

Modern Complex Society in the Civilized State: Is It Sustainable?

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Humanity needs to sustain the long view and avoid hubris and complacency if it is to survive into the very distant future in the condition of democratically structured complex society – upon which modern civilization depends. There are many factors that work against this happening – some very old and constant and others of very modern origin, of our own making, and probably resolvable. Unfortunately, the result of assessing the collective and compounding import of these factors is not very encouraging. The key question that emerges is: how enlightened is our struggle for survival? What follows is a consideration of some of the variables that inform humanity's prospects for the future.

1) At a foundational level, humanity must face the fact that all species go extinct at some point. And as a very complex species, humans are much more vulnerable to extinction than are simpler species. Homo sapiens almost went extinct about 250,000 years ago with only a small group of a few thousand individuals surviving in East Central Africa. However successful the species has been since then in populating the planet and dominating all other species on Earth, all of humanity exists as a single species and will go extinct eventually. When this will occur is the issue, and whether humanity itself will promote bringing this extinction about.

Many species go through the process of boom and bust as they evolve and cycle toward extinction. To the present time, humans have mostly boomed; but they can also bust due to many different potential causes and return to the hunter-gatherer stage of bands and tribes with complex society and civilization retained as only a distant memory in their mythologies. Humans need to realize that relative to other species and as one among the array of complex species, homo sapiens is very new and very little tested on the long evolutionary block.

2) Humans have thrived and developed into very large groups of millions of individuals living in complex societies during a very stable period cosmically, geologically and climatically. These conditions are not typical, and a return of significantly active and/or fluctuating conditions of this kind could easily render complex society and the civilized state of humanity – if not the species as a whole – impossible to sustain. Humanity needs to avoid taking these privileged conditions of relative stability for granted.

3) Humans in the state of complex society – upon which civilization depends – is very new in the history of humanity. For 96% of human history, humans lived in dispersed bands and tribes as hunter-gatherers. Most of humanity has lived

in the complex society state for only the last 3,000 years – no time at all from an evolutionary perspective. Humanity needs to respect the fact that complex societies of humans are just in the initial phase of being tested for their viability.

4) Humans are genetically tuned to be both competitive and cooperative, but the competitive mode is the default, biological survival mode. Culture with its ethical and moral dictates lends support to biology to insist on social cooperation among individuals. Culture must be extraordinarily strong in this regard if it is to be successful in requiring cooperation among the millions of individual citizens that are brought together in our current large, complex societies [nations]. Unfortunately, at the global level culture is weak in this regard, leaving states and nations oriented more toward competing than cooperating with one another. Put simply, humanity must realize that international cooperation is far too weak to effectively address the many global scale challenges to humanity's survival that have arisen and that continue to escalate.

5) Humans are physiologically tuned to cooperate in relatively small groups with limits of about 150 individuals where personal relations are the norm. Personal social relations – in contrast to impersonal social relations – are characterized by individuals who know one another “in the round,” meaning that they know one another in many different roles and over long periods of time mostly as relatives and intimate “friends.” Under these conditions, individuals learn to trust and depend on one another for their very survival; and if such trust does not pertain, individuals can be banished from the band or tribe – often a death sentence. As human relations become more and more impersonal in the very large groupings of complex society, the basis for trust and dependency wane, cooperation abates and competition rises. In this context, other humans are first regarded as “colleagues”, then as mere “acquaintances,” then as vague “fellow citizens,” then as “strangers,” and finally as potential “enemies.”

The competitive orientation is “naturally” the default mode for humans outside of relatively small groups of close associates. Complex societies of thousands and millions of individuals bring strangers together as “fellow citizens,” and culture must be strong enough to insist on respect and cooperation among these individuals who, in fact, do not know one another personally at all! This is a heavy load, and culture struggles to carry and sustain it. In its present iteration, the cultures of complex societies wax and wane in their ability to sustain cooperative internal relations among their own “citizens” gathered together in cities, states and nations. And, where cultures differ among nations, cooperation is that much more difficult to achieve. Indeed, the concept of the “global citizen” is not even in the vocabulary of most humans in modern complex societies. Humanity needs to recognize that at the present time only a

nascent world culture exists, far too weak to insist on a high degree of cooperation among nations.

