“Thinking seriously about the civilisation to follow this one: On seeds and lifeboats”.

By Rupert Read

Abstract:

The Paris climate agreement is inadequate to prevent what is likely to be catastrophic climate change, and in any case the agreement’s own targets are almost certain not to be achieved. This means that it is no longer good enough to seek to transform our civilisation. We should keep doing so; but we also have to face and start to prepare for the likelihood that this civilisation will fall.

This means that we need to start to conceptualising and building lifeboats. As Ophuls puts it at the end of Immoderate greatness: why civilisations fail: “[J]ust as prudent mariners carry lifeboats and practice abandoning ship, a global civilisation in its terminal phase would be well advised to prepare arks, storehouses, and banks designed to preserve the persons, tools and materials with which to retain or reconstitute some semblance of civilised life post-collapse.” We need to seed what might be a viable successor-civilisation from out of the brilliance and squallor (and ruins) of this one. We need to model the genuine communities to come. This is why the Transition movement and permaculture are so important. At a personal/homestead/neighbourhood scale, what this also means is that we need to ‘prep’ for the strong possibility of seriously bad and hard times ahead for virtually everyone, maybe sooner than you think. We can’t leave prepping to ruthless libertarian survivalists. At a much larger scale, and above all perhaps, we need a new ‘imaginary’. A meta-story. An imaginary capable of being the philosophical and ethical kernel of the new civilisation we must keep the possibility of alive, and must seek to start to model. We need, that is, to imagine a new way of imagining, and then to bring it into being. A new way of seeing and being ourselves together in-the-world. For, assuming that our collective self-destruction is not absolutely total, what forms of political and social organization emerge out of a world with a severely degraded climate and ecosystems is the important question, and the intellectual and political battle never ends, precisely because the future is to some extent always open and still to be made. We must start preparing for - initiating - that battle, now.

We need somehow to do this while being all-too-aware of the very strong likelihood that the new civilisation will have to pass through a most unholy baptism of fire: the fire of global-overheat, and the fire of the resource-wars and desperate migrations and extreme turbulence that will accompany it. The ‘transitional’ period is reasonably likely to be a very long and dire emergency, a nightmare compared to which the suffering involved in previous world wars may come, incredibly, to seem relatively minor. We have to try to start to construct some of the potential elements of a successor-civilisation, both ideational and practical, in such a way that they (we?) can survive this baptism of fire, and not be corrupted in the process. And when you stop a moment and think this through, it makes our task even harder. For, if there is to be a civilisation to succeed this one, it will have to be tough enough to survive - without being turned wholly vicious - a time that is likely quite literally to test humanity more severely by far than it’s ever been tested before. The signs, in terms of things like our willingness to be caring to refugees (including climate refugees) are, to say the least, thus far rather mixed. There have to be lifeboats. But how does one build lifeboats that are not so viciously exclusive that they undermine their own worth?

This is how we might start to cash out - or qualify - the lifeboat metaphor. That metaphor might seem - might be - overly hopeful: because lifeboats can be picked up, saved, by other larger boats (Think of the end of Cuaron’s film Children of Men). But the future we are sailing into is one where there will most likely be no-one to pick us up. We, if we end up mainly crafting lifeboats, can hope only to be picked up, freed of our quest, by the future itself.

Perhaps the task then, when properly understood, is not even as easy (sic!) as building just one new civilisation. For we need to think of principles of civilisational succession, which might be very roughly modelled on principles of ecological succession (my proposal here greatly develops a suggestion made in passing by Ophuls in his Ecology and the politics of scarcity revisited). Probably we need to plan on two new civilisations, in sequence: perhaps the real task then is to start to build (or, at least, ‘seed’) a ‘lifeboat-civilisation’, a decent and yet realistic-pragmatic ethic, unafraid to be determined to survive at most costs, that can carry some of us through the storms of our children, and that can somehow carry within it the seeds of a future successor less harsh civilisation that might exist and truly flourish in a less awfully-pressed time
that we might one day be able to recover to. (A great fictive model — for this carrying within — is the boy in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, and the idea therein of ‘carrying the fire’.)
The great leadership task of our time is: daring, as none of us wish to do, to do this thinking, and so to start to plan accordingly.

