The Ecological Crisis is a Political Crisis

by Kevin MacKay

With each passing day, reports on global climate change become increasingly bleak. Recent research has affirmed that the glaciers are melting faster than anticipated\(^1\), and that acidification, with its catastrophic effect on ocean ecosystems, is also proceeding faster than feared\(^2\). As the concentration of atmospheric carbon continues to rise, so does the likelihood we’ve passed the tipping point for irreversible climate change\(^3\).

When one looks at other critical earth ecosystems, the danger is equally apparent. Soil is being destroyed\(^4\). Fresh water shortages are wracking several continents and leaving billions of people without reliable access to clean drinking water\(^5\). Fish stocks are plummeting\(^6\). Oceans are clogged with plastic garbage\(^7\). Biodiversity is disappearing at an alarming rate\(^8\). In the face of this full-spectrum ecological assault, a growing number of scientists have been saying that the collapse of civilization is now unavoidable\(^9\).

Stopping the destructive effects of industrial, capitalist civilization has now become the defining challenge of our age. If we don’t radically change our society’s course within the next 30 years, then a deep collapse and protracted Dark Age are all but assured. In order to confront this challenge, we need to understand what is causing civilization’s crisis, and most importantly, how the crisis can be resolved. At stake is nothing less than a viable future on this planet.
The Five Horsemen of the Modern Day Apocalypse

In my book, *Radical Transformation: Oligarchy, Collapse, and the Crisis of Civilization*, I argue that industrial civilization is being driven toward collapse by five key forces – related to terminal dysfunction within its ecological, economic, socio-cultural, and political sub-systems:

1. **Dissociation**: globalized production and distribution systems disrupt people’s ability to put their own actions, and the actions of elites, into a coherent causal and ethical framework. Actions by individuals, institutions, and systems of governance are therefore disconnected from their effect on the natural world and on other peoples. Without this critical feedback, even well-intentioned actors can’t make rational and ethical choices regarding their behaviour.

2. **Complexity**: the world-spanning nature of industrial capitalist civilization, and the massive number of interrelationships it represents, make predicting the effect of any given change on the system as a whole devilishly difficult. Disastrous tipping points loom in several of civilization’s systems – from the collapse of ocean ecology to the threat of nuclear war. In addition, because the crisis cannot be contained in one part of the globe, the dysfunctions can’t be dealt with in isolation.

3. **Stratification**: a profoundly unequal distribution of wealth – both globally and within nations - leads to mass human poverty, displacement, and to premature death through disease and continuous warfare. Stratification also leads to political instability, eroding a society’s social cohesion and undermining decision-making structures.

4. **Overshoot**: the economic practices of industrial capitalism are exceeding ecological limits. Our civilization is critically degrading the biosphere, burning through non-renewable energy sources, and shifting the entire climatic balance.

5. **Oligarchy**: in states worldwide, political decision-making is controlled by a numerically small, wealthy elite. This form of government serves to lock in patterns of conflict, oppression, and ecological destruction.

Societies as Decision-Making Systems

Each of the horsemen presents a significant threat to civilization’s viability. However, oligarchy is particularly important as it deals with a society’s decision-making systems. In his 2005 book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or to Succeed*, geographer Jared Diamond argued that many past civilizations have collapsed due to their inability to make correct decisions in the face

To Tainter, the ultimate mistake failed civilizations made was to continually solve problems by adding social complexity, and as a result, increasing the society’s energy needs. Eventually, Tainter argued that civilizations encounter a “thermodynamic crisis” in which they are unable to sustain an energy-intensive level of complexity. The result is collapse – ecological devastation, political upheaval, and mass population die-off.

The tendency for societies to collapse under excessive energy demands is an important insight. However, what Tainter and Diamond failed to appreciate is how oligarchy is an even more fundamental cause of civilization collapse.

Oligarchic control compromises a society’s ability to make correct decisions in the face of existential threats. This explains a seeming paradox in which past civilizations have collapsed despite possessing the cultural and technological know-how needed to resolve their crises. The problem wasn’t that they didn’t understand the source of the threat or the way to avert it. The problem was that societal elites benefitted from the system’s dysfunctions and, prevented available solutions.