6) Humans have the ability to think and plan for the long term at expansive scales, but for old, biological survival reasons, their default mode is presentistic and local. The result is that humans tend to wait until their problems emerge emphatically in the present before they make the effort to deal with them. The difficulty with this way of operating is that some problems [eg. climate change] have to be anticipated with planning and implementation in advance if catastrophic consequences in the eventual present are to be avoided. As humanity's challenges become global in scale and accumulate and compound one another, it becomes clear that complex society can only be sustained for the long term if humans plan for the long term considering as many relevant variables as possible. So, true leadership in complex society needs to be both well informed at the larger planning scales and as broadly anticipatory as possible. Unfortunately leadership in current complex societies at the state, national, and international levels is very uneven on this issue, often pursuing only what is politically or economically expedient in the moment. Such leadership is led by a very narrow cooperative perspective – not serving the needs of sustaining complex society at most any scale in the long term.

The default human presentistic perspective also tends to correlate with the inability to sustain historical awareness. And as the lessons of the past fade in the citizenry, complacency rises and the mistakes and horrors of the past are invited to repeat themselves. So, culture must struggle to keep both the past and future perspectives alive and accurately engaged if complex society and civilization are to be perpetuated. Currently, such engagement is far too rare.

7) When humans in complex societies feel themselves to be under significant threat or stress, competitive, survival instincts dominate, and cooperation diminishes outside of a very limited core group. In these circumstances, emotions take the lead, and logic and reason fade in their influence. This is an especially important factor in the modern era as both the number and scale of state, national and global challenges facing humanity escalate [nuclear war; terrorism; mass shootings; pandemics; uncontrolled populations growth; inequality; economic outsourcing; job insecurity due to the expanding scope of robotics and artificial intelligence; information overload due to its instant and universal availability, its global scope, and the media focus on negative events everywhere; uncertainty about the potential impacts of climate change; cyber and information malfeasance in the age of the internet and social media, etc.].

Under these collective circumstances, humans are feeling ever less secure and more anxious. As critical thinking abilities fade in the general citizenry due to these stressors, the conditions arise supporting populism in the

political arena. Sustaining enlightened forms of government becomes still more difficult. We see the appearance of this situation most recently in the isolationist response of nations to the relatively mild global migration pressure in Europe and the United States due to political, economic and environmental stressors. This kind of reaction does not suggest that global cooperation will be readily forthcoming when the much more significant pressures arrive in the future from humanity's many unresolved global challenges.

Upholding and making progress in complex society depends on a clear thinking, cooperative citizenry; and a stressed out citizenry is not capable of maintaining this condition. Unfortunately, this situation of significant underlying stress has existed for the last 50 years – especially in the frustrated middle class in most developed countries. And this frustration has been magnified by the emergence of the ever increasing condition of economic inequality as the financial industry has greatly expanded its independent tendrils and as economic benefits have flowed to the top 5% of the citizenry.

8) The current lifestyle in developed complex countries is not sustainable if it were to be extended to humanity globally, given the demand that would be placed on natural resources. And yet humanity on the planet continues to increase its population, and the citizens of developed countries continue to expect their material well-being to rise with each generation. Humanity must get realistic about both its numbers and its expectations if it is to survive long term. And if our goal is to achieve global cooperation and peace among all nations, standards of living must be more equitable.

9) Religion and its promise of salvation, reincarnation, and/or a life of bliss after physical death has traditionally offered humans a way to cope when life is arduous or does not measure up to expectations. But in modern times, religion has become less influential as more and more individuals gravitate toward worldviews defined by secular humanism and materialism/consumerism. In this context, religion tends to be left to the fundamentalists who represent religious belief at the literal extremes where belief itself becomes the basis for competitive – even terrorist and genocide – behavior. In the divide among humans in modern complex societies between those with weak or no religious belief and those with absolute beliefs that they are willing to die to promote, religion first offers no placating effect in the face of disappointment or death, and second provides the foundation for the most extreme forms of competitive behavior – murder and warfare. Neither of these results is productive for supporting cooperation and perpetuating complex society.

10) Cultural, ethnic and racial diversity among human societies unfortunately pose a challenge to cooperation at all social scales. While many modern

complex societies try to celebrate diversity at the ideal level, realistically humans are tuned at a very fundamental level to distinguish among “others” on a great many bases: language, behavior, and especially any aspect of appearance [eg. race, dress, adornments, etc.]. In this regard, infants distinguish among faces in the first few months of life, smiling at known visages and crying at strange ones. Reflecting this human sensitivity to recognizable distinctions, even modern societies in the 20th and 21st centuries have built major parts of their worldviews around these differences – and acted in extreme ways as a consequence: witness all the instances of genocide, ethnic cleansing, and the mass shootings of Jews, Blacks, and Hispanics by white supremacists. While modern genetics in the biological sciences and the ascension of cultural relativism as the prevailing view in the social sciences have exposed the fallacies in these biased worldviews, clearly these points of view are alive and well within and among modern complex societies. It is just a fact: adult humans in all societies carry the instinctual tendency of the infant to make a great deal of what are minimal and mostly superficial “racial” distinctions among humans. Cultural differences are real and more extensive, but they do not justify assertions of superiority based on theories of cultural evolution. Culture in complex societies has to fight mightily to restrain the tendency in humans to make far too much of the differences they observe. When modern cultures fail in this, they limit the options for cooperation and do not support long term complex society survival.