We are in the midst of an unprecedented ecological crisis. It is far bigger and wider than the most famous and pressing aspect of it, which is the climate crisis. We face an unprecedented biodiversity crisis, there are crises of desertification, and soil disruption, there is a crisis of plastic pollution, especially in the oceans. These are symptoms of a profound, underlying malady. The climate crisis is the most existential of the symptoms, the one that most clearly and within nameable timelines threatens our very existence as a civilisation and it therefore deserves some special attention. What I say about the climate crisis is this: that devastating, human-caused climate change is a ‘white swan’. For whereas a ‘black swan’ is an unexpected, catastrophic event that comes along and defies all our expectations, and causes something really bad - an example is the financial crisis of 2007 to the present -, anthropogenic climate change is not like that. We can see it right before our eyes if we just bear to look. It is coming, because we are living (from a climatic point of view) as if we had about ten planet Earths. We are way beyond the limits of growth. It’s not a question of some adjustment or reform to set us back on track. We are an order of magnitude out. This is the stuff of revolutions - or collapse.

So: *Our civilisation* - the globally almost-wholly hegemonic civilisation - *will* (therefore) be transformed:
It will either
(1) collapse utterly and terminally, having failed to learn in time from the indigenous etc. alternatives to it. Or
(2) we will manage to seed a future successor-civilisation, as this one collapses. Or
(3) this civilisation will somehow manage to learn from indigeneity and transform itself radically and rapidly, in an unprecedented manner, in time to avert collapse.

The 3rd option is the least likely, though the most desirable (because either of the other options will involve unprecedentedly vast suffering and death). The 2nd option is likely, though still difficult to achieve in any way that will be at all desirable. The 1st option may become likely, if we do not act appropriately. The chance of complete catastrophe is thus very high. But the general logic of the *Precautionary Principle* applies: just as one must make every effort to avoid catastrophe even if the chances of it happening are remote, so one must make every effort to avoid catastrophe even if the chances of it happening are very high and the chances of averting it very remote, as they now are.
Any of these three options will involve a transformation of such extreme magnitude that what emerges will no longer in any meaningful sense be this civilisation: the change will be at minimum of the kind of extreme conceptual and existential magnitude that Thomas Kuhn famously calls ‘revolutionary’. Thus one way or another, this civilisation is finished. It may run in the air, suspended over the edge of a cliff, for a while longer. But in due course it will either crash to grief, birth something radically different from itself from within its dying body, or somehow scrabble back to safety on the cliff-edge. Managing to do the latter would involve some extraordinary change that means that what came back to safety would still no longer in any meaningful sense be this civilisation.

As our predicament grows ever graver, with so little time left within which we might conceivably be able to turn this supertanker around, the situation appears to accelerate away from us. The very things we so badly need now - long-termism, a strong base in and connection with nature, a strong collective spirit, the ability to put the most destructive forces on a leash - these powers are receding from us, as the world ‘develops’. As the ‘white swan’ of climate catastrophe bears down on us, we do not pull together to stop it, we do not even stay stationary: we race toward it at roughly the speed of economic growth.

We’re very obviously not being precautious. Nor are we scientific. We live in anti-scientific times. Because people aren’t persuaded by facts, aren’t living in any kind of harmony with the truth. They are persuaded, rather, by technologies. In both of two senses: (i) People are persuaded by technologies in the sense of being more or less willingly manipulated by those technologies, especially by virtual technologies; the sinister way that Trump won election (via private ‘post-truth’ Facebook ads, etc.) is merely the most vivid and worrying recent example of this escalating phenomenon. (ii) As I’ve noted, people are persuaded by technologies in the sense of giving up all their rational faculties in favour of wild technophilic dreams.

Tendency (ii) is if anything the scarier tendency. For while (i) is disturbing and disastrous, it could in principle be fought and beaten. But insofar as (ii) wins the day there won’t be the will to beat it. People will willingly sign up to Brave New World meets Black Mirror, if doing otherwise would contradict their self-image as good technophiliacs. And it is truly frightening how many, including for instance many academics who ought to know better but appear completely caught up in the thrill of modernity (or so-called ‘Post-Modernity’), are strongly attracted by - and willing to drop their critical faculties in aid of - utterly wild ideas of ‘transhumanism’, interstellar colonisation, digital utopia, etc.
The truth is that these ideas are ways of not facing up to the way we are destroying the one common future that we can rely on: our embodied ecological Earthly existence. The great challenge that faces us is the challenge of birthing some new kind of way of thinking that involves facing and accepting reality. …And moreover enjoying reality, living in the present, loving our life (even as it perhaps ends). For this is the tragic irony of our desperate craving for more: paradise is available right now, if only we cease that craving and truly inhabit and enjoy and love the present.

Our being now is evermore not-being-in-the-world. Being human has come to be dissociated from being an Earthling. And that is of course why life is getting worse: less meaningful, less wild, less connected, less present. We need, in the face of this, to affirm life, and to overcome the great temptation, that I explore further below, to withdraw completely (rather than just tactically or temporarily). We need to love life - knowing that, because of the self-undermining industrial-growth juggernaut, we don’t know how long we’ve got. That can of course make the sense of each moment more piquant.

