

The HOPEFUL REALIST Newsletter: *Looking at the World Today as if Facts Matter*

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Here we explore the latest facts, actions, and perspectives on the New Great Transformation of the Earth System, as it unfolds before our eyes. We apply the Hopeful Realism we all need to work through the greatest predicament in human history.

Latest News from the Hopeful Realist

Is there a Sociology of the Climate Emergency?

Last weekend I attended and gave a talk to a ‘virtual’ (Zoom) Conference, which had the weighty but relevant title, **Navigating Uncertain Futures: Social Engagement and Transformative Change in Global Socio-Ecological Systems**. Leading members of the Environmental Section of the American Sociological Association (ASA) and the International Sociological Association (ISA)'s Environment & Society Research Committee (RC24) organized and hosted the conference. Scholars from all over the world attended and gave presentation about their research. Coordinating time zones with presentations was not easy, but the organizers did a great job.

Some of the presentations were as boring as academic presentations often are, unless the listener was directly involved in the specialty involved. I was able to attend several of the other presentations while sorting out the last details of the PowerPoint for my own. The speakers presented results from some very high quality research. Along with eliminating the travel costs for an international meeting—which some could not afford—the participants reduced the ‘carbon footprint’ of our involvement in the conference to the energy used to enable our internet interaction. Time, money, and carbon were saved.

If you are not familiar with Zoom or other virtual conferencing platforms, here are some of their handy functions. The host can mute or unmute the audience members as well as the speaker. The speaker can share her/his own computer screen while presenting. Comments and questions can be written in the Q&A space or in the chat room. Most speakers displayed a series of slides related to their talk. The sessions lasted 90 minutes with 15 minutes allotted to each of 4 speakers and the last 30 minutes for discussion. The speakers never have enough time to cover all that they want. For the discussion period, audience members could click the ‘raise your hand’ button and be recognized by the host to ask questions, make comments verbally or to debate a point of contention.

Our session was titled, “Eyes Wide Open: Navigating the Escalation of Catastrophe,” and was chaired by Dr. Raymond Murphy, a long time environmental sociologist at the University of Ottawa, Canada. I liked the title of the session for several reasons. First, so many people look at ‘climate change’ with ‘eyes wide shut,’ as I put it in my presentation. It is not easy to grasp the full implications of an unprecedented global change, or how it may affect individual lives. Second, we are all trying to ‘navigate’ what only

some of us recognize as the escalating catastrophe of climate and ecological destabilization. That isn't easy either.

My presentation was titled, *The Missing Link in Sociological Attempts to Navigate the Uncertainties of the New Great Transformation of the Earth System and of Societies*, a typically long title for an academic paper. Despite a lot of complexity, the point of the talk was quite simple.

First, most public discussion of the climate/ecological emergency neglects to consider how actually to achieve the changes needed in the industrial-consumer economy without forcing the collapse of civilization. Think of all the ways you would have to change the way you live and work if all the institutions you are involved with are no longer energized by fossil fuels. Renewable clean energy cannot simply replace all the excessive use and waste of energy. We must conserve much of the energy fossil fuels have provided, replacing the rest with energy from clean sources. That means reorganizing social institutions themselves, which means transforming our lives in yet not fully understood ways.

Second, sociology seems the obvious scientific discipline to study this predicament and find potential solutions to this rather huge problem of societal transformation. Environmental/ecological sociology has been a relatively unappreciated specialty within sociology since the late 1970s. Collective human survival will increasingly depend on finding new ways to organize societies to harmonize with their habitats while restoring and regenerating the ecosystems upon which we depend.

Survivors of existential threats recognize the need to act differently and shift their paradigms (basic assumptions about the lived-in-world) to reflect the new conditions of an emergency; victims do not. A new paradigm of ecological sociology could be a big help in navigating the uncertainties and extreme changes we have begun to experience in the early stages of the Anthropocene. The missing link in sociology is the absence of a model of how societies can mobilize globally to transform themselves when so-called leaders engage in diversion, dissociation, and denial of the fact that extreme circumstances call for extreme responses. Is there an ecological sociology up to that task? Or, as the saying goes, "More research is needed."