11) Modern developed societies are mostly characterized by a representative democratic political structure [egalitarian and cooperative in orientation] and a regulated capitalistic economy [self-serving and competitive in orientation]. When this dynamic relationship of major social structures is kept in balance, the overall system works quite well. But when one or the other of these institutions dominates the other, the system falters. At the extremes, communism undermines individual and corporate initiative, innovation and creativity while free enterprise capitalism corrals the benefits of economic activity for the few leaving the many to live in squalid conditions.

Presently, except for the more socialist nations, the trend with respect to this dynamic has been toward economic/capitalist domination of the political/democratic realm – especially since the 1970s and the fluorescence of the global economy. The resulting influence in politics of money from mega corporations, the financial industry, and the wealthy has become pervasive. And beyond politics, the judicial system has also been significantly “bought.” The self-interested, status quo oriented corporations and the wealthy work mightily to defeat political and judicial decisions that have the potential to curtail their pursuit of their competitive, short term, self-interested monetary goals. Efforts to move complex societies toward global cooperation and integration are not

supported under these conditions, but these are the conditions that currently prevail in many developed nations.

12) As the boom period for humanity has progressed, the pace of change has increased exponentially – especially in the time since the industrial revolution. Scientific knowledge of the material sphere of reality has exploded, and technology – as the practical application of this scientific knowledge – has vastly expanded the capability of humans to interact with and benefit from the exploitation of material and biological reality. But benefit is not the only potential consequence of the effect of evolving technology. Technological innovation can also lead to highly destructive consequences [nuclear, chemical and biological warfare; pollution; species extinction; negative long term health consequences; various forms of information/communication malfeasance; uncontrolled genetic engineering and artificial intelligence; job insecurity; financial manipulation and recession; and economic inequality]. Society is left to deal with these negative consequences – many of which are not anticipated. And as the changes largely due to technological “advancement” have become faster and broader in their ecological and social impacts, society has found it very difficult to make the appropriate adjustments in anything like the needed time frame.

Adequate provision and security are the primary requirements of any society, and the modern pace of change results in complex societies lagging ever further behind in fulfilling these functions. Ironically, uncontrolled technological “progress” can lead to social collapse, and there are signs in the modern era of complex society that this eventuality may be emerging. Humanity needs to be aware of the potential negative social and ecological consequences of an unrestrained pace of change driven by a competitive, mega corporate, capitalist, global economy.

Complex society may well have reached the point when the modern devotion to an ever expanding economy must shift to support a truly sustainable/stable global economy that “lives within its means.” The current hyper pace of change in combination with the pursuit of an ever expanding economy are additional elements challenging the sustainability of complex societies.

13) Humans in modern complex society – especially “developed” complex societies with “high” consumptive standards – have exploited the natural resources of Earth and polluted the environment to such an extent that the viability of the planet’s ecological system upon which humans depend is under threat. In spite of the deniers, the threat is very real that this debilitating process will not be stopped before humans bring upon themselves the global climatic conditions that bring about very negative social and economic consequences for

humanity as a whole. The final results of this process can contribute significantly to undermining the survival of humans in the complex civilized state.

The developed nations of the world have been the almost exclusive beneficiaries of their excessive and irresponsible exploitation of Earth's resources. As a result, they must be held "liable" for nearly all of the detrimental consequences. These countries must lead and financially support all of the changes necessary to clean up the mess they have created which threatens complex society itself.

14) Humanity needs to recognize that representative democracy [egalitarian and cooperative based decision making as the mode of "government"] is very new in complex societies – only about 300 years old. For the previous 10,000 years, various forms of authoritarian political structures were the norm in complex societies: warlords, generals, pharaohs, kings/queens, divine emperors, dictators, etc. Democracy in complex society is still in the test phase, and the various forms of authoritarian rule are always waiting in the wings to reclaim the control of government in complex society. And recent history itself demonstrates that this "reclamation" in fact often occurs, especially in young democracies.

