

Yes, But: Assessing the Global Condition of Modern Complex Society 2022

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Introduction

In evaluating modern complex society, optimists focus on the achievements – the positives – predicting a wondrous future for humankind, while pessimists dwell on the deficiencies – the negatives – forecasting an imminent collapse. I contend in this essay that in assessing the current state of complex society there are both strengths and weaknesses that can be identified for each of fourteen significant variables. After a review of the pluses and minuses on each variable, I offer an admittedly subjective estimate of its current state [good, average, or poor] for both the United States and the world at large. I also indicate whether the projected trend for that variable is in the direction of improvement, stability, or decline. Trends can collect to be very consequential.

Government [Democracy vs. Authoritarianism, Nationalism vs. Globalism]

For 97% of human history, humans lived in bands and tribes where roles are differentiated but where general equality among adults is the norm. In complex society, democracy – political equality – is recent and remains in its infancy. Various forms of autocracy have been the norm in complex society for most of its 10,000 year history. Only in the last 250 years has equality been reclaimed from autocracy in democratic government and spread in complex societies.

Unfortunately, authoritarianism always lies just beneath the democratic surface seeking opportunities to make a comeback. And in recent years a clear trend has emerged favoring authoritarianism – this within representative democracies themselves. It seems that once political equality becomes the norm over several generations, the citizenry is inclined to forget the long struggle to achieve democracy, becomes complacent, and fails to accept responsibility for remaining informed about policy issues, to support cooperation and compromise, and to exercise its enfranchisement in knowledgeable voting. When for whatever reason, frustration in a significant portion of the public is added into this context of complacency, populism and political extremism can arise to threaten the democratic fabric and make autocracy appear acceptable.

At the global level, as serious challenges have arisen that can undermine the viability of complex societies, achieving a fully empowered global government becomes more and more crucial. But unfortunately nationalism continues to dominate, and support for global government remains weak.

In the United States the estimate for the condition of government has dropped from good to average over the last thirty- years – and especially in the last five years. At a worldwide scale the current rating is poor. The projected trend on this variable is from stable to declining.

Fuel – Power – Energy

Human bands and tribes and city states typically rely on wood/charcoal/peat for energy to provide warmth, cooking, metal-smithing and security. Complex society requires a much greater level of energy to support industrialization and electrification, and sources of such energy have been discovered in the fossil fuels – coal, oil, and natural gas. Nuclear fission and fusion have entered the scene late and offer both major challenges and possibilities. Wind and solar have always existed, but have become focal in the recent green energy setting. Water and geothermal tend to be location restricted. Petroleum sources are wide spread and voluminous but they are major contributors to environmental and ecological problems. Nuclear energy is yet to be developed free from long term contamination and adequate control, but fusion could potentially be a major contributor in the face of an ever increasing human demand for energy. The challenge for solar is high power demand, storage, and the need for much more efficient solar cells.

At a world wide scale, complex society is only sustainable with non-polluting sources of power that can supply energy in sustained, highly concentrated levels. Fusion is the only current potential form of energy that has the potential to meet these requirements, but it is in its infancy and extremely challenging to control and to even think about offering at commercial levels.

The current worldwide energy supply is adequate, but it remains tied to the seriously polluting fossil fuels. The current energy rating for the United States is above average. The energy rating worldwide for complex societies is average. The overall variable trend is decline, short of major and rapid corrective efforts.

Population

Humans are probably the most successful complex species ever in populating the terrestrial portion of the planet. And in this process, they have adapted and become distributed virtually everywhere in all environmental conditions. But since industrialization, this success has exploded with potentially catastrophic consequences. By many estimates, basic planetary resources can sustainably support perhaps 50% of the current population level – not considering the further increase that is projected.

Unfortunately, the worldwide commitment to an ever expanding economy and increase in standard of living depends on ever greater demand, and these economic goals encourage hiding from the population problem. If humans want to avoid the boom and bust “pandemic” cycles of beavers and the potentially horrific challenges associated with migration due to anticipated sea level rise, they must get serious about significantly reducing the human population.

The current rating for the condition of population in the U.S. is average. Worldwide this rating is poor. The trend is continued decline.