I discuss this in different ways in my eBook ***HOPEFUL REALISM: A Climate Manifesto***. We are having a 'free book' contest on Good Reads, where some readers have already begun to write reviews. Or, you could read, [review and rate](#) it on Amazon by clicking the button on the lower left of the book's Amazon page below "Customer Reviews," and say a few words about what you think about the issues it. If you don't do Kindle, email me and I will send you a .pdf version directly.

Note: You can find past issues of The HOPEFUL REALIST Newsletter archived on my web site:

<https://thehopefulrealist.com/hopeful-realist-newsletter/>

LOOK UP! A Bi-weekly Featured Commentary

I could make up a pretty long list of current and emerging crises in our world today. You probably could too. Most of us would not, because it is bad enough just facing any one emergency at a time. Given the fact that I have devoted most of the last two decades to studying and writing about this stuff, you might consider me a masochist. But I am not. I do not enjoy pain and I do not like to see others suffer either. On the other hand, we should recognize that pain is *information* about our existential prospects.

I used to think a stoic was someone who just accepted misery and suffered through it assuming that nothing was to be done. That is how many people have used the word in common conversation. But if you read the original stoic philosophers, or even some contemporary ones, you will find that their world view was actually much more sophisticated and subtle than that. Stoicism is actually a kind of realism.

The stoic tries to identify which parts of reality are not subject to our will and our ability to act on them, and which parts human action can influence. That is part of why I call myself a 'hopeful realist.' If I can observe the world and recognize what I can do to change bad things or support good things, then I have hope. The pessimist only sees the bad and assumes that we can do nothing about it; the optimist only sees good things and assumes that it will all work out fine in the end. Neither are realistic; stoics on the other hand are realistic, so they carefully pick their targets for action.

Over the years I have studied climate destabilization, ecological breakdown, complex system science, social networks, and the political economy of endless growth. I have come to a point where I see social control as a critical element in the trajectory of development and eventual limitations and weaknesses of industrial civilization. In the evolution of almost any system, especially living ones, growth is initially exponential, then slows, then enters a period of stasis where growth has stopped but the system continues in its present state. Of course, no system lives on forever, so eventually various components begin to break down and the system finally collapses into death. Collapse at the end tends to be exponentially faster than growth was at the front end.

Meanwhile, the key to the operation, growth, stability, and success of any complex adaptive system is the processes by which it controls its relations not only with its environment, but also how it controls the relations of its own many interconnected parts—subsystems. If you take a look at the current trajectory of modern industrial civilization, you will see many components destabilizing, which means the internal controls are weakening, even as its relations with the outside also become more strained.

Deny it if you will, but a range of destabilized elements within modern civilization and in its environment are not only intensifying, but most of the worst of them are of our own doing. If we look at modern society as a complex adaptive system, we should see that it is currently adapted to conditions that no longer exist, and denying that the world has radically changed in the meantime. The world around us has begun a major transformation and we have caused much of the change we currently fail to deal with. Effective social control means that the system responds to changes both in its environment and within itself to counter trends toward instability.

Despite all the international 'agreements,' 'pledges,' protestations, and false promises, the elites of this world continue down a path of destruction by trying to squeeze out of the global social system and the planet that last bit of profit before it all collapses in upon them. We must call that dysfunctional, counter-productive, even pathological, because the system's control mechanisms have unduly centralized and serve only the short term interests of the elites who control our political, economic, and social institutions.

At this late date, it seems that only by massive societal mobilization to force elites to either act in the interests of societal survival or get out of the way, can progress be made. Then, the rest of us can shift into accepting a new survival paradigm and get on with restructuring our institutions and our lives to build a new society that can at least survive and maybe even flourish as we move further into the Anthropocene.

For more discussions of various related matters, go to:

<https://thehopefulrealist.com/the-hopeful-realist-blog/>

Today's Featured Image:

Homelessness: Something is Missing.



