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The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity and the Renewal of Civilization

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Finding a positive side to the collapse of society is a difficult task, and *The Upside of Down* is one of very few texts to attempt this — but be prepared for generalized suggestions without a lot of “up.” The take-home message is that we should network to change rigid values, curbing catastrophic collapse and establishing the basis for rebuilding society.

Thomas Homer-Dixon engagingly presents a cogent argument for the likelihood of collapse by relating to personal experiences and using real-world analogies like earthquakes. For the technical reader, substantial references and notes provide access to research and arguments on both sides of the sustainability debate.

He identifies five stresses on sustainability: population trajectories; energy supply; climate change; other environmental damage; and economic instabilities. Importantly, he recognizes that dealing with these stresses simultaneously seriously escalates the problem. Disappointingly, there is little analytic assessment of these interactions, which unfortunately reflects much of sustainability science in general. Centrally, Homer-Dixon deals with energy and the little-recognized but very important issue of diminishing energy profit ratios—less energy obtained for energy invested. The text is a little short on weighing alternative energy possibilities, especially given our fundamental dependence on energy.

There is an excellent and overdue section on the core reasons for our obsession with economic growth—avoiding social upheaval from mass unemployment that would otherwise result from the increased efficiency of our technological ingenuity—and how this conflicts with sustainability challenges.

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