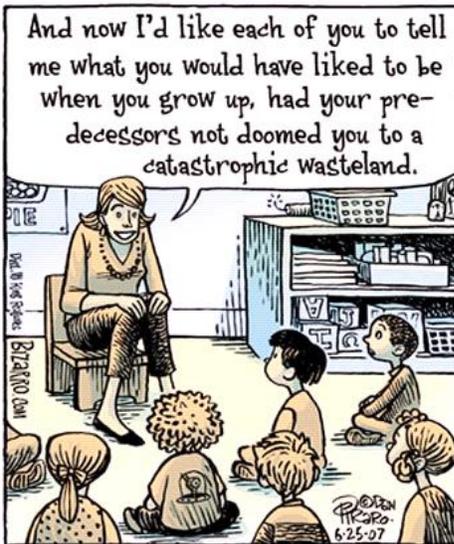


“It’s Later Than You Think”

Alton C. Thompson

We are living in a unique—and uniquely perilous—time in human history, a time when the demise of our species is a very real possibility—that demise being a result of our own actions. Brilliant intellectual [Noam Chomsky](#) noted recently, [quoting](#) Strategic Air Command Gen. Lee Butler, “humanity has so far survived the nuclear age ‘by some combination of skill, luck and divine intervention, and I suspect the latter in greatest proportion.’” From the fact that we have escaped—so far at least!—thermo-nuclear annihilation, it does not, however, follow that we will



be able to escape the consequences of our interference with Earth System (which consists of a *collection* of systems, actually), our extinction as a species being a possible consequence. (Numerous [extinctions are occurring](#) at present, and the “present rate of extinction may be up to 140,000 species per year”—our interference with Earth System being the primary cause of those extinctions.) (source of “cartoon” to the left: <http://guymcpherson.com/2014/04/to-go-extinct-or-not-go-extinct-that-is-the-question/>)

A question that occurred to me recently was: If the world were inhabited now solely by [gatherer-hunters](#) (I say that rather than “hunter-gatherers” in deference to [Richard E. Leakey](#))—as it *once* was—but the *current* situation existed, would those peoples have a better chance of surviving than we do? The answer to that question came quickly (for I knew the answer before I even asked the question!): Of *course* they would, for two reasons in particular:

1. They “lived off the land” in the sense of the immediate surround (unlike us!), and ate a [great variety of foods](#) (what was available in their area, which might vary during the course of a year)—and their foods were not adulterated with various additives!
2. In not having a sedentary life, as the food supply in the area of their current occupancy became scarce, they could—and would—move to a different location, being able to do so because of their having a [concept of “property rights”](#) that differed significantly from ours.

After answering this question that I had posed (hypothetically!) to myself, I realized that it was a dumb question to ask, however, given that the current situation exists *because* most of us today—with the exception of those “primitives” that we have not yet killed!—are *not* gatherer-hunters, it being our *modern way of life* that is *directly* responsible for our current perilous situation. Had we humans *remained* gatherer-hunters, it is virtually certain that we would not be facing our current perilous situation.

That fact suggests the question: Why did we allow our current way of life to develop? Actually, that is a poor way of phrasing the question, because it tacitly assumes that we *did* choose the current modern way of life—which is a highly questionable assumption. The question would be *better* phrased simply as: Why did our current way of life develop?

Before addressing that question I should, however, make note of the fact that although I used the word “crisis” above, in talking with friends/relatives/acquaintances, listening to politicians, reading the newspaper, listening to those who report the weather (!), watching television, listening to sermons delivered by members of the clergy, etc., one gains little, if any, sense that we are facing a crisis situation. The fact that we *are*, in fact, facing a crisis, combined with the fact that so few *recognize* this fact, means that the crisis that we now face is even *more* serious than it would *need* to be—and *should* be!

The *fact* that few seem to recognize the crisis that we face at present is, of course, a problem. And—significantly—what *that* fact means for those of us who *do* recognize our current crisis situation is *not* that we should make a concerted effort to “awaken” those who are asleep: Trying to so do would be a waste of precious time. What we must do, rather, is to (a) *establish* a course of action for *ourselves*, and to then (b) *act* on that plan of action.

What that course of action might be will be given attention in due course in this essay, but first I must address the question that I posed earlier: Why did our current way of life develop?