Economy

In complex society, economic systems exist on a continuum from 1) autocratic/elite focus and control with minimal shared benefits for the citizenry, 2) free enterprise, 3) regulated capitalism, 4) socialism, and 5) communism. Most modern systems range from free enterprise to socialism. Regulated capitalism [#3] and moderate socialism [#4] have resulted in substantial increases in the standard of living for the masses and avoided the opposing challenges of extreme economic inequality and lack of reward for effort. At the same time, these systems can be manipulated by what has become the relatively independent global financial industry. This financial system along with the political dominance of the World Trade Organization constantly promote the expansion of the global economy and press regulated capitalism [#3] in the direction of free enterprise [#2] and economic benefit for the wealthy few individuals and international corporations [#1]. National political systems struggle to retain the needed level of regulation in the face of multiple opportunities allowed for money to find ways to “buy” political influence.

While this economic – political contest remains focal, all of these systems fail to recognize that the current standard of living and level of resource use of the developed countries can not be extended to humans worldwide without resource system collapse. And, the current global distribution of economic benefits is extremely unequal. Accordingly, none of these economic systems incorporates the principle of equality together with resource and ecological sustainability. This failure puts all modern systems at risk.

The current rating for the state of the economy in the United States is average, while the global rating is poor. The overall trend is decline.

Industrialization and Electrification – The Cascading Complex

With the discovery of the fossil fuel source of energy, industrialization has exploded in complex societies over the last 200 years. This development together with electrification has resulted in major changes throughout society. Many of these changes are positive, especially for citizens in developed countries: 1) access to all kinds of materials to support the creation and maintenance of nearly anything, 2) the opportunity to create and offer varied products and services to many different clienteles, 3) access to transportation systems that improve mobility and opportunities to travel and experience life beyond one’s location of residence, 4) a major improvement in standard of living for most citizens, 5) access to many products that make life more varied, more secure, easier, and more efficient, 6) much greater personal freedom in general, 7) a greater number of job/career choices, 8) greater opportunity to improve one’s position and standing in life, 9) opportunities to benefit financially by investing in enterprises from the local to the global level, 10) many choices for a

supply of different foods, 11) access to reliable water and sanitary facilities, and 12) ready access to medical facilities.

But the phenomena associated with industrialization – specialization, urbanization, technological innovation, commercialization, suburbanization, expanded individual freedom, and a readily available extensive transportation system – also introduce a cascade of negative consequences. High mobility of adults through their lifetimes leads to the devaluation of extended family and community. And the emphasis on individual freedom reaches the point where 1) women are liberated by the control of reproduction to become fully independent, 2) the core family relationship of marriage becomes subject to high divorce rates, 3) the stability of childhood for children weakens as more and more youngsters are raised by single parents across multiple households, 4) the concept of Home devolves into “where I am living Now,” 5) older adults are marginalized, separated from family, and left to deteriorate and die on their own in nursing homes and the like, and 6) the small community – grounded in the sense of local place – struggles to survive

Overall, this social “chain reaction” which is associated with the industrial “cascade” serves to elevate the importance of individual freedom while de-emphasizing social and communal relations and values. Every society – complex or otherwise – must balance individual and social values, but modern complex society is out of balance in the excessive emphasis it places on individual freedom.

Apart from this “cascade” problem, industrialization’s dependency on the goal of a constantly expanding economy links it to the weaknesses of an insufficiently regulated capitalistic economy – especially the disregard for resource, ecological, and climatic sustainability. Accordingly, while industrialization has many benefits, the accompanying side effects unfortunately lead to imperiled social, community, and ecological conditions.

The overall rating for the conditions promoted by the industrialization complex in the U.S. is average. The global rating on this variable is poor. Without significant adjustments, the trend for this variable is decline.

Agriculture and Food

The “green” revolution within agriculture starting in the 1950s has vastly expanded the production of food to feed an ever increasing human population – now expected to reach nine billion by 2200. As impressive as this food production accomplishment is, it comes with an array of major negative consequences: 1) chemical sterilization of soils, 2) deforestation, 3) fresh and salt water pollution from fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides, 4) significant contributions to green house gases – especially from concentrated forms of husbandry and the associated long distance transportation, 5) risks to the long term food supply and surrounding environment of genetically modified vegetable

and animal species, 6) processed food diet limiting micro-nutrients and the proper components of gut function, 7) reduction of species habitat in all ecological zones leading to a dangerous rate of species extinction, and 8) the depopulation of rural areas and the loss of viability for small communities.

