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Catastrophe as catalyst

Disaster is inevitable, author says, so let's learn from it

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Thomas Homer-Dixon wants to give us hope, he really does, but the poor guy just can't stop himself from scratching that doomsday itch. Homer-Dixon's first book, *The Ingenuity Gap* (2000), was so laden with observations on the ecological and social stresses that humanity has created, and with dire predictions for our demise, that commentators began referring to him as a modern-Malthus or Cassandra or Chicken Little.

In some respects, the six years since the publication of *The Ingenuity Gap* have proven Homer-Dixon right; the events of Sept. 11, 2001, for example, illustrated the threat posed by geopolitical and cultural clashes, and the devastation of Hurricane Katrina reflected both the consequences of climate change and our lack of readiness. In another respect, the last six years have proven Homer-Dixon wrong – we're still here!

In his new book, *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity, and the Renewal of Civilization*, Homer-Dixon, who is the director of the Trudeau Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Toronto, advances his thinking to the ultimate extreme, arguing that massive catastrophe is inevitable, and questions whether this collapse can bring about regeneration for surviving humanity. But even this vision of the future may be overly optimistic for Homer-Dixon; in reality, the book describes volumes of peril (which he characterizes as "tectonic stresses") and a few meagre pages of renewal (which he terms "catagenesis"). It further speculates that we might have moved beyond the point where catagenesis is even possible after collapse.

In the dominant narrative of *The Upside of Down*, Homer-Dixon describes himself sitting among the ruins of ancient Rome, studying the Colosseum and contemplating the staggering amount of energy required to operate an empire. To sustain growth, he realizes, the Roman Empire had to expand farther and search out more sources of energy, which led to an ever decreasing energy return on investment (EROI). The fall of the Roman Empire, then, was the result of a scarcity of the high quality energy sources. It is no surprise that Homer-Dixon uses ancient Rome as an analogy for the United States, the world's contemporary empire. It is even less surprising that this comparison leads him to conclude that America's economic growth impulse, fuelled by high quality energy (oil), is responsible for many of the stresses in the world today.

Within this narrative framework, Homer-Dixon is able to identify five dominant tectonic stresses – "population imbalances, energy shortages, environmental damage, global warming and widening gaps between rich and poor" – and provide copious evidence to support his claims. It is unlikely that anyone who reads the *New Yorker* or *Harper's* regularly will discover much new information in *The Upside of Down*. Still, Homer-Dixon is a master compiler, and what he lacks in originality or rhetorical finesse he makes up for in exhaustive detail and stubborn persistence.

Several metaphors guide Homer-Dixon through his argument, the most effective of which is the example of the 1906 San Francisco fire, which had a devastating effect on the city but ultimately led to the creation of more resilient institutions like the Federal Reserve System to safeguard against liquidity crises. This example enables Homer-Dixon to suggest that future global disasters may be the wake-up call needed to create more stable institutions and

systems. Other metaphors are considerably more sophomoric, like Homer-Dixon's clumsy use of Robert Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken* (complete with a diagram of a traveller trying to choose between two roads) to explain that: "Once a complex system goes down a particular path, it can't easily jump from one path to another or retrace its steps to try a different path."

In the end, the arguments of *The Upside of Down* lead Homer-Dixon to prophesy a fictional doomsday scenario, which begins with an Al-Qa'ida attack on a Saudi oil field, triggering an oil crisis, a recession, Islamic upheaval, unrest in China, a war in Asia, and a U.S. invasion of the Persian Gulf. It is this scenario, near the end of the book, that exposes the greatest weakness in Homer-Dixon's work; while this fiction is one of an infinite number of possible destinies, that's all it is, and the presence of such a fiction in a book posing as scholarship is specious.

It is far more likely that humanity will be forced to confront the damage we've caused in localized disasters, and that we'll continue to respond to the devastation without a complete global breakdown of our systems. After all, even Sept. 11 didn't cause a Homer-Dixonian collapse, but sparked, if only for a few short days afterward, an unprecedented outpouring of goodwill toward the U.S. from around the world.