

The Georgia Straight, November 23, 2006

There may just be hope for humanity yet

Author Thomas Homer-Dixon sees the silver linings in global crises.

TERRY GLAVIN

Something's going to have to give.

Since 2003, the number of billionaires in the world rose by more than half and their total wealth nearly doubled, while almost three billion people around the world were scraping by on less than \$2 a day and almost half the world's children were severely deprived of basic nutrition, sanitation, shelter, and education.

We're living in the twilight of the oil age. The world's poor are rapidly gathering in squalid, teeming megacities, and what's looming over the global economy is an imminent skyrocketing of fuel costs, along with the costs of all those primary goods and services that rely on fossil fuels for their production and distribution.

Global-scale ecological collapse is already under way, carrying off such basic ecological services and natural resources as breathable air, clean water, arable land, forests, and fisheries. It's already too late to scale back greenhouse-gas emissions in time to completely stop global warming, with forecasts ranging between the disastrous and the catastrophic.

Into all this gloom walks University of Toronto political scientist Thomas Homer-Dixon, director of the Trudeau Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies and author of the 1999 Caldwell prize-winner, *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*, and the 2000 Governor General's Award winner, *The Ingenuity Gap*.

What Homer-Dixon has to say now is that things are every bit as bad as they look but they're nowhere near as hopeless as they seem. Homer-Dixon's new book is *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity and the Renewal of Civilization* (Knopf Canada, \$37), and there isn't any book out there quite like it. You could compare it to Jared Diamond's enormously popular *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, except it's much better.

Homer-Dixon, 52, is fast emerging as an especially eloquent voice among the English-speaking world's most insightful thinkers on the great challenges of our time. Taking his cues from such sources as Joseph Tainter's classic *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and the "panarchy" theory of Canadian scientist Buzz Holling, Homer-Dixon has accomplished something astonishing in *The Upside of Down*.

He sees silver linings up there, and he makes a thoroughly convincing case. But what is perhaps most important about *The Upside of Down* is that it manages to get past the existential anxieties that invariably paralyze clear analysis of the apocalyptic scenarios this book confronts.

First, the bad news.

"Our current values serve the interests of today's political and economic elites, and so are aggressively defended by these elites," Homer-Dixon writes. It will probably take "some kind of major shock" to rattle rich societies out of their preoccupation with continuing economic growth.

The good news is that such a shock would force a thorough reconsideration of what our basic values really are—what kind of a world we really want—and the result might put the planet on an entirely different course.

The grim part is that it's quite likely that there will be some kind of systemic breakdown associated with at least one of five major "tectonic stresses" at work in the world: population growth and dynamics; the looming energy crisis; environmental stresses and natural-resource depletion; climate change; and the widening gap between rich and poor.

The really scary part is the possibility of "synchronous failure", in which shocks arising from these stresses occur severally and at once and are compounded by multiplier effects: the quick and the rising global connectedness of technologies and societies, and the world's vulnerability to disruption by small, committed groups.

All a terrorist group needs in order to build a nuclear bomb capable of flattening a city, for instance, is an amount of highly enriched uranium less than one-10,000th of the available supply. An event like that could end up triggering a chain reaction that drags everything down with it.

But short of a catastrophic breakdown, it's not too late to start planning for what Homer-Dixon calls "catagenesis", the process of breakdown, reorganization, and renewal that reinvigorates all natural systems and applies equally to human societies.

Progress comes from disaster, and *The Upside of Down* illustrates that central point in its opening pages, with an account of the Great Fire of San Francisco in 1906. That was a catastrophe that led to the creation of the U.S. Federal Reserve System.

The Great Fire story is also an example of another thing that makes this a great book. It's well-written, engaging, and lively, from the beginning to the end. Parts of it are even a bit like breezy travel writing, as Homer-Dixon roves across the United States and to such pivot points in the history of civilization as Italy and the Levant to look up close at civilizations that are failing to cope with their tectonic stresses, as in the American case, and failed utterly, as in the cases of Rome and Baalbek.

Homer-Dixon's remedy is pretty simple: scale back, control and contain tectonic stresses, mitigate their worst effects, and build system resilience, right down to the community level, to withstand system-wide shocks; an emphasis on local food security and independent energy production, for instance.

"The extremists, when we reach crises, they're going to be organized," Homer-Dixon told me during a conversation the other day. "They're going to be ready. We should be ready as well."

Getting organized will require a revival of old-fashioned civic engagement, Homer-Dixon told me, but liberal democracies should modernize their governance structures to make them more representative, collaborative, and relevant to the scale of the daunting challenges we're now facing. New technologies are also opening up possibilities for democratic engagement, such as open-source problem-solving, with its built-in corrective mechanisms. Homer-Dixon cited Wikipedia, the on-line encyclopedia of everything, as an example. Some of his colleagues at the Trudeau Centre are already conducting open-source experiments to devise a measure of social well-being that's better than the crude gross domestic product model.

"We should take this architecture out for a spin against some of our deepest problems," he said.

We can't predict the future, Homer-Dixon stresses. But we can prepare for the worst, and hope and plan for the best.