deniers, like the evasions of here-and-now decision-makers, and those who blithely dismiss future threats, are not hard to identify. Self-interest, viewed as an expression of ego and pride, plays a huge role, particularly when it remains unexamined and unquestioned. In many cases it is accompanied by narrow-mindedness, an aversion to high-quality information and a lack of interest in humanity's future. Human characteristics such as these have major implications but are often overlooked in more conventional economic-, and technology-focused accounts. Such characteristics are, however, neither invisible, nor set in stone.

E.F Schumacher wisely noted that problems cannot be understood on the same level upon which they're first experienced. To appreciate how human attributes directly affect the shifting prospects for humanity requires something more than positive thinking or everyday psychology. It requires an open mind, a depth dimension, respect for quality evidence and an extended timeframe. Overall, *a broader, deeper canvas*.

One of the secrets hidden in plain sight is that the entire human world is constructed by and for people. Moreover, every part of it needs to justify its place or, in other words, be legitimated. It's a continuing process. This means that, in principle (if not always in practice) every aspect of our world can be revised, re-imagined and re-constituted in the light of changing circumstances.

CRITICAL TO INTEGRAL, AND INTEGRALLY INFORMED FUTURES

Critical approaches manifestly generated new insights and reinvigorated methods. But, over time, what also became clear is that it omitted other highly significant features of the human world: the human and cultural interiors. It was only by paying more explicit and detailed attention to how individuals, societies and organisations, for example, construct and inhabit these inner worlds (through language, tradition etc) that we could begin to clarify why some corporate executives, political leaders and high-tech oligarchs acted as they did.

The tools and methods of integrally informed futures work are useful precisely because they shine new light on interior realities. They also give new life to older methods such as [environmental scanning.](#) They help us to understand how values, worldviews, perspectives and states or stages of human development each have a role in producing the consequences we see around us. Climate denialism, the premature dismissal of "limits," rigid adherence to the ideology of growth, and many other issues become much clearer when approached in this way. The same methods helpfully illuminate some of the interior aspects of more humanly compelling futures. A concise summary covering the theory, vision and practice aspects of Integral Futures work can be found in this 2020 [overview.](#) Here are three brief examples that speak directly to issues arising in an overshoot and collapse world.

1. Descent pathways

Back in 2014, Joshua Floyd and I edited a special issue of *Foresight* on the topic of descent pathways. The central idea was to suggest that instead of reaching a peak of human activity globally that destabilised the global system and sent it into a sudden overshoot or collapse mode, it was worth considering strategies whereby specific pathways could be identified that moderated the descent and improved the chances of less catastrophic outcomes. An introduction to the issue is available [here](#). An account of interior human factors involved in the denial of limits is [here.](#) The project may appear ambitious, but it sits well with many related initiatives that help to open out new options for a world greatly in need of them. Some related examples include those of "de-growth" (Cattaneo, et al, 2012; Alexander & Gleeson, 2019) and *The Great Transition* (Raskin, et al, 2002).

2. Interior human development

Toward the end of my book, *The Biggest Wake-Up Call in History,* I wanted to leave readers with a sense of qualified optimism. One way to do this was to consider several exemplars, or outstanding individuals who had shown in their lives and work that it was and is possible to [make headway during impossible times.](#) The group shared a number of personal characteristics that I summarised in the following way. In each case:

> *an exclusive focus on one or two reality domains had disappeared. Gone too was the focus on self and the need to diminish others…. Absent also was the reliance on limited value sets. Gone finally, was the drive for power, material wealth and domination. Instead, what emerged provided clear evidence of the personal and practical power of more encompassing values, post-conventional worldviews and, overall, broader views of reality.*

From this, three conclusions emerged:

- The seeds of many solutions appear to be grounded in the left-hand quadrant domains. That is, in enhanced human capacities, more encompassing worldviews and values that support world-centric outlooks.

- One of the most powerful and significant shifts that, in principle is available to virtually anyone, is that from conventional thinking (taking perceived reality as more real and finished than it actually is) to post-conventional thinking (seeing things as constructed (i.e., more open and subject to revision and change).

- While low-energy, more local and self-sufficient, lifestyles are becoming default necessities, the viability of such arrangements depend very much on *the developmental capacities of the individuals within them* and the necessary *social validation and support* that they require. It is therefore precisely these factors that need to be brought more clearly into focus and supported by purposeful mainstream social and institutional strategies ([Slaughter, 2015](#)).

3. Technology, Values and Worldviews

It's abundantly clear these days that what is meant by "technology" is subject to interpretation. For example, a common default view pursued by powerful people and institutions more or less equates it with notions of neutrality and wide, continuing utility. I argued strongly against this view in a recent Compass article in part because it misconstrues the critical role of human agency throughout.