The best sort of answer to this question would have “truth value” while also being *useful*. The importance of the latter feature—particularly, perhaps, in the answer that I provide here—is that it suggests that it will be *extremely difficult* for us humans to solve the problem facing us. Indeed, it leads to the unhappy conclusion that **the problem cannot be solved in a fully satisfactory way** (a point that I will argue later). It might seem curious to regard such an answer as “useful,” but I believe that a necessary starting point in addressing our current situation is for those of us who *are* aware of the problem to understand the serious obstacle that this fact of “serious difficulty” presents to us—for this should help us be as *realistic* as possible in *addressing* the problem.

My answer to the question of why our current way of life developed is that the *nature of our thinking* has been flawed for some time in various ways, among them:

1. It has tended to be [reductionistic](#); that is, rather than thinking in terms of *wholes*, we have tended to break things into their constituent parts (as with academic disciplines, in a sense!), under the tacit belief that by gaining an understanding of the *parts* we will gain an understanding of the *whole*.
2. Related to this, we have tended to think in *non-systemic* terms. Although we recognize cause-effect, functional, etc., relationships, we have tended not to go beyond this and recognize [systems](#) and the *interrelationships* existing within them. True, it is fairly common to recognize the *human body* as a system (a fact that, however, is contradicted by the presence of heart, kidney, etc. specialists!), but we tend not to recognize the existence of *other* human systems (e.g., [societal systems](#)), nor to recognize the fact that humans are a part of *larger* systems.
3. Related to this latter point, we have tended to perceive the non-human part of our world as the “environment”—suggesting that we tend to think of it as existing *apart* from us. Such a perception is involved, e.g., with our concept of “conservation”—which suggests not only that the non-human world is “outside” us, but exists *for* us. That is, we have tended to perceive the non-human part of our world from a *utilitarian* standpoint (although *some* of us perceive it as beautiful, mysterious, sacred, etc.).
4. Insofar as we recognize change, we tend to assume that it tends to be gradual, smooth (a tendency which may have its roots specifically in the geological ideas of [Sir Charles Lyell](#), who “popularised [James Hutton](#)’s concepts of [uniformitarianism](#)”)—and is *necessarily* of a “progressive” nature.
5. We tend to have a fixation on the present and near future; and because of our assumption regarding change, we tend to assume that the future will be much like the present—different in *details*, but *fundamentally* the same, except for some minor “improvements”—which will, eventually, however, become *major* “improvements.”
6. Some, in their education, are exposed to *hypothetical* arguments (e.g., geographers in being exposed to the ideas of [Johan Heinrich von Thünen](#)), and in the process come to believe that they are learning *empirically-based* truths—“truths” that then guide their recommendations (e.g., to political leaders) and behavior (often leading to disastrous results!).
7. Related to this, some learn that “[market](#)” is not a mere abstraction with *hypothetical* existence, but is something empirically *real*. Beyond this, they learn that this “market” is (a) a *natural* phenomenon, that (b) its “workings” produce “desirable” results, the (c) *best possible* results (shades of [Pangloss](#)!), in fact, so that (d) although humans, in having the

capability to choose *can* affect the workings of the “market,” any human efforts to affect the workings of the “market” constitute *interference*—thereby resulting in outcomes that will hurt, in some way, at least some of the individuals/firms involved. (The reference to “interference” here might suggest that those dominated by this mode of thinking tend to think in *systems* terms—but nothing could be further from the truth!)

8. The goals that some think of as of primary importance are very *narrow* in scope—e.g., “efficiency,” rather than goals that pertain more directly to human well-being.
9. Some have a fixation on *uniformity*, and therefore devalue variety—and work to eradicate it. Given that sexual reproduction functions to produce variety, thereby increasing a given species’s chances of survival, one must conclude that it is *variety*, rather than *uniformity*, which is “natural.”
10. Many are so attached to their existing way of life that they regard a drastic *change* in way of life as unthinkable. The exception to this “rule” is that a drastic change in way of life (but in this case, what I prefer to term “lifestyle”) that would involve (a) more material goods and services, (b) more variety in them, and (c) better quality, would be readily embraced by most.

Let us refer to the above features of modern thinking as constituting the Modern Mode (MD) of thinking.

A question that arises about MD thinking is: Are the various tendencies listed above (a) totally *unrelated*, (b) partially related, or is it possible that they (c) all stem from the same source? My answer here is one that has been affected strongly by Morris Berman’s [*Why America Failed: The Roots of Imperial Decline*](#) (2011), in which he argues for the central role that “economic liberalism”—with its orientation to so-called “free markets”—has played in our society, a mode of thinking that Berman traces back to the sixteenth century. With Berman, I would argue that such thinking has played a dominant role in our society—a far greater role in our society than, e.g., Christianity (which has tended merely to *adapt* itself to the society, rather than being a force for societal system change—except at [rare times](#)).

