

*The Toronto Star*, November 5, 2006

## **We're headed somewhere in a handcart**

**Perhaps it's not too late to change**

**Never before has humankind faced so many crises all at once. Be afraid**

JAMES GRAINGER

It is a disconcerting, even surreal experience to lay in a warm bathtub under the soft electric lights, radiator softly humming, and read that all the domestic security embodied in this scene of technological bliss must inevitably come to end one day — probably sooner than later.

That's exactly what happened as I was reading *The Upside of Down*, political scientist Thomas Homer-Dixon's in-depth survey of everything that can and probably will go wrong in our environmentally and economically fragile world over the next few decades. There wasn't much in the book that I hadn't read in similarly themed books and articles, but Homer-Dixon's sheer thoroughness and level-headed tone somehow shredded the veil of cognitive dissonance separating my bathtub oasis from the encroaching chaos outside my window. The University of Toronto thinker, who won the Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction for his previous book, *The Ingenuity Gap*, is just the man for the job.

There's nothing new in being told that Western civilization is on the verge of total collapse. Just about everyone born in the last 60 years has been raised on a sometimes conflicting diet of doomsday scenarios.

The baby boomers were bombarded with visions of a cinematic Cold War nuclear apocalypse. Those of us born after 1960 have had to make do with the promise of a slow but certain extinction by some combination of air and water pollution, deforestation, global warming, ozone depletion and desertification — with pandemics, terrorist attacks and the perpetual destabilization of the Middle East thrown in just to keep everyone on their toes.

However you look at it, the writing has been on the wall since the end of World War II: the world as we know it, with its unlimited economic and technological expansion, is coming to an end; we just don't know exactly when or how. Plotting these endgames, and working out preventive measures, has become a mini-industry powered by earnest intellectuals whose frowning countenances pop up in documentaries and news segments whenever a new catastrophe threatens.

Yet in spite of this increasingly hysterical public discourse, energy consumption in the West continues to redefine the word "unsustainable," plant and animal species go extinct at record rates, and thousands of acres of rainforest are clear-cut daily. Meanwhile, the glories of unrestrained capitalism promise to put hundreds of millions of new cars on the roads of China and India.

It is this inability to reconcile the incontestable signs of social and economic collapse to our comfortable, technologically regulated lives that Homer-Dixon aims to overcome. His strategy is a good one: break down the root causes and manifestations of this inevitable collapse and show how these seemingly separate causes work in unexpected ways to perpetuate and accelerate their effects.

Homer-Dixon begins by defining the five “tectonic stresses” that threaten to cause a total collapse in the global order: population stress resulting from wildly different population growth rates between rich and poor countries; energy stress (more demand, less supply); environmental stresses on the world’s interconnected ecosystems; climate stress, mostly from global warming; and the economic stress from the ever-widening gap between the rich and poor.

Any of these tectonic stresses, he argues, could cause a temporary or permanent breakdown of society. It’s when the stresses operate in tandem, as they inevitably do, that society experiences what Homer-Dixon calls a “synchronous failure.”

This synchronous failure may be unprecedented in human history. Homer-Dixon writes: “In coming years, our societies won’t face one or two major challenges at once, as usually happened in the past. Instead, they’ll face an alarming variety of problems — likely including oil shortages, climate change, economic instability, and mega-terrorism — all at the same time.”

Homer-Dixon uses the collapse of the Roman Empire as an example of how a number of tectonic stresses, including a series of literal earthquakes, worked to bring down a remarkably efficient and powerful empire that had endured for centuries.

The parallels between the last days of Rome and the situation facing today’s technocratic/economic empire are too juicy to resist, but Homer-Dixon also points out key differences — especially the ways in which the communication technologies of our wired world are more prone to sudden breakdown than the horse- and human-powered systems of the past.

The book introduces general readers to a number of key concepts pursued by Homer-Dixon in his academic studies on the links between population growth, environmental degradation and global security. It is his ability to delineate those links that makes *The Upside of Down* such a sobering and stimulating read.

Thomas-Dixon’s long experience as a lecturer and teacher serve him well. He patiently breaks down complex issues into comprehensible ideas for the lay reader, always pausing to explain key concepts. The approach can seem a little pedantic at first, but the strategy pays off when he begins to tie these seemingly disparate trends into abstract, interrelated patterns.

There is some good news, as the book’s title suggests. Like any good futurist, Homer-Dixon repeatedly reminds the reader that the future is never truly written. There are more creative and human-scale paths open to us, if we can work against our society’s deeply entrenched denial mechanisms and start to work together for positive change.

The world cannot sustain its levels of resource consumption, and the poor had better stop getting poorer pretty damn soon. But just as Rome wasn’t built in a day, it didn’t die overnight either.

*Toronto’s James Grainger is the author of the story collection The Long Slide, winner of the 2005 ReLit Award for short fiction.*