

Are Humans Living A Fantasy?

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For 99% of human history, humans lived in bands and tribes in a mostly sustainable relationship to their surrounding ecology. Time was viewed as cyclical, predictably repeating season after season, year after year, century after century, etc. The nature of life repeated through the generations as a constant, with a few challenges in terms of climate and interactions mainly with other small human groups. This was the norm – individual life and society sustainable, repetitive, stable, in balance internally and externally. It had taken millennia for this condition to be achieved.

This was the 220,000 year Phase One Fantasy: Why was it a Fantasy? Because it depended upon a long period of relatively stable geological and climatic conditions on the planet, conditions that did not apply much of the time in previous eras. Yes, there were glacial cycles, local storm events, and some significant regional geological [volcanic and earthquake] events. But overall, and allowing for this range of local and regional variability, relative stability was the norm. Under these conditions, humans flourished and populated the planet. But from the perspective of the long term planetary norm, this development depended upon a fantasy of planetary stability.

Then came the more recent 10,000 year Phase Two Fantasy of Complex Society – Civilizations. Stable climatic and geological conditions from Phase One continued, and with the advent of agriculture, first came the city states, then federations of states, then nations, then empires. And with this complexity emerged the stratified society with power, wealth and control vested in the few elites while the masses existed as commoners – this social situation justified by institutionalized religion. Under privileged conditions and an interest in expansion/retention of their territories, the elites pursued knowledge of the objective world and improved technology to assure security and control of resources. Trading networks over vast areas emerged to provide access to resources and craft based products. This initial development within the Phase Two Fantasy was a slowly advancing process allowing for the time needed by society to adjust to new technology and changing life style conditions. Still, most such civilizations only lasted on average about 350 years before declining or recycling due to a variety of factors that led to instability. In short, such complex societies never achieved the kind and degree of stability that characterized the societies in the much longer Phase One Fantasy Period.

The very short, modern 350 Year Period of “Developed” or “Advanced” Complex Society is an extension to the present of this Phase Two Fantasy Period. It constitutes the full blown Modern Phase Three Fantasy – based on all the fantasy assumptions of both the Phase One and Phase Two Fantasy Periods. This is the period of democratization of society, the emergence of a market oriented economy [leading to capitalism], the full blown development and application of the scientific process, and the vast expansion of knowledge and technology. Together these developments have led to significant “progress” in the standard of living for citizens within these more egalitarian “developed” societies. But this Phase Three Fantasy is based on the discovery, exploitation and utilization of fossil fuels to provide the energy to power the industrial machinery of the agricultural, manufacturing and construction processes. In turn these processes support the allied social, political and economic/financial services to keep the ever expanding markets “humming.”

So, Fantasy upon Fantasy upon Fantasy Brings Humans to the Present Day. We are devoted to this multi-layered fantasy which rests on the burning of fossil fuels and the secondary fantasy that an ever expanding market economy is sustainable. Fossil fuels are both limited and polluting, and an ever expanding economy and escalating standard of living is fast running up against limited natural resources of all kinds. And our devotion to materialism/consumerism has led to ignoring our negative impacts on basic resources and the natural ecology upon which we ultimately depend. In addition, for all its wonders, science has given us both the technology to destroy the species and a pace of change that to date we have not been able to regulate adequately to protect our survival as a complex society species.

Particularly in the last thirty years with the doubling of CO₂ in our atmosphere, climate change, with all of its interwoven potential negative impacts, has arisen and looms to first expose and then destroy the lattice of fantasies upon which modern human society rests. Given the current circumstances and the capacity for denial and delay that characterize our species – if little is done to halt the climate change process, we may well be fortunate if our human species survives to continue under Phase One Fantasy conditions.

Modern complex society with its competitive economy and science and technology have brought us to this current threshold: On the one hand, humans have the potential to solve their problems, escape the Earth and populate the solar system and the galaxy – bypassing the multi-layered fantasy condition of their earthly existence. Or humans can continue on their present course and await eventual extinction as a species either rapidly under the current system

projectory or slowly after reverting to the Fantasy One condition of dispersed bands and tribes. Which? Creative adjustment and escape or extinction?

As a species, humans have the unique ability to anticipate and plan for the long term future relying on their rational capability as expressed through the scientific process. But the challenges humans now face are global in scale, and modern complex egalitarian society is still reaching for stability at the level of nations. The cooperation and integration necessary at the international/global scale to rapidly address our current climate “crisis” is in its infancy [United Nations, “voluntary” Paris Climate Accords]. Realistically, humans confront the many conditions that support the “do-nothing” status quo:

- 1) Insufficient social/political regulation to manage the many challenges posed by the rapid pace of change [not enough time to achieve balance and secure societal stability],
- 2) Unrealistic belief that technological innovation will fix IT,
- 3) Uncontrolled human population growth combined with expectations by huge “under” developed areas for an escalating standard of living [fostering an ever greater demand for energy and natural resources],
- 4) Technological innovation tied to consumerism and supported by a commitment to an unsustainable, ever-expanding market economy,
- 5) Denial of the climate change challenge by many of the moneyed, vested elites [corporations and billionaires buying political influence],
- 6) Fear of “excessive” government, socialism, and the “One World Order” by conservatives [allied to their focal emphasis on individualistic rather than communal values],
- 7) Major religions that “favor” an “End of the World” scenario,
- 8) Poor Critical Thinking Skills in the general public,
- 9) Uncontrolled Media/Internet Blogs/Social Media that isolate groups, encourage fear/paralysis, and promote rumor/disinformation/fake news going viral,
- 10) Ignoring negative ecological impacts, especially collective impacts.

So, given the obstacles, the very serious question arises: Is there the time or the will for humans at the global scale to move in the direction of operating more as a unified organism so as to be able to efficiently address their collective challenges? Without this movement, it seems very likely that humans are doomed to go the way of all former complex species of life on earth – awaiting extinction while at one level or another “Living the Fantasy.”

For a work that identifies the multiple individual and collective consequences of insufficiently controlled climate change, see the just published work:

David Wallace-Wells, Uninhabitable Earth, N.Y., 2019.

[Includes 65 pages of documentary Notes!!]