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# A race to the bottom?

## by Graham M. Turner

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More than likely we are already in the early stages of global collapse. Whether unfolding over the next decade or longer, this could involve economies failing, standards of living retreating to those of a century ago, and consequent civil unrest of one form or another. Of course there is a chance that this view is wrong or that somehow we will navigate a way out, though the odds of this are rather small. The rational approach would be to take the likelihood of collapse seriously since the evidence is so strong and the implications are so far-reaching. But there is little evidence we will adopt a rational approach, at least at the national or global level — as amply demonstrated by the history of civilizations-past and our own recent failures at environmental action. This does not mean “abandon all hope”; rather, get prepared at a personal and community level — at least emotionally if not in more concrete ways.

The two most pressing emergencies on our societies and economies are climate change and peak oil, and both are already underway. Compounding these environmental and resource stresses is the obvious fact that we have reached our financial credit limit through spending on rather dubious purchases. Consequently, there is insufficient capital to pay for national and global programmes that could potentially address our real emergencies even if we had the political leadership needed (which of course is the bigger problem).

Peak oil is perhaps the most immediate of our troubles, given that our way of living is dependent on readily available oil. Even very conservative bodies such as the International Energy Agency now acknowledge that the production rate of oil appears to have peaked in the last decade (and hence pre-empted the Global Financial Crisis by a few years). The issue is not about running out of oil per se — far from it, since we are about half-way through global reserves of conventional oil, and we

know here are even larger fields of non-conventional oil and gas, such as the much acclaimed shale oil/gas resources in the United States. Rather, these ‘stocks’ are wrongly and commonly confused with ‘flows’.

The core problem is that we are unlikely to be able to get the oil out of the ground fast enough to meet the demand of an ever expanding economy. Typical aspirations of growth mathematically imply that in the next three decades we need to produce the same volume of oil as in all proceeding years combined, and to repeat this doubling act indefinitely. That is not likely to stop us trying, but unfortunately it will divert increasing energy, water and money away from other parts of the economy (as well as increasing pollution). Interestingly, this is the very mechanism that underlies the global collapse in the Limits to Growth “business as usual” scenario, originally modelled in the early 1970’s. Forty years on this scenario is still aligning remarkably well with what has actually happened. Alarming, the growth in the scenario halts about now and attempts to secure growth simply make the problem worse, leading to economic and population collapse over the coming decades.

Playing out more slowly than peak oil, but faster than most scientists had expected, are the impacts of climate change. The spate of record-breaking extreme events in recent years across the globe would require fantastically small odds for them to be ascribed to sheer bad luck of random weather. This seems to leave no rational choice other than to accept that climate change is underway. But if growth in emissions is left unchecked, violent weather will become the norm rather than the extreme. In this case, adaptation is a fanciful strategy of forever playing catch-up and even emergency responses may be swamped, especially when society is hamstrung by competition for expensive oil.

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Public perception of these dire possibilities may not be high overall, and will certainly vary across demographics. Nevertheless, these environmental and resource issues have been in the media for decades, so that there is at least some general awareness that our economies and societies face big challenges. Still, little has been done to avert the crises. This may be for a host of reasons.

One disincentive is likely to be the sheer gargantuan scale of change that sophisticated modelling shows is now necessary to de-carbonise and de-oil, change which is not yet occurring at any realistic level. Every industry would need to advance technologically with unprecedented speed, simultaneously. Family size would have to be restricted. Material consumerism curtailed to something like 1950's levels. And the average work-week reduced to three days by mid-century (to counter the unemployment effects of efficiency and productivity). Technically all possible, but exceedingly unlikely: even ascribing an optimistic 50/50 chance for each component implies about a 1 in 20 likelihood for the collective strategy in which all components are required.

It is tempting from a scientific viewpoint to believe that more information is needed in the public and political domain, that education is the answer. Unfortunately, there are strong arguments for why this might simply be wasted effort.

Research shows that people are inherently and unduly optimistic, even when faced with concrete statistics on things like disease incidence and mortality rates. In the environmental debate, unabashed optimism routinely rears its head in the form of belief in our technological wizardry, despite evidence to the contrary. Unfortunately, blind optimism is an obvious personal strategy when there is a lack of leadership.

And there is a lack of leadership because we are in a “political race to the bottom” as *thwink.org* system dynamics modelling demonstrates. Essentially it is easier for a politician to tell a bigger lie and win more supporters than it is to win supporters by telling the truth — the competing dynamics are biased toward corruption because a bigger lie can always be told whereas there is no bigger truth. There are strategies to counter these dynamics, such as increasing the ability of people to detect lies, but the modelling shows that extraordinary levels of effort and long timeframes are required for rationalism to prevail. Evidently science and logic have a role in exposing falsehoods, but we ourselves must be rational about the limits of our own influence.

In the light of all the evidence about the immense and immediate challenges we face—regarding both environmental/resource issues and social change — the rational course of action is to “prepare the lifeboats” since attempting to change the global ship’s course is going to be too little too late. This means the narrative around national or global emergencies might best be directed to those in the community and public life who are willing to listen and to act on building self-reliance at local scales.

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## References

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