The prospects of urban, industrial, multi-story, hydrologic based farming of vegetables is impressive, as is the potential production of “synthetic” meats, but depending on innovative technology to overcome existing agricultural and food challenges has proven to be a high risk venture in the past.

The overall rating for the current condition of agricultural production and food in the United States is average. Globally it is poor. The trend is decline.

Justice and the Rule of Law

One of the great strengths of democratic complex society is its customary inclusion of an independent legal system that is designed to provide fair justice under the universal application of the rule of laws that are defined by the citizenry as a whole. Most democratic complex societies are committed to maintaining the integrity of this independent system of justice. Unfortunately, politics can bias the system if the basis for the appointment of judges is ideological and not representative. In addition, biased treatment in the application of the law can also apply to minority citizenries based on racial or ethnic differences. Where moneyed interests are allowed to influence the selection and election of judges, bias can also enter the system.

The American judicial system unfortunately suffers from all of these sources of bias. And non-democratic and autocratic societies, which are the majority at the global scale, have potentially much less fair judicial systems. The rating for the U.S. judicial system is average, for the western system of democratic societies as a whole good, and overall for the judicial system at the global level poor. The trend for this widely ranging variable is relatively stable.

Science and Technology

Relying on analysis, objectivity, repeatability, and the scientific method, the physical, natural, and social sciences have made astonishing progress over the last 100 years. Constant increases in technological capability have supported this achievement as well as the development of a great many new products and processes. Physics alone has penetrated much of the nature of the macro and micro realms of material reality. Overall, impressive indeed! In this applause worthy context, three important reservations apply: 1) public awareness of the significant progress that has been made in understanding the nature of physical and social reality is very weak even in the supposedly “well educated,” developed countries, 2) integration of this knowledge to define appropriate policies and activities in all institutions of society is greatly lacking, and 3) the science of the immaterial energy realm of reality lags far behind.

The worldviews of many countries remain in a 12th century state when it comes to the scientifically revealed nature of reality. At the same time, the citizens of these countries are utilizing all of the functions of their smart phones. This level of disconnect is extreme and can ultimately be dangerous. At the global scale, the social and political institutions of most complex societies have not adequately addressed the plethora of challenges that have been created by the rapid changes in multiple, major technologies.

The rating in the U.S. for the overall condition and impact of science and technology is good. At the global level the rating is average. The trend for this variable is stability – with improvement possible with major outreach efforts.

Communication and Information

Spectacular progress has been made especially since WWII in speed, scope, coverage, and access to information as a result of the development of the computer, internet, email, zoom, and GPS and satellite based systems. In open complex societies, electronic access to digitally stored information of all kinds on virtually any subject at any level of expertise is both vast and immediate. In a single generation, this is an extraordinary achievement! The opportunity for almost infinite information discovery is available from the computer, tablet or phone of every “connected” individual. So, what are the difficulties? 1) Many countries selectively restrict electronic information access for their citizens, 2) electronic media is inadequately controlled for the reliability of the information it purveys to the public, resulting in a serious disinformation and propaganda problem, 3) governments and corporations are not sufficiently limited in their access to and use of the personal information of internet users, 4) virtual internet based social “groups” are more readily subject to dangerous manipulation and radicalization, 5) the development of AI and robotics to general intelligence capabilities is fraught with policy, implementation, and ethical problems, 6) relative social isolation and face-to-face interaction incompetence can result from internet “addiction” to virtual reality – now common in gamers and many young smart phone absorbed individuals.

Modern communication systems have extraordinary potential, but once again most complex societies lag behind in implementing sufficient social and governmental controls.

The overall rating for communication and information systems in the U.S. is average to good. In global complex society the rating ranges from good to poor. The trend for this variable is stable with the threat of decline.