Why economic liberalism itself has grown to dominance—and given us MD thinking—is a question worth pursuing, I suppose, but doing so here would carry me too far afield from my principal objectives here. The central points that I wish to make in this essay are that:

1. Our modern way of life is, *ultimately*, the product of the MD thinking that has come to dominate our society.
2. Our MD thinking is a serious obstacle to arriving at a *solution*—insofar as one is even *possible!*—to the crisis that faces us today.

Brilliant intellectual of the previous century [Thorstein Veblen](#), in his [The Theory of Business Enterprise](#) (1904), stated (p. 318) that “Arguments which proceed on material cause and effect cannot be met with arguments from conventional precedent or dialectically sufficient reason, and conversely.” Today, we might say—relative to point 2 above—that arguments that proceed on the basis of MD thinking cannot be met with arguments that proceed on the basis of a more ecologically-oriented mode of thinking, “and conversely.”

The significance of this point is that those who think in MD terms—which describes virtually *all* of our “leaders”!—can only with difficulty—if at all!—be persuaded (a) *that* we are currently faced with a literal “life or death” situation which (b) *has* no satisfactory solution, but (c) *may* have a *partial* solution, but (d) one too *unconventional* for them to consider. Because of these facts, those who today *are* aware of our present plight need to “think outside the box” in responding to the ominous threat that we face—e.g., the sort of thinking that I offer later in this essay.

What needs to be pointed out in particular about our current situation is that—as stated (p. 194) by Diane Dumanoski in her excellent [The End of the Long Summer: Why We Must Remake Our Civilization to Survive on a Volatile Earth](#) (2010)—the “long summer” in her title alluding to Brian Fagan’s [The Long Summer: How Climate Changed Civilization](#) (2003):

- There is “growing *instability* in planetary systems,” because we humans have been interfering in the “metabolism” (as Dumanoski puts it) of Earth System.
- There is “increasing *vulnerability* in human systems.” Individual human systems have merged into a Human System that is comparable to Earth System in its interactions and flows. Interruptions can—and do—occur in this mammoth System, however, because of shortages resulting from droughts, excess rain, flooding, and other “natural” phenomena (caused by *our* “interference,” however!), political factors, etc. And, various factors may affect the flows themselves. As a consequence of these factors, along with the low-stockage rates that have become common with many firms, modern societies have become fragile, vulnerable, so that the interruptions that occur in the future—are likely to become more prevalent and severe in the future, in fact—are likely to result in societal collapse here and elsewhere at some future point in time (as a *direct* result of violence (including suicides), starvation, disease, etc.), with a tremendous loss of human life.

(emphasis added to the above quotations)

By no means are these two trends a good combination!! For what it suggests is that **even if the bulk of our population were *not* “possessed” as indicated in the above discussion by MD thinking, we would *still* be in deep trouble.** For referring here to just *one* of the important [biochemical cycles](#) associated with Earth System, the [carbon cycle](#), it can be said that:

1. Our burning of fossil fuels (along with [deforestation](#)) has resulted in an increase of the global mean [by about 0.85° C.](#) since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (which many date to about 1850 CE).
2. The “[climate commitment](#)” value is believed to be between 1° C. and 1.5° C. (1.6° C. say [some scientists](#)). That is, if humans throughout the world were to cease pouring [greenhouse gases](#) into the atmosphere *tomorrow* (which won’t happen, of course!), warming would continue to a point somewhere within the range just specified.
3. Perhaps even more important than warming *per se* is the likelihood that (a) the *number* of storms will increase, (b) there will be more “monster” storms—i.e., the *severity* of storms will increase, and (c) weather will become more and more variable/erratic, and therefore more unpredictable.
4. The factor that lies *behind* the points mentioned in point 3 is the fact that global warming is a phenomenon that tends to “feed upon itself” in that:
 - As warming proceeds, more and more snow and ice melt, exposing more and more bare ground. As bare ground has a lower [albedo](#) than do snow and ice (which tend to *reflect*, rather than *absorb*, the short-wave energy coming from the sun), it tends to *absorb* the sun’s rays, and convert that energy into long-wave energy, which acts to further heat the lower atmosphere.
 - As warming proceeds, the permafrost that covers vast areas in the northern hemisphere tends to thaw, in the process releasing [methane gas](#), which is far more potent as a greenhouse gas than is carbon dioxide (CO₂). Heating is thereby *accelerated*.
 - Carbon “sinks” such as the oceans are becoming saturated, so that for that reason alone more of the greenhouse gases emitted into the atmosphere will *stay* there for a long period, and “do their thing” (i.e., contribute to *further* heating).
 - [Forests serve as a carbon “sinks,”](#) but because increased variability in weather conditions is a feature of global warming, and severe *droughts* will become increasingly common, *forest fires* will also become increasingly common—and become an [increasingly important source of atmospheric carbon](#), thereby “contributing” further to the acceleration process.
5. A general consensus exists with climate scientists that the global [mean must not be allowed to increase](#) more than about 2° C., with some such scientists (such as [James](#)