Democracy depends on a commitment to cooperation among the egalitarian citizenry, and without a democratic polity taking the lead in the major nations of the world, the global integration and cooperation that is needed is unlikely to occur, putting the democratic form of complex society at risk. Unfortunately, presently, we see much evidence for the return of authoritarian rule within the democratic, developed countries of the world – for reasons identified elsewhere in this essay.

15) Nations are no longer able to independently address and resolve many of the challenges that they now face because these challenges have become global in scale. But, no effective and empowered global government exists to serve the critical functions of planning, implementing and enforcing the actions needed to deal with these looming global level challenges. Unfortunately, the United Nations is currently structured primarily to serve the self-interested goals of the 5 permanent member states, and they rarely can agree on meaningful actions at the global scale without one or the other of them invoking their veto privilege in the Security Council. In addition, these same permanent members protect the ineffective status quo and their special privileges by suppressing recommended and much needed UN reforms. National sovereignty and the competitive pursuit of hegemony among nations block progress being made toward global level integration under a federalist umbrella that is essential if complex society is to survive very far into the future.

It has been necessary to overcome the fear of the loss of individual freedom and “sovereignty” [reflecting the competition perspective and individualistic values] as humans have transitioned through every increasing stage of human governmental integration from bands to tribes to chiefdomships to city states to nation states to full-blown mega nations. Committing to a fully empowered global government of federated nations is the last stage in this process, and the conditions necessitating this move by humanity are emphatically present. The survival of complex society under a representative democratic polity is at stake.

Conclusion

Clearly there are many obstacles to humanity being able to sustain itself in the complex societal condition, which is essential for civilization. For the most part, humanity does have the ability to address and significantly resolve most of these impediments. What is lacking is the empowered global government to accomplish this overall task. Interestingly, the United Nations identifies all of these issues and has assigned the goals of their resolution throughout the many divisions of the organization. But, unfortunately, the UN is not structured and authorized to pursue these goals in anything like an effective manner. And, currently, the 195 separate nations of the world are just not prepared to cooperate to the global extent required to deal substantially with these issues, obstacles and challenges.

Historically humanity has proven that in spite of its many fundamental limitations it can integrate and cooperate at increasing social scales. In this regard, it is extraordinary that humans have managed to develop and maintain complex societies at the mega national level. Taking the next step to fully empowered global governmental integration is critically necessary at this time, but it requires anticipation, not just reaction to horrific events as has been the case in the past [eg. League of Nations after World War I and United Nations after World War II].

Humans can collectively take this next step, but the forces working against this occurring are many and well entrenched – as this essay has identified. So, what can be done given this difficult situation, which can seem overwhelming and easily promote pessimistic resignation? First, at the more specific level, individuals and groups of all sizes can work to a) address any of the individual impediments to global cooperation or b) propose and implement solutions for global concerns at the municipal to state to national level and so contribute to resolving any of the many global challenges that humanity currently confronts. Second, at the more general level, enlightened humans and their groups can join and support a global grass roots movement of the citizens of the world to

insist that national governments cooperate and commit to developing an empowered global scale government able to address these challenges.

To be successful, most likely this movement must originate in and be led by the developed and major developing nations of the world. These mostly democratic, capitalistic complex societies have caused most of the grave global problems that humanity now faces, and they are the ones with the power to create a global government that is capable of dealing with these challenges in a timely manner. So, the movement starts here, and while individuals and groups in all complex societies may elect to focus on more specific issues, they can join and lend at least their names to support this broader global movement. The survival of complex society and the civilized state of humanity may well depend on humanity taking these actions, and doing it **PROMPTLY!**

Fortunately, many organizations exist that are making substantial efforts to address humanity's individual global challenges. These organizations at local to international levels can be found with a simple search on the internet under the name of the issue [eg. climate change, human population, cyber security, etc.]. And at the more general level, major organizations **DO** exist with the goal of achieving global cooperation and governmental integration as their mission. These organizations need the support of the global citizenry, and, if they are to be successful, they must engage in much more consequential outreach efforts. I identify some of these organizations and discuss their goals and outreach programs in the following four essays – available under the topic “Global Challenges - Global Government” on my website: www.dynamic-humanism.com

“Humanity at the Crossroads”

“The Global Challenge for Humanity – Stated Simply”

“Global Federalist 501c4 and Press Corps – Critical Outreach Needs”

“Major Organizations with a Global Federalist Agenda”

JOIN THE MOVEMENT!!

[Or, propose a viable alternative solution and get involved!]

[Or, do nothing, get blown back to bands and tribes, and await extinction with civilization in your great grand children's mythological rear view mirror!]