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Five “Tectonic Stresses” Endanger Social Stability

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Scanning the newsstands early this fall, I zeroed in on the headline “Canada’s Craziest Professors” on the cover of the Western Standard, a right-wing magazine from Alberta. Inside, I was surprised to find Thomas Homer-Dixon on a shortlist of crazed “Marxists, terrorist sympathizers and eco-freaks” who are corrupting our youth.

The writers accuse the head of the Trudeau Centre for the Study of Peace and Conflict of sensationalizing the world’s environmental, social and economic problematique in his award-winning book, *The Ingenuity Gap* (which the writers apparently didn’t read). According to the Western Standard, this supposed cluster of problems either doesn’t amount to a hill of beans or can be easily solved by a combination of market forces and cruise missiles.

Homer-Dixon’s new book will really drive them crazy. Like *The Ingenuity Gap*, *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity, and the Renewal of Civilization* (Knopf 2006), is a potent distillation of information from a range of disciplines that is both stimulating and profoundly disturbing. Aside from its carefully-reasoned analysis of the threats to global stability, it is noteworthy for probing the denial of these threats by people like the writers at the Western Standard.

Why do apparently intelligent and educated people reject overwhelming evidence of the combined dangers of climate change, toxic chemicals, deforestation, soil and water depletion, peak oil, disparities of wealth and poverty, et cetera? Homer-Dixon cites a combination of factors:

- Our natural propensity to ignore things that scare us or challenge assumptions that give our lives meaning and a sense of security.
- As a species, we have succeeded in the past by paying attention to immediate concerns and focusing on specific events rather than looking to the future and making connections between seemingly unconnected events. We haven’t yet adapted to the new realities of a highly-complex, interconnected global society.
- The self-interest of powerful elites causes them to cajole, co-opt or coerce people to ignore evidence that might challenge the status quo.
- We have a political-economic system in which perpetual economic growth is essential to its stability. How so? As we apply technology to problems, we reduce labour needs. (For instance, it took two people 14 minutes to assemble a Dell computer in 1999. By 2004, it took one person five minutes.) What do we do with the excess labour? We grow to absorb it. Without 3% growth a year, or thereabouts, unemployment would become a progressively larger problem that would disrupt the social order. To maintain stability, we must accept growth and its unpleasant consequences.

We can’t really accept the idea that our economic system is not sustainable. If we did, we would have to stop economic growth, at least in wealthier societies, and we don’t know how to operate an economy without growth.

However, if we don’t change the way our economy operates, Homer-Dixon notes that at current rates of growth and technological change, the world’s total economic output will rise tenfold, energy consumption will quadruple, and greenhouse gas emissions will triple by 2100.

It is crystal clear that the earth doesn't have the capacity to support that type of growth, and yet almost every one of us believes implicitly that growth is good.

Unfortunately or fortunately, depending how you cut it, Homer-Dixon argues that five "tectonic" stresses will derail that growth. These include:

- Population stresses from high birth rates in poor countries;
- Energy stresses from the scarcity of conventional oil coupled with growing demand;
- Environmental stresses of all kinds;
- Climate stresses, and
- Economic stresses from instabilities in the global economic system and disparities between rich and poor.

These stresses are now being felt and will have an ever-stronger impact on the social, economic and ecological order of the planet, says Homer-Dixon. While rich societies may adapt better than poor ones, in the short term, the consequences of these stresses are likely to be catastrophic unless we recognize them, end our denial and start to change the basic assumptions by which we operate.