The situation is directly akin to the explored in Kazuo Ishiguro’s superb, haunting sci-fi work, ‘Never let me go’, which imagines our health being dependent on the sacrifice of that of others (and those others, non-coincidentally, are: children). Will we actually be willing to do the right thing? or are we too selfish? Here is what the authority-figure Miss Emily says, close to the close of that devastating work: “There was no way to reverse the process. How can you ask a world that has come to regard cancer as curable, how can you ask such a world to put away that cure, to go back to the dark days? There was no going back.” The analogue is precise: How can you ask a world that has come to regard many diseases as curable given high-tech interventions, how can you ask such a world to go back to the ‘dark’ days? Will we willingly give up our high-tech life-prolonging devices, even when these crush the futures of our own descendants? The society that sustains our health into an ever older old age makes it impossible for civilisation to be sustained long-term. There will, one can be pretty confident, be no going back - even if the cost, as is virtually certain, is, in time, to crash the entire system.

Humanism is the problem, not the solution. We have held ourselves - or at least, some of ourselves - ‘above’ our animal kin and above our only home, in a way that literally can no longer be sustained. Humanism has morphed smoothly into growthism, ‘development’, technophilia, and (at the extreme) new influential trends such as transhumanism: and all of these are profoundly destructive; any or all of them will be enough to trash our Earth and crash civilisation.
The technophilia, the addiction to ‘progress’ that is virtually universal, goes hand in hand with a ruthless selfishness, a lack of true concern for our posterity. For example: Monied interests plan with glee for the robotisation of much of our economy. Some ‘progressives’ (a telling term) plan on resisting the same trend, while others hope to make the trend work for the common good (via introducing a ‘basic income’, e.g.). But at a deeper level, all are in the most abject denial. For none pays any significant attention to the far more significant trend: the trend of every technological development, in its net effects, to propel us closer to (i.e. over) planetary limits. To increase entropy. (Even renewable energy is no exception, because of the ‘rebound effect’: it is no good making energy-systems greener and more efficient, if the net result is to free up more money and resources for people to fly more.) To those who envisage robots increasing the efficiency of our use of energy, a simple question suffices: Will your robots be additional to existing human beings (in which case they will without doubt add to net energy- and resource- consumption) or will they replace existing human beings? Not (just) existing jobs - existing human beings. In which case, we ought to be told exactly who will be replaced, and how. One fears that some among the far-seeing rich and powerful are likely already to have plans that would make Huxley’s nightmare-vision look benign.

What hope is there for this civilisation, when it shows so little sign of having truly absorbed any real understanding of any of this, let alone of having anything even remotely resembling a plan with which to address it? Despite our supposed rationality, despite the very clear warnings we have been given over and over, we continue moving in the wrong direction. If this civilisation were going to save itself, the last 25 years would already have seen strong, radical, mass-backed Green and green-friendly governments taking power all over the planet, turning back the ‘free trade treaties’ that institutionalise our peril, putting haute finance and ‘globalisation’ itself on a leash, and relocalising, starting to move us collectively in the right direction. Nothing even remotely like this, of course, has happened, or even been tried. Above all, we would have seen an effective and just global climate agreement, not the toothless sticking-plaster — which quietly commits us to the utter recklessness of geo-engineering of Paris. It is a mark of how far we are from living in truth vis a vis climate-reality that Paris is, absurdly, widely regarded as having been a success.

We live in absurd times.

The most likely end for this culture, tragically, appears to be that people will carry on living roughly as they are. This is why it is so hard now to imagine our society, this civilisation
surviving, unless one imagines entirely absurdly unlikely technological outcomes. Sure, there will gradually be more and more concern; and anger; and bitterness. There’ll be pious declarations (as in Paris). Some of us will really try to do something, and there will be some great achievements and moments of hope along the way. But it appears likeliest that the net result will be — faced as we are with the mother of all collective-action problems, and unable or unwilling to rise to a higher state of consciousness at a lower level of impact — humanity signing its own death-warrant. We will act as the brilliant allies of our own gravediggers. Or more simply: as our own gravediggers.

So; what is to be done? What, given the above, is the meaning of being human now, at this point in history? How do we best now manifest what we are, to recover something from the fire we have started?

Firstly, we need to wake up to all this; we need to stop fooling ourselves, and to wake as many others up as we can. This is a very large task: for, right now, most of us are in effect simply taking more and more sleeping pills. This task of waking up ourselves and others needs to be undertaken repeatedly, until it starts to sink in and spread. We are stuck deep in Plato’s cave, and are not taking seriously enough that the fire burning behind us it virtually out of control.