Environment and Ecology

Humans – in complex societies and mostly in the last 3,000 years – have come to dominate all terrestrial species over the whole of the Earth. This is an extraordinary achievement! And humans are now pursuing the goal of populating

other planets and moons of the solar system – a truly spectacular possibility. But, in a previous Era the reptiles achieved a similar position of species dominance on Earth only to be driven back into minor status by a major extinction event. In this regard, very few humans are aware of the degree to which the relatively recent development of complex society and their species' dominance has depended upon an unusually stable period of ecological conditions – both geologically and climatically. In spite of the vulnerability represented by what can normally be a much more volatile ecological state, humans in complex society – mostly over the last 300 years, have put all of the systems of planet Earth's ecology under stress. These collective changes threaten to alter the basic conditions of Earth's ecology and put the very survival of complex society – in any form – at risk.

If this situation is not immediately addressed and rectified, just the climatic changes that humans are causing can totally undermine the viability of complex society and return humans to the state of bands and tribes. The vulnerability of humans in complex society is severe, but unfortunately the recognition of this situation is minimal with denial in one form or another being common.

In the entry for Agriculture and Food, I have cited the array of negative environmental consequences caused by the global scale degradation of soils and the pollution of air and water. Clearly, these observations apply as well in this primary entry.

Humans are unfortunately living a fantasy that complex society can be sustained without addressing and resolving global scale, human caused ecological stress to the planet.

The overall rating for current ecological conditions both globally and in the United States is average to poor, and at risk of relatively rapid decline.

Health and Longevity

Modern medicine has made impressive strides in diagnosing and treating physical disease and disability. And much of this progress has been shared with most of the world. The result is that many diseases that killed infants and children have been eliminated by effective vaccination. And adults live longer and in better condition as the debilitating diseases and loss of function in aging have been eased as a result of effective drugs and surgical interventions. These accomplishments are impressive, but there are several weaknesses: 1) symptoms are treated as much as causes, 2) mental health is much less well understood and treated, 3) health care in general is not well integrated across specialties, 4) access to health care is uneven across the citizenry as a result of inadequate and expensive coverage by private insurance and failure to support universal health care, 5) failure to address exorbitant drug prices, 6) cognitive decline – especially in older adults – is more common, little understood, not well treated, 7) antibiotics are over used resulting in super bacteria and fungi, 8)

human health worldwide is threatened by the failure of nations to cooperate and avoid epidemics and pandemics, 9) failure to investigate the human energy field for its potential value in offering a complementary path to better diagnoses and non-invasive treatments, 10) weak response to the desire of older adults, who face progressive long-term physical and cognitive decline, to have access to the option for death with dignity.

The rating for the condition of human health in the U.S. is above average, and at the global level is below average. The trend is stable, but at risk.

Security and the Military

Advanced complex societies have accumulated arsenals of super weapons that collectively are capable of creating a planet wide extinction event. The “side effects” of even the limited use of these weapons can bring complex society to its knees. This situation is one of the major reasons why an empowered global level of government needs to be developed and implemented. A federal form of such a government can respect differences among countries while being capable of preventing conflicts from escalating into full blown warfare. What is stopping this development from happening? 1) nationalism and its close cousin xenophobia continue to prevail, 2) influential countries like the U.S. seek hegemony by attempting to police the world, 3) the competitive world economy and the interests of major corporations are invested in the status quo, 3) the weak, inept United Nations is used as an excuse for inaction, and 4) the vested military industrial complex can use its economic influence at all political levels to support the status quo. If the \$778 billion in 2022 budgeted for U.S. defense were reallocated, consider the many benefits that could result for all Americans.

Even with established treaties and diplomatic efforts to negotiate conflicts, international security is in a precarious condition, and the major countries of the world are mostly ignoring the severe risks that accompany this situation.

The security rating for the U.S. is average while global security and effective international conflict resolution is poor. The trend for this variable is stable, but it is subject to rapid decline with no empowered global government.

Entertainment and Art

In the smaller societies of most of human history, art and entertainment are mostly “housed” within spiritually infused ritual. In modern complex society, art gets separated from ritual and an independent, secular recreation and entertainment industry arises. The communication technologies of print, film, broadcast, and digital electronic media vastly expand the reach and influence of this separated, secular oriented form of entertainment. So, in the context of this greatly expanded and altered role for entertainment, separation invites manipulation and the exploitation of entertainment to purvey propaganda. And the focus on economic gain in what becomes the secular entertainment industry

pushes for more and more sensational products. The results: entertainment for ideological gain and the prevalence of violence and sex all the way to cage fighting and outright pornography. And in this context of extremism, art gets so committed to innovation and radical expression that it loses contact with its source in the spiritual perspective on reality.

