Time to Say Goodbye?
The Politics of Doom and Gloom

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Abstract

Aggravating environmental problems, a serious financial-economic crises, the looming return of scarcity and growing social unrest in many countries around the world combine to create a climate of doom and gloom, and have produced a growing stream of apocalyptic writings. Regardless of whether the grounds for such pessimism are valid, the spread of doom and gloom thinking and the creation of a prevalent and enduring sense of crisis, has significant political implications, in particular for democracy, as pointed out by a range of authors and commentators. Developing and advancing responses that safeguard democracy and offer desirable and realistic courses of action for addressing these problems, poses a huge challenge. Perhaps not surprisingly, many crisis response ideas emphasise re-localisation as the most desirable and feasible strategy to prepare for what is regarded as the inevitable shift towards a new reality. While not playing down the desirability and importance of acting locally, this paper emphasises the need for systemic change at the national and international levels, and argues that, strategically, efforts are best focused on bringing about political-economic change the national level.

Introduction

Aggravating environmental problems, including growing evidence of climate change and its devastating effects, the onset of a deep financial-economic crisis which is producing mass unemployment and intense social suffering, with no end is in sight, growing resource scarcities, including the looming of peak oil and of a range of other minerals as well as water and productive agricultural land, and associated manifestations of political and social unrest and instability in many countries around the world, have given rise to a public mood of doom and gloom, reflected also in a burgeoning literature and significant number of movies of an apocalyptic nature, some of which seriously contemplates the possibility of the human race becoming extinct.

Although apocalyptic ideas and messengers have been around for thousands of years and been part and parcel of major religions, notably Christianity, present doom and gloom thinking distinguishes itself from the past in two important respects: first, it is based not so much on faith but analysis and science; second, it does not offer the prospect of salvation. Present doom and gloom thinking is to a large extent shaped by perceived facts and scenarios, based on science and computer modelling rather than religious beliefs. Related to this difference in basis, while in the past people could be consoled with the hope that they might be among the lucky ones who could look forward to a (much) better life after the apocalypse, many present doom and gloom scenarios offer, at most, the survival of some in the most miserable conditions.[1]

Regardless of the extent to which the grounds for such pessimism are justified, the discourse of multiple and permanent crises, and the sense of doom and gloom that it feeds, has significant political implications, in particular for the already limited and vulnerable liberal-democratic systems that have been institutionalised around the world. Again, the political effects are both real, reflected in observable developments, and projected into the future in the form of depressing and demotivating dystopias, replacing the more inspiring utopian visions of the modern era that are now pretty much a thing of the past.

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[1] Quite rightly, it can be argued that many people in the world have been living in miserable conditions for a long time. Even so, they may have done so, and continue to do so, with the hope of their lives getting better, although such hope may not become reality. By contrast, the already rich may be more prone to doom and gloom thinking as they have much to lose.

Formulating and advancing responses to these developments that maintain or even strengthen democracy, and that can be considered desirable and feasible from the point of view of most if not all people in societies, poses a big challenge. Perhaps not surprisingly, many environmentalists and others who pursue solutions to the present and future environmental, economic, and social woes of society seek to do so at the local or regional level. Act locally, bioregionalism, and re-localisation have been recurrent themes in environmental and social movements, as they are seen as empowering individuals and communities to act and adopt practical solutions to environmental problems. Others emphasise technological solutions and/or appear to explicitly seek the depoliticisation of environmental and other issues. However, such responses, although they may produce valuable results and must be part of a broader approach, have significant limitations and distract from the systemic political-economic causes the multiple crises. Addressing these requires a fundamental change at the national and international level which, this paper argues, strategically is best pursued at the national level.

To advance this argument, first, I will briefly elaborate on the growing prevalence of modern doom and gloom thinking, notably in the literature. Then, I will identify and illustrate some of the (potential) political implications thereof, notably for democracy. The next section discusses some of the main responses to the multiple crises advocated by environmental and other advocates of radical change, and their shortcomings and limitations. Finally, I will expand on the argument why pursuing a strategic approach at the national level offers the most promising prospects for achieving fundamental change aimed at resolving the sources of the multiple crises.

Doom and gloom on all fronts

Although the idea of the end of the world or humanity (commonly referred to as the apocalypse) has been a common element of belief systems for thousands of years, and has therefore often been dismissed as irrational (after all, the world has not ended yet and the human count now stands at more than 7 billion), in recent times it is coming back with a vengeance, in part related to the perception of a growing environmental crisis in which the devastating impacts of climate change have started to make themselves felt. Notwithstanding the difficulty of attributing specific weather events to climate change, there is a growing body of evidence that climate change is happening, and more rapidly than most scientists expected.