**Oligarchic Control in “Democratic” States**

Citizens in countries such as Canada, the United States, Australia, or the Eurozone members, would generally consider themselves to be living in democratic societies. However, when the political systems of Western democracies are scrutinized, clear and pervasive signs of oligarchy emerge.

A 2014 study by American political scientists Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page revealed that the great majority of political decisions made in the United States reflect the interests of elites. After studying nearly 1,800 policy decisions passed between 1981 and 2002, the researchers argued that “both individual economic elites and organized interest groups (including corporations, largely owned and controlled by wealthy elites) play a substantial part in affecting public policy, but the general public has little or no independent influence.”

Today, oligarchic control over decision-making, and its catastrophic ecological effects, have never been clearer. In the U.S., Donald Trump and his billionaire-dominated cabinet are seeking to dismantle the Environmental Protection Agency, to question climate science, and to
pursue a policy of “American energy dominance” that will dramatically expand production of fossil fuels.\textsuperscript{15}

U.S. energy companies are also having a profound impact on domestic energy policy by accelerating the development of hard-to-access fuel sources through hydraulic fracturing, deep-sea oil drilling, and mountain-top removal coal mining.\textsuperscript{16} At the same time, fossil fuel oligarchs are working overtime to dismantle green energy initiatives, such as the Koch brothers’ war on the solar industry in Florida, and in other cities across the continent.\textsuperscript{17}

In Canada, often thought of as more progressive than its southern neighbor, the situation hasn’t been much different. Under prime minister Stephen Harper’s two terms, the Canadian state became an unapologetic cheerleader for extracting some of the world’s dirtiest oil – Tar Sands bitumen. Harper accelerated Tar Sands production, leading to the clear-cutting of thousands of acres of boreal forest, the diversion of millions of gallons of freshwater, and the creation of miles of toxic tailings ponds, filled with water contaminated by the bitumen extraction process.\textsuperscript{18}

Like the Trump administration, the Harper government silenced federal climate scientists.\textsuperscript{19} The government also targeted environmental charities and non-profits, using funding cuts and the threat of audits to undermine climate advocacy.\textsuperscript{20} When a movement of national outrage swept Harper from power in 2015, Canadians were hopeful that climate change would once more be taken seriously. However, the new government of Justin Trudeau, while embracing the international discourse on global warming, has shown a continued allegiance to the fossil-fuel oligarchy by committing over $7 billion in federal funds to purchase the failing Kinder-Morgan Trans Mountain pipeline.\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{What is To Be Done?}

To create a sustainable future, we must first learn the lessons of the past, and what archaeological research shows is that throughout history, civilizations that have been captive to the interests of an oligarchic elite have all collapsed.\textsuperscript{22} Today’s industrial, capitalist civilization is trapped in this same deadly cycle.

As long as a self-interested elite controls decision-making in modern states, we will be far too late to avoid the effects of steadily contracting ecological limits. In addition, we will be unable to avert the downward spiral of economic crisis, conflict, and warfare that will result as oligarchs scramble to maintain their wealth and power in the face of dwindling resources and mounting crisis.\textsuperscript{23}
Breaking free from this destructive pattern will require us to take political and economic power back from the 1% and return it to the hands of citizens. This means that advocates for ecological sustainability must move far beyond individual actions, lobbying, or reform of existing political and economic institutions. If we are to have a chance, we must ensure that governments make decisions based on the public good, not on private profit.

Radically transforming industrial, capitalist civilization won’t be easy. It will require movements for environmental sustainability, social justice, and economic fairness to come together, and to realize their common interest in dismantling the system of oligarchy and building a democratic, eco-socialist society. This “movement of movements” must put aside sectarian squabbles, and finally realize that the goals of economic justice, human rights, and ecological sustainability are all intrinsically linked.

Such changes may seem like a tall order, but hope can be found in the deepening struggle being waged to protect our fragile ecosystems. First Nations groups are leading this charge and beginning to win some important victories. The inspiring Water Protectors of Standing Rock were able to disrupt the Dakota Access Pipeline in the face of intense government oppression. In Canada, Several British Columbia First Nations recently won an impressive court victory in their opposition to the Trans Mountain pipeline.

If successful grassroots struggles can be linked with equally hopeful movements for real political change, then there is hope for the future. However, if we continue on with “business as usual” – hoping that change will come from lifestyle choices and the interchangeable representatives of elite political parties, then the future looks grim indeed.

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