Secondly, we need to keep fighting as hard as we can to stop the acceleration of the situation toward utter calamity. We need to fight ‘holding actions’ against the destruction of the irrecoverable; we need to stand up for precaution, long-termism and care for the future; we need to cut out the worst of our collective impacts. So there is still a clear role for being involved, for instance, in electoral democracy — and for trying to stop its further erosion. If we hand over look stock and barrel to the forces of political-economic insanity and corruption, then, in simple terms, we further reduce the chances of our survival through the coming maelstrom. We need to hope that, by the time this civilisation collapses, it will have not taken down with it the conditions for human life and most animal life on Earth. So we need to act so as to blunt the hyper-destructive impact of this civilisation, giving ourselves time for a next move.

Thirdly, we need to start to build lifeboats in earnest. As Ophuls puts it at the end of his recent mini-masterpiece, Immoderate greatness: why civilisations fail: “[J]ust as prudent mariners carry lifeboats and practice abandoning ship, a global civilisation in its terminal phase would be well advised to prepare arks, storehouses, and banks designed to preserve the persons, tools and materials with which to retain or reconstitute some semblance of civilised life post-collapse.” We need to seed what might be a viable successor-civilisation
from out of the brilliance and squalor and ruins of this one. We need to model the genuine communities to come. This is why the Transition movement, permaculture, and associated trends and experiments are so important. At a personal/homestead/neighbourhood scale, what this also means is that we need to ‘prep’ for the strong possibility of seriously bad and hard times ahead for virtually everyone, maybe sooner than you think. We can’t leave prepping to ruthless libertarian survivalists. At a much larger scale, and above all perhaps, we need a new ‘imaginary’. A meta-story. An imaginary capable of being the philosophical and ethical kernel of the new civilisation we must keep the possibility of alive, and must seek to start to model. We need, that is, to imagine a new way of imagining, and to bring it into being. A new way of seeing and being ourselves in the world. For, assuming that our self-destruction is not absolutely total, what forms of political and social organization emerge out of a world with a severely degraded climate is the important question, and the intellectual and political battle never ends, precisely because the future is open and still to be made. We must start preparing for - initiating - that battle, now.

Fourthly, we need somehow to do this while being all-too-aware of the very strong likelihood that the new civilisation will have to pass through a most unholy baptism of fire: the fire of global-overheat, and the fire of the resource-wars and desperate migrations and extreme turbulence that will accompany it. The ‘transitional’ period is reasonably likely to be a very long and dire emergency, a nightmare compared to which the suffering involved in previous world wars may come, incredibly, to seem relatively minor. We have to try to start to construct some of the potential elements of a successor-civilisation, both ideational and practical, in such a way that they (we) can survive this baptism of fire, and not be corrupted in the process.

And when you stop a moment and think this through, it makes our task even harder. For, if there is to be a civilisation to succeed this one, it will have to be tough enough to survive - without being turned wholly vicious - a time that is likely quite literally to test humanity more severely by far than it’s ever been tested before. The signs, in terms of things like our willingness to be caring to refugees (including climate refugees) are, to say the least, thus far rather mixed. There have to be lifeboats. But how does one build lifeboats that are not so viciously exclusive that they undermine their own worth?

This is how we might start to cash out - or qualify - the lifeboat metaphor. That metaphor might seem - might be - overly hopeful: because lifeboats can be picked up, saved, by other larger boats. But the future we are sailing into is one where there will most likely be no-one to pick us up. We, if we end up mainly crafting lifeboats, can hope only to be picked up, freed of our quest by the future itself.
Perhaps the task then, when properly understood, is not even as easy (sic!) as building just one new civilisation. For we need to think of principles of civilisational succession, which might be very roughly modelled on those ecological succession (as proposed in passing by Ophuls in his Ecology and the politics of scarcity revisited (W.H. Freeman, 1992)). Perhaps we need to plan on two new civilisations, in sequence: perhaps the real task is to start to build (or, at least, ‘seed’) a ‘lifeboat-civilisation’, a decent and yet realistic-pragmatic ethic, unafraid to be determined to survive at most costs, that can carry some of us through the storms of our children, and that can somehow carry within it the seeds of a future successor less harsh civilisation that might exist and truly flourish in a less awfully-pressed time that we might one day be able to recover to. (A great fictive model for this is the boy in Cormac McCarthy’s The Road, and the idea therein of ‘carrying the fire’.)