The 'Invisible Hand' of the 'Free Market' at Work in Los Angeles Today

When I was in high school in the late 1960s, we heard rumors about the 'winos' who lived on the streets near the center of Los Angeles. By the time I completed grad school and returned to Southern California, there were homeless encampments all over the L.A. Metropolitan Area. Since then, the income and wealth disparities between the wealthiest and poorest Americans has grown increasingly extreme. The middle class is disappearing as companies find it more profitable to ship jobs overseas or to invest in automated machinery to replace workers.

This is not the work of some mystical magical 'invisible hand' of the 'free market' producing the best outcome for all by the self-interested acts of individuals. Or, as John Maynard Keynes put it, "Capitalism is the extraordinary belief that the nastiest of men for the nastiest of motives will somehow work for the benefit of all."

We really do need to get beyond the economic myth of neoliberalism and begin to build an economy based on serving human needs rather than accumulating capital to serve the billionaire narcissists riding their phallic rockets up to the edge of space.

Books and other Sources on the New Great Transformation

While researching how societies succeed and fail, I became interested in the processes that occur when a person is confronted with a life or death situation. After all, that is what we are all faced with together as the climate/ecological emergency intensifies. I found Laurence Gonzales' book, *Deep Survival* very enlightening:

Gonzales, Laurence. 2017. ***Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why***. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Gonzales reviews many "true stories of miraculous endurance and sudden death" in a wide variety of emergency situations, from sinking ships to the collapsing Twin Towers of 9/11, from expert mountaineers lost in the wilderness to a raging fire at a wedding venue, or a special forces operator drowning in a swift river despite his training. In vastly different life-threatening situations, Gonzales found certain consistencies in the mentality and behavior of those who survived versus in the behavior and mental state of those who became victims.

The essence of the difference between those who survived and those who did not was in the ability, or lack thereof, to recognize that the individual was in a 'non-ordinary' reality in which the old rules of ordinary reality no longer applied. This change in perspective is called a paradigm shift, which Thomas Kuhn explained in 1970. A scientific paradigm shift is a (much slower) process by which one theory displaces an older one in science when sufficient anomalies appear in the old theory with evidence from more and more research. When a new theory simply fit the data better, scientists who believed in the old theory for years, finally and begrudgingly shifted their thinking from the old paradigm to the new.

So it is with people confronted with a new unexpected life-threatening situation, but at a much faster pace. The evidence of the irrelevance of our paradigm of ordinary reality is immediate, as is the danger. Those who recognize that fact tend to survive much more frequently than those who do not.

It seems reasonable to draw a parallel between such situations of individual survival and our current global situation of an impending existential threat of societal collapse due to the accelerating destabilization of the climate and ecosystems on planet Earth, upon which we all rely for our health and survival. So far, most humans who have become aware of the evidence still hold on to the old paradigm of ordinary reality in industrial-consumer civilization. Even as more and more evidence builds to an undeniable conclusion, many still hold to the comfortable assumptions of the old paradigm of unending economic growth and all the consumer comforts that implies.

As more people experience direct impacts of increasing environmental chaos—floods, hurricanes, droughts, sea rise threatening multi-million dollar homes, etc., etc.—the paradigm shift is beginning to happen for greater numbers. Who will survive and who will retain the victim's mentality?

Quotable Quote

"When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?"

~ John Maynard Keynes

Keynes was one of the most impactful economists ever. He made some of the most astute observations on how economies work. His insights opened doors to new ways of managing economies when most mainstreamers had so much faith in markets to guide us to progress by their 'invisible hand.' In this quote, he captures the essence of what it takes to be a survivor. It is the survivor who takes immediate decisive and powerful action that is out of the ordinary because the situation reaches beyond the ordinary reality where we don't have to change our minds.

Without decisive and powerful action, we will become our own victims. Extreme danger requires extreme action. Only a *New Great Transformation* of society will make us survivors.

See you in two weeks. Meanwhile, stay safe and read [HOPEFUL REALISM: A Climate Manifesto](#).