[Hansen](#)) believing that even 2° C. is too high a number. In fact, Bill McKibben has given us this quote: “‘Any number much above one degree involves a gamble,’ writes [Kerry Emanuel](#) of MIT, a leading authority on hurricanes, ‘and the odds become less and less favorable as the temperature goes up.’”

Given the above five facts/projections, in conjunction with the fact that DM thinking *is* dominant in our society, I believe the following to be reasonable conclusions (given the unlikelihood that a switchover to non-polluting sources of energy will occur soon, and that geo-engineering—for a discussion of this see, e.g., Chapter 6 in the Dumanoski book quoted above—measures are unlikely to be introduced, but *if* introduced are likely to create additional problems, and so have been [labeled “insane”](#) by Al Gore):

1. Atmospheric change will begin to accelerate within a few decades—certainly before 2050 CE. Assuming, that is, that acceleration has not already begun! We really do not know whether or not it has.
2. The effects of this accelerating change are likely to be manifold—including a severe culling of the human population—[perhaps 90%](#) (!), per climate scientist [Kevin Anderson](#).

On the basis of these conclusions it seems to me that one will have the best chance of surviving if one does not look to our “leaders”—political, corporate, etc.—for “salvation” but, rather, does one of the following:

1. Become a [homesteader](#).
2. With other individuals/families form a “[homestead colony](#)” (a term originated by [Ralph Borsodi](#)).
3. Move to an existing “[intentional](#)” [community](#), or form one with other individuals and/or families. Note that this would involve an “[exodus](#)” of sorts!

Whichever option is chosen, two goals, at minimum, would need to be sought: (1) Becoming as *self-sufficient*, economically, as possible and (2) *anticipating* the effects of global warming (for the production of food, for access to water, for surviving severe storms, etc.). In addition, given that our existing society is rotten in so many respects, I advocate that those taking either option 2 or 3—but especially those taking option 3—that they recognize the reality of human “design specifications” (see pp. 38 – 117 in [this eBook](#)), and include that matter in their planning efforts.

I should note that a point made in that eBook is that a variety of views exist as to what our “design specifications” as humans are, and rather than *bemoaning* that fact one should *welcome* it, for that diversity provides a basis for *discussion*, and *joint* decision-making in coming to conclusions as to what, specifically, to *believe*, and then *do*, about this matter. Members of a

group deciding to create an eco-community for themselves would, of course, have a large number of decisions to make, and [this essay of mine](#) discusses some of the major ones.

Despite the fact that most in our society are likely to be a “hard sell” with the above proposal, so that even *trying* to “sell” it might be an utter waste of time, still there is the possibility that the eco-communities created in response to the proposal will act as “[cities upon a hill](#)”—at least in the sense that MN people, in seeing them and visiting them, will, like “[doubting Thomas](#),” come to the realization that this is a good idea after all, and *also* adopt the idea.

If this occurs, Kevin Anderson’s projection of a 90% culling of the world’s population might, conceivably, be reduced to less than 80%, but I foresee *no possibility whatsoever* of a percent much less than 80% being “saved.”

That is a sad projection to make, to be sure. But if [my strategy for societal system change](#), published in 1984 (!), had been implemented shortly after the publication of that article, there would now be no *need* for me to have written this essay! However, it *wasn’t*, so that there *is* a need for me to write this essay after all.

The odds seem stacked against us humans at present, but given that we cannot know, with certainty, how the world will be in, say, 2050 CE, it would be best to assume that we—*some* of us, at any rate—can “make it,” and proceed with confidence that we *will* do so.