At my best moments, I am grateful to be alive now. Grateful to be the recipient of this awesome gift: that we are the ones who have the chance to save the future, one way or another. At minimum, to help design the ‘lifeboat’ in and from which, like in the very final scene [pictured] of the highly salient film, Children of Men, the future can set sail and survive.

But it is often difficult to feel grateful. One feels terrible bursts of grief, and anger: one wants to go around shaking people, or even perhaps shouting in their faces… Don’t you see what we are doing? Why don’t you act? Why don’t we act? Thinking these things, and saying them, feels incredibly lonely, most of the time. Like the protagonist in another deep
ecological film, Take Shelter: it is impossible to come to terms with the end of civilisation on one’s own. This coming-to-terms is an epochal, massive, tremendously hard process, that I’m still very much in the middle of, myself. It would be easier if there were more of us.

Because it doesn’t seem as if most people, even most ‘environmentalists’, philosophers, and ethically-mindeds, have understood yet where we are at, world-historically; and it seems as if most even of those few of us who perhaps have are staying similarly quiet and lonely about it.

Fifthly then: We need to link up with each other, and face climate-reality and its human implications together. We need to discuss all this more openly, and more widely. We need to try to start living in truth. That’s what I’m now trying to do.

And in order to do that properly, we need to slow down (It used to be called turning on, tuning in, and dropping out…):

So:

Sixthly and finally for now: We need, for a while, to stop. We need to breathe deeply, and spend some time in Keatsian ‘negative capability’. We need, as Paul Kingsnorth puts it to contemplate and to pay attention: “There is an abyss opening up before us. It challenges everything we thought we knew about our culture and about nature. We need to look into it and concentrate on what we can see.” (‘Confessions of a recovering environmentalist’, pp. 222-3) Kingsnorth asks the vital question: What would happen if we looked down? If we actually dared to look at the lack of ground beneath our feet. We think (or we fear) that what would happen is that we would plunge headlong into a despairing depression from which we would never emerge. So we maintain the conspiracy of silence. But perhaps if we dared to actually contemplate the abyss we might finally find some new, some more reliable strength. Especially if we dared to look into it together (See ‘Fifthly’, above), and to talk about our fears, and about what hopes we still have once we let go of our delusive optimism and pointless Polyanna-ism. To update Gramsci: Realism of the intellect, which will look to the world of denial like utter pessimism. And then a new kind of optimism of the will might yet be able to be born. (Kingsnorth and the Dark Mountain movement would of course go further than I have. They - perhaps you, reader - would urge that what we need is no civilisation, but rather what they call ‘uncivilisation’. But perhaps the new imaginary that we need to create will consist largely of precisely the kind of elements that they would dub ‘uncivilisation’. So perhaps the disagreement I have with them is mainly merely verbal/semantic.) For this piece is very far from being a counsel of despair. On the contrary: we need a new hope. And only a hope that is compatible with daring to look down will be real. Only such a hope will make it real when we ask ‘What is to be done?’
Yes. I think that’s it: We need to look into the abyss. Together. Only that will overcome the incredulity that even I still often feel, as I contemplate the truth of these sentences. Machiavelli was right: it is hard for one to understand something before one has lived through it.

We need to break the silence around this, before we have to live through it. We need to start to face the future. Including crucially: we need to find a way (and this is very hard) of talking to our children about all this. They don’t deserve to be brought up in ignorance of where their world is headed. And if everyone had to tell their kids what was coming, and that we are desperately afraid for them, then we might yet, together, even head it off: for it is an outrage to have to say to your children that their birthright is probably premature death (and certainly abominable loss). Or, if we were to tell the truth to our kids and still not act, then perhaps they would say to us, “If you don’t act, knowing what you know, knowing what you have told us, then you don’t love us.” That painful truth-telling might be the spur we need. If even that didn’t get us to transform our civilisation, then, once again, it would not be worth ‘saving’.

Those with children seem to find it, in a way understandably, even harder to face the desolate truths present in the present paper than those of us without. Is it possible to face climate-reality, the face the likely end-times of our civilisation, while choosing to have children? Our children are our greatest hope, partly for the reason given in the previous paragraph. But their very presence may cocoon us from being able to face the awful reality we are setting up for them.

And then we need, to start to create a ‘plural’ (i.e. no longer TBTF) civilisation - or even two, as described above - that will succeed this one. A civilisation able, like those indigenous cultures that have survived previous overshoots, to harmonise, and stay within limits. A civilisation that will be determined to sustain and renew itself and to learn from our civilisation’s failure. A civilisation that will actually be civil.
A civilisation that, unlike this one, can last.¹

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