Technology may not necessarily be regarded as good or bad but it *always* brings with it distinctive human and political attributes that, in turn, emerge from and articulate particular values and commitments within a given worldview.

Figure One: Values, Worldviews and Technology Matrix
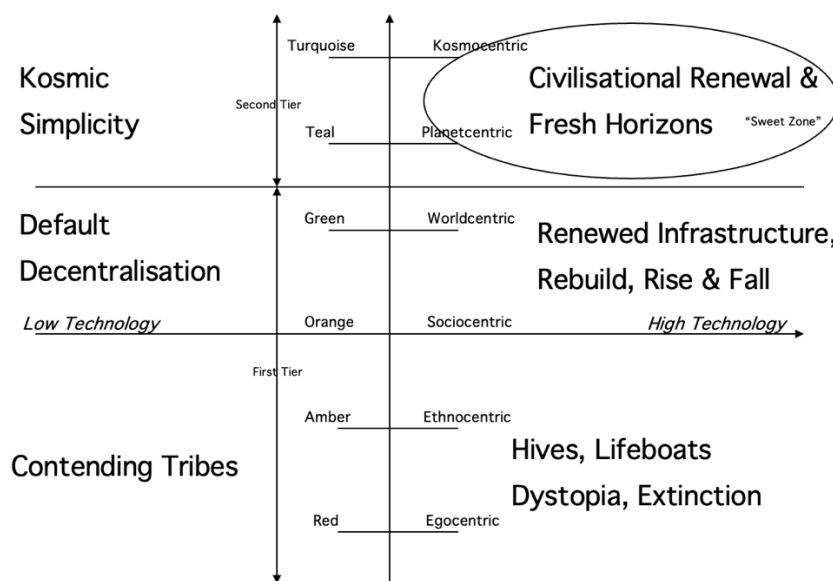
Source: Slaughter, R 2010, P. 168

Figure 1 suggests that in a context characterised by basic values (ego, envy, fear and aggression) technological development almost certainly leads to conflict scenarios and possibly extinction. It also illustrates the idea that venturing consciously "up" through a hierarchy of value orientations demonstrates how such shifts serve to expand human options and socio-cultural possibilities. Also, in terms of worldviews, moving from ego-centric toward, social-, world-, or planet-centric levels of insight also opens up new worlds of meaning and capability. The figure proposes an "ideal type" zone for high technology implying civilisational renewal. Progress toward any such a sweet zone requires something we rarely see in our own conflict-ridden world: a balance between advanced technology and a corresponding set of advanced. high-level human attributes.

SO, IS COLLAPSE INEVITABLE?

If by "collapse" we mean the global system shuts down then – no, it won't happen -- because the system will continue to adjust to the impacts created by our species and, as has happened many times before, eventually reach a new dynamic equilibrium. If by

"collapse" we mean the sudden termination of human societies, again, I'd say this future is unlikely. Some form of human presence will continue, so long as global temperatures remain with a zone habitable to humans.

If by "collapse" we mean that some resources will run out, more species will become extinct and human societies will be battered and bruised by global changes beyond our control, my sense is -- *yes*, this is a very likely future. Most of the "heavy trends" do, in fact, point in this direction. But "very likely" does not, by any means, mean inevitable. Part of the reason is that we are literally surrounded by resources that, for many reasons, we've either overlooked or declined to take seriously. This article has, for example, implied that Western culture has proceeded for too long by overlooking half of reality (i.e. the human and social interiors), which has left huge gaps in what can be grasped, what projects can be attempted and what futures seem likely at any particular time.

So where are we headed? Currently we are clearly heading toward a high-tech dystopia, a damaged, denuded world overrun by non-human, digital devices that, as things stand, we may never fully understand or control. This is precisely where higher—order human capacities of the kind referred to here are most <u>urgently required.</u>

Once the interiors are factored back into our evolving picture of the world, we can see how out of balance things have been. We notice how conventional taken-for-granted worldviews reality provided so few options beyond an arid business-as-usual. Once we've identified the specific domains, values and worldviews from which the mega-crisis arose, everything changes. The paucity of view that led to depression, fatalism, avoidance and so on recedes into the past. We realise that what any individual perceives depends upon the internal resources that he or she brings to the tas*k*. Similarly, by understanding what this means in depth, we open up a truly vast arena of possibilities and real-world options.

An overshoot and collapse future is perhaps best understood as the consequence of an exhausted worldview and redundant values. On the other hand, embracing a broader, deeper canvas provides access to human and social resources from which vibrant and humanly compelling futures can emerge.

But time is certainly short, and the sooner we get on with it, the better.

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NOTE

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