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Signs our complex system spinning out of control

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What do the blackout of 2003, 9/11 and the SARS epidemic have in common?

The University of Toronto's high-profile conflict-studies expert, Thomas Homer-Dixon, sees them all as signs of a complex system spinning out of control.

It would be a mistake to view these disasters as unrelated and random occurrences, he argues; they are symptoms of the tremendous pressure we are placing on our planet and on society, and there is worse to come.

The Upside of Down is part critical analysis of the modern world, and part first-person travelogue. Homer-Dixon takes a bird's-eye view of many of today's most pressing problems: pollution, global economic inequality and the rise of megacities.

He weaves together explanations from across the disciplines for how we arrived in our present situation, and why these trends are unsustainable.

The chapter on the cumulative effects of chronic strain is one of the strongest. SARS and the East Coast blackout, he demonstrates, were not explosions, in which a sudden shock threw the system into chaos.

Rather, they were earthquakes, in which stresses built very slowly, each increment almost negligible, until the system was pushed over a threshold.

The blackout was the inevitable result of an ever more complex power network. SARS was initially a small regional problem, but it spread, and threatened to become a worldwide peril. The triggers for disaster -- a sick airline traveller, an error at a power station in Ontario -- were minor. But their effects were major.

Homer-Dixon studies these problems in the context of human history, and finds an analogy in eighth-century Mayan civilization.

For centuries, the Mayans had been a regional superpower, with a prosperous, advanced society. Over the years, overfarming, population growth and constant wars and infighting drained resources. In the end a drought led to the death of 90 per cent of the Mayan Empire, but it was the existing stresses that pushed the death toll so high.

Homer-Dixon writes of sitting in the shadow of the Coliseum in Rome, contemplating Roman history, and concludes that "when viewed across thousands of years, even our most prodigious accomplishments will seem ephemeral."

This is a uniquely 20th-century perspective, and an evaluation that defies two millennia of science, religion, philosophy and politics, all of which drew upon Roman civilization and accomplishments.

Early in the book, Homer-Dixon asserts that new government agencies won't prevent problems. Adding more complexity to an already complex situation makes things worse, not better.

But in his discussion of the environment, he writes that “we’ll need to set up a vast superstructure of scientific, monitoring, financing, and enforcement mechanisms that spans the globe and affects every person and organization’s life.” This will send a chill down the spines of small-government advocates everywhere.

The Upside of Down is an easy read. Homer-Dixon is a seasoned writer (his last book, *The Ingenuity Gap*, won the Governor General’s Award in 2001), and this is reflected in well-worded and elegant prose.

His ideas are interesting, and he draws upon events across time and space to illustrate his points. Ultimately, though, this book won’t change many minds on the major issues of the day.

He is writing largely for those who already agree with him. The second blurb on the dust-jacket is from U.S. Cassandra Paul Ehrlich, a Stanford professor best known for predicting disasters that never transpire. (By 1999, he claimed, the population of the U.S. would be under 25 million due to pesticide use.)

Refreshingly, Homer-Dixon discusses not only the horrors that lurk on the horizon but also the opportunities. Whether to prevent a catastrophe or to recover from one, society will be transformed in the coming decades. The more thought and energy we devote to avoiding mistakes, the better for everyone.

The Upside of Down hints at a new Dark Age in almost every chapter. While not a lighthearted book, it is on balance guardedly optimistic.

Homer-Dixon’s thesis echoes the Benedictines, who helped preserve civilization during the last Dark Age. Their motto, “succisa virescit.” means “pruned, it grows again.”

The flaws of the book don’t detract from its central point: Difficult times lie ahead of us, and we must make profound changes to survive them.

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