Ecocentrism and our possible futures

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A recurring theme in ecocentric discussions is the ever-increasing possibility of ecological collapse. But collapse of what, and for whom? Basically, it means a serious degradation, terminating unevenly in destruction – on a global scale, and in a relatively short time-frame – of the integrity of the Earth's ecosystems and their ability to support life. This is already happening, and the cause is human activity. So the mass extinctions of nonhuman lives that result from collapse are, to put it simply, our fault. Beyond that, humanity may well join them. Ultimately, nature in the round will survive, almost certainly to flourish again, eventually, without us. But in the meantime, it seems that we are going to prove the truth of Gary Snyder's sorrowful observation to Wendell Berry: "The best intentions in the world will not stop the inertia of a heavy civilization that is rolling on its way" (Wriglesworth, 2014: 25).

At this juncture, the possible futures we face can be summarized this way: inevitable serious collapse; preventable serious collapse; inevitable limited collapse; preventable limited collapse; or no collapse.

If we really are heading into serious collapse, the idea that it is preventable (number two) is vanishingly unlikely. The scale of cultural, social and economic change that is needed overwhelms what humanity, even at its most highly motivated and best-organized, is currently and foreseeably capable of accomplishing. Equally unlikely, given the range of indications starting with climate breakdown and crashing biodiversity, is the possibility that there will be no collapse at all (number five). So we can ignore them.

Of the remaining three outcomes, number one consists of inevitable serious ecological collapse, with all its destructive consequences for both the non-human and human world. Number three, unavoidable limited collapse, would differ only in being somewhat less drastic, although still sweeping. But the challenges remain the same; the only difference is that there is more scope for adaptation.

In both cases, then, the vital question becomes: who and what to try to save? Since self-interested human-centredness lies at the heart of the activities bringing about radical collapse, any answer based on more of the same is literally hopeless. Since all life depends on a thriving Earth, the answers must concentrate instead on trying to protect core areas, ecosystems and species, so that the natural world has the best possible chance of recovering, sooner rather than later, some of its richness, and therefore the human world with it.

The focus of too much of the analysis of collapse assumes that what is mainly wrong with our ecological predicament is that it is endangering humanity. This tends to rally people around the distorted mandate of 'saving civilization,' instead of redirecting our energies toward protecting the living planet and *all* its beings from human destruction and plunder. Behind the existential threat of ecological crises, and inseparable from it, is the moral bankruptcy of the anthropocentrism that has caused them. Civilization therefore does not need to be saved, but reinvented as truly ecological.

Shrinking from that challenge, the idea of collapse can even function as a paradoxically comforting fantasy embracing impotency, since (the so-called thought goes) 'It's all going to be destroyed anyway'. This "symbiosis of defeatist thinking and wish fulfilment" (Reed, 2000: viii) is a self-fulfilling prophecy, and one that lets us off the hook of attempting the difficult work of building a movement that will have a chance

to bring about real change in the world – with all the pragmatic, unglamorous compromises and failures that such work necessarily involves. "Organizing", to quote Adolph Reed, Jr, again, "is a painstaking, slow and time-consuming process, and it promises no guarantees of ultimate victory or even shorter-term success. But there are no alternatives other than fraud, pretense or certain failure" (Reed, 2000: ix).

Even more-or-less successful rear-guard action will take cooperation, not only between individuals but especially in and between groups, voluntary but even more so, governmental. How else will the steps that need to be taken – severely controlling corporate behaviour in its widest sense, both production and consumption, for example – ever come about, and be enforced? Nor can collective cultural dynamics be ignored; it will take a creatively cunning mixture of inspiration and mutual coercion to sustain those changes. And even knowing what steps and changes are needed depends on having an ecocentric paradigm which is paramount in all relevant domains.

Nevertheless, it is hard not to hope! Already, this discussion has strayed into 'solutions', leading to the final scenario worth considering: preventable limited collapse (number four). This is the one on which many people are pinning all their hopes. But how realistic is it?

This is not meant as a rhetorical question. Can we expect *intelligence*? I am writing in the times of the Australian bushfires, resulting in not only human hardship but a massacre of animal innocents. These resulted from not only human-caused climate change but also the clueless political leadership of a rich and democratic society. Or *benevolence*? The richest democratic country is led by a President who is energetically dismantling as much environmental protection as possible, and looks set to be re-elected later this year. Or *ethics*? In China, the lives of countless wild animals – caught, imported, caged and tormented, and even bred – are sacrificed purely for human palates, alongside the misery and death of domesticated animals on a massive scale.* Or *daring*? The steps urged by Paris Accords, from which the USA has withdrawn, are strong on rhetoric but look set to fall far short in actuality. So too does the European Union's recent much-vaunted 'green deal'; as the analysis of Varoufakis and Adler (2020) makes clear, what that mostly amounts to is green-washed business-as-usual. In other words, it offers more of what is deeply implicated in bringing about the situation it is supposedly addressing.

Indeed, the truly frightening prospect may be this: that collapse is largely prevented by the sacrifice of all of nature that can't be enslaved. After all, history has taught us that capitalism is an extraordinarily resilient and flexible system, able to survive and adapt to crisis after crisis. The tempting belief that capitalism is destined to collapse of its own accord in the near future is thus, perhaps, a naïve optimism – another example of that "symbiosis of defeatist thinking and wish fulfilment" noted above. Instead, if we do not act, perhaps things will terminate in the kind of dystopia which John Stuart Mill (1871: bk. IV, ch. 6) envisaged:

> with nothing left to the spontaneous activity of nature; with every rood of land brought into cultivation, which is capable of growing food for human beings; every flowery waste or natural pasture ploughed up, all quadrupeds or birds which are not domesticated for man's use exterminated as his rivals for food, every hedgerow or superfluous tree rooted out, and scarcely a place left where a wild shrub or flower could grow without being eradicated as a weed in the name of improved agriculture.

Of course, this brave new world would have to be updated by adding mega-cities, laboratory-produced 'food', government by corporate algorithm and 'artificial intelligence', 24/7 surveillance, mass addictions, pandemics, and so forth. Nonetheless, the Earth would still "lose that great portion of its pleasantness which it owes to things that the unlimited increase of wealth and population would extirpate from it, for the mere purpose of enabling it to support a larger, but not a better or a happier population…"

But more than nature's pleasantness is at stake, important though that is. Given that human societies depend on healthy and functioning ecosystems, the utter collapse of those societies would surely intervene before ecocide was complete. Or so it is to be hoped, if those really are the only two alternatives left.

So any degree of success, whether in preventing (to some extent), mitigating (for some beings) or adapting to collapse, comes back to the *kind* of measures undertaken – who and what are they intended to protect or help, and how? – as much as their scale and extent. Given what is needed, the historical record, right up to the present, is not encouraging, although absolute certainty is not an option. But without intelligent and compassionate ecocentrism at the heart of those measures, we – and all the creatures, plants and places who, unlike us, bear no responsibility for this situation – really are doomed. ■

*At the time of writing, due to the coronavirus, it appears this situation may be changing.

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