Entertainment has exploded in commercially, technologically and secularly oriented modern complex society. Unfortunately, it is highly questionable whether the overall consequences of this development contribute to maintaining the integrity of these societies.

The rating for current state of art and entertainment is average globally and in the United States. The trend is stable with no signs of improvement.

Religion and Spirituality

Spirituality is the perspective that holds that the self and all of reality is so fundamentally connected that everything shares in a singular unified identity. Spirituality lies at the core of all religions, but in religion it is so encrusted with absolute belief in surrounding dogma and ritual that it is often almost lost. And very significantly, the different religions compete with one another over whose absolute beliefs are “true” to the point where these religions can become the primary basis for conflict and warfare among human groups.

The major religions of modern humanity were mostly codified by the 12th century, and they reflect the worldview of that time – that humans and Earth are the center of both the universe and the attention of God or the gods. These religions retain this perspective and remain a source of significant conflict in spite of the discovery through science that humans and Earth are totally insignificant in the vastness of physical reality where no gods are to be found.

Unlike the institution of religion in any form, the shared, expanded identity of the spiritual perspective supports cooperation and respect among all humans and all other “members” of reality. Humanity can reclaim a productive spiritual perspective on reality and avoid the negative complications of religion. But in the modern context, the retention of the commitment of most of humanity to religion operates at multiple levels to defeat the need for greater unity and respect among all human groups. And, the development of the extreme split in modern times between secular humanism and religious fundamentalism misses the spiritual center and exacerbates the underlying problem.

Unfortunately, the current rating is poor both globally and in the U.S. for the condition of religion and spirituality in complex society. The trend for this variable is stable, but regrettably at a very low rating.

Conclusion

Complex society is in its very early childhood, and representative democratic complex societies are in their infancy. Humanity needs to appreciate the

tenuous and vulnerable position it is in and stop assuming its “apparently” successful present condition is sustainable. In the above sections, I have offered an overview of the state of humanity in modern complex society in the United States and at the global level. This collective evaluation recognizes significant achievements along with important deficiencies in most variable categories. There is much to applaud and much to criticize – many strengths and many weaknesses. Collecting together the admittedly subjective ratings from the fourteen variable categories, the United States has a ranking of average for current conditions while the overall global ranking is mostly poor.

As disappointing as these ratings are in this evaluation of individual variables, it is the following facts that are striking to me: 1) the ratings of current conditions are pervasively average to poor, 2) many of these rankings are associated with an overall downward trend, 3) it is often the excessive and unattended “side effects” of the positives that are the source of the negatives, 4) because these variables are all interrelated and operate as a system, the declining trends have the potential to coalesce and magnify the projected rate of decline assigned for individual variables, 5) the absence of a sense of global urgency to address and resolve the network of declining and threatened conditions is extremely disappointing.

Historically, the complex societies of the western “world” are largely responsible for both the positive and negative current variable conditions within themselves and globally. Yet most of them remain constrained by the forces supporting the problematic status quo. If humanity wants to be able to take full advantage of the potential represented by the ongoing positives offered in modern complex society, it is the western complex societies that must stop ignoring the negative “side effects” of their achievements, take seriously the task of eliminating them, lead in the planning and implementation of the required changes to reach the goal of true sustainability, and provide the economic and technological support to accomplish the task. Having garnered most of the benefits of modern complex society, it is time for western societies to stop hiding and get busy with comprehensive payback.

Post Script

When it comes to assessing the condition of modern complex society both in the U.S. and globally, I am certainly no optimist. The question is whether I am a pessimist or a realist! In behalf of a long and productive future for human complex society, I actually hope that I am a cranky, old pessimist. It is my fear that I am more a concerned, elder realist.

Those interested can visit my website [www.dynamic-humanism.com] for essays that deal more extensively with most of the variables considered in this overview essay.