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How to be less stupid

Q&A | Thomas Homer-Dixon on the possible upside of catastrophe

OLIVIA WARD

Thomas (Tad) Homer-Dixon is the giant-killer of overwhelming issues. He has tackled population explosion, ecological crisis, and a perilous “ingenuity gap” that humans face in dealing with an ever more complex and out-of-control world.

*Now the University of Toronto political science professor, who heads the Trudeau Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, has literally taken on the world. His latest book, *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity and the Renewal of Civilization*, recognizes the danger of a political, economic, ecological, and energy-consuming system that is stressed to the point of breakdown but interconnected in a way that makes a disaster for one country a crisis for all.*

A consultant to former U.S. vice-president Al Gore and frequent visitor to Bill Clinton’s White House, Homer-Dixon believes the role of a public intellectual is to supply answers as well as questions. But is anyone out there listening?

Your title has the word “catastrophe.” Is there a danger today’s crisis-weary eyes will simply glaze over?

It’s not a warm and cuddly book. But *The Upside of Down* offers the possibility of, perhaps not optimism, but at least some hope. It’s something we can do something about.

I’m pleased that it is distinct from books like Jared Diamond’s *Collapse* and Martin Rees’s *Our Final Hour*. You’ll notice I talk about “civilization” without making a division between Eastern and Western civilization. We are part of human civilization. I’m anxious to put us all in the same boat, because we share more than what divides us.

Is there a distinction between catastrophe and breakdown?

Definitely. Those who want to caricature the book say it’s just another “catastrophist” argument. But I’m very careful to take the middle ground between everything being okay, which looks increasingly improbable, and absolutely cataclysmic catastrophe, which is fatal. It’s the middle ground between those two poles where the interesting stuff is going to happen.

But is there any time in world history that people have taken preventive action against future threats?

The book is partly a recognition that the answer is no. I say that quick action is needed to reduce the tectonic stresses we face. I have four prescriptions: first, to try and reduce the force of the stresses. Second, to develop a different attitude to a future that will be marked by volatility and surprise. Third is to do what we can, knowing that we can’t prevent a breakdown of some kind in the social, political, technological, ecological systems that are all linked together. We need to move ourselves away from (catastrophe) by working to build resilience as much as possible into our systems.

Ontario, for instance, depends on a stream of tractor-trailers from California and Florida bringing large quantities of our food, while we're paving over the best agricultural land. With energy getting more expensive in the next 20 years, we will want to produce locally using new technologies, such as heat drawn from the earth to warm our greenhouses.

Finally, we can acknowledge the fact that it's unlikely we can prevent serious trouble in the future, but we should be prepared to make the best of it when it happens. So far that's an argument that we don't even want to think about.

Democracy has been the universal prescription for solving the world's problems. Has it failed us?

It's at sea. Institutions aren't coping with the kinds of problems we face.

On the political side, to say we need a little breakdown sounds marginally revolutionary. But there are examples of systems that were inflexible and incapable of responding effectively to the external environment. In Russia, the czarist regime was completely inflexible. With the shock of World War I it broke down in a catastrophic way, and then there was the Russian Revolution. The democratization process that had begun in the early 20th century was shut down by the czar. If we don't allow for constrained shocks within the system, we'll end up getting much bigger ones.

Speaking of shocks, will last week's American mid-term elections, with the Democrats turfing out the Republicans, bring a change for the better?

I don't think it will make much difference. Stresses continue to build under the surface. There's an underlying fiscal crisis in the U.S., a failed foreign policy that has produced a disaster in Iraq and a war that's rapidly being lost in Afghanistan. Our political system diverts attention to short-term concerns and away from larger, long-term pressures that really need to be addressed. That's why I'm advocating creation of almost a parallel democratic process... If our governments and conventional political institutions aren't coping, we can try to reform them. Or we could, maybe, start trying out new ideas.

History is full of examples of short-term thinking gone wrong. Are we simply too stupid as a species to consider the long-term effects?

I hope not — but it's a significant point. Collectively we seem to be stupider than we are as individuals. But it isn't always true, and in lots of circumstances we can be smarter.

As a species we have been about as smart as a protozoa, dumping huge amounts of poop into the environment and poisoning ourselves.

But it's about system architecture: how you create problem-solving activities that encourage us to be smarter rather than stupider as a collectivity. I'm convinced we are capable of that. We just need to decide what kind of institutional structures we need to be in.

For a long time parliamentary democracy worked very well in dealing with our challenges, and it allowed for enormously adapted societies.

Now, if we have an electronic, Internet-based, large-scale democratic process, it's also going to be quite complex and require lots of learning to set it up so the process isn't hijacked by extremists or experts. By deepening and broadening the democratic process we can face the global challenges we have in common. Understanding that we are all in this together is the only way forward for human survival.