Positive feedback mechanisms and the triggering of tipping points, are likely to lead to even more rapid changes, increasing temperatures to levels which will make life for many forms of life, including human, precarious if not impossible (Lynas, 2007; Pearce, 2003, 2007).

Climate change, apart from bringing about an increasing incidence and severity of climate induced disasters that test the resilience of communities and governments, has also many other consequences that, although less spectacular, potentially are at least as devastating and capable of creating other disasters or crises, such as the simultaneous failure of crops in different parts of the world, causing food prices to rise steeply and creating world-wide famines, the spread of disease and a rising incidence of heat induced health problems and deaths, increased pressures on declining fresh water supplies, and on energy supply and infrastructure. The decline of biodiversity not only heralds the demise of so-called glamour species, but constitutes the unravelling of the tapestry of life (including microscopic) that is likely to generate its own unpleasant surprises for the sustainability of life on earth. Many of these indirect consequences and implications of climate change are much harder or even impossible to fix through local or even national short-term emergence responses, but require longer-term planning and preparation measures adopted and implemented in collaboration between countries.

To make things worse, energy experts inform us that one of the main pillars on which economic development and prosperity has been built in the last few centuries, oil, is weakening. The phenomenon of peak oil (looming or already upon us, depending on different assessments), although not implying that oil is about to run out, represents the point at which the production of oil is at its peak, signalling the starting point of an era where supply will not be able to keep up with demand, causing prices to rise. Although there is a range of alternative sources of energy, some of these (like coal, shale gas and nuclear power) are problematic for environmental reasons, while none of these is able to substitute for oil with regard to the amount of energy returned per unit of investment (EROI). This means that maintaining, let alone increasing, the energy demands associated with the present standards of living will become (much) more costly (Heinberg, 2011; Homer-Dixon, 2006). Moreover, the growing competition for remaining oil reserves increases the chance of conflict or even wars between countries. The same applies to a range of other minerals for which demand is outstripping supply (Klare, 2001, 2008; Renner, 2002). Although population growth is not the cause of these problems, it does add to these demands and pressures.

Apart from the environmental and resource crises that are unfolding themselves, analysts of the financial-economic crisis in which much of the world currently finds itself argue that this crisis also heralds the beginning of a new era, namely that of the end of growth. In part, this is because, as noted above, the era of cheap oil and energy has come to an end, and the rising costs associated with the development of new energy solutions, growing resource scarcity and decline, climate induced disasters, and climate adaptation measures. But it is also because the ability to finance future economic growth has been compromised by excessive and unsustainable levels of public and private debt incited by a financial-economic system based on untrammelled free market mechanisms. Mainstream economic experts are pessimistic about and/or critical of government efforts to resolve the crisis (Schneider, 2011), but have also little or nothing to offer in terms of more effective solutions, acknowledging the likelihood of a long recession (Foster & McChesney, 2012). But, as noted above, others take the view that the present crisis heralds a permanent end of the era of economic growth (Heinberg, 2011), and/or speak of the need for 'degrowth' to bring the economy within sustainable limits (Latouche, 2012; Schwartzman, 2012). However, such ideas are anathema to governments and the dominant economic interests.

To top off this barrage of bad news, there are indications of a fourth and arguably the most fatal development, triggered by the combination of crises referred to above: the erosion of the socio-political fabric that holds societies together. The apparent inability of governments to deal effectively with disasters, the growth of inequality in many countries and the rising levels of economic and social hardship visited upon large proportions of populations, because of the financial-economic crisis and the measures imposed by governments and international financial agencies, together with either the absence or erosion of democratic institutions, are undermining the legitimacy of governments and creating volatile situations, as demonstrated in the countries influenced by the Arab Spring and in the countries affected by the austerity policies imposed by the EU and IMF. If these policies fail and/or if the financial-economic situation were to further deteriorate, one can only speculate about the extent of social and political disintegration that would follow.

These developments, it can be argued, are nothing new, as the collapse of societies as a result of combinations of environmental, economic, and socio-political factors, be it in different forms, is a familiar pattern in history (Diamond, 2005; Tainter, 1988; Wright, 2005), and has happened more recently in so-called failed states (Kaplan, 1994). However, given the large

degree of economic interdependence between countries in the present world, collapse, if it were to happen, will be an international or even global rather than a local phenomenon. In a worst case scenario, some speculate, the occurrence of some other human-made or natural disasters (such as a nuclear war, disastrous effects of new technology, the emergence of a killer virus, or a large volcanic eruption), combined with the developments sketched above, could provide a fatal blow to humankind and cause its extinction (Leslie, 1998; Lovelock, 2006; Rees, 2003; Tonn & MacGregor, 2009). At the very least, as many of these analyses and projections indicate, the future looks rather gloomy, and life will be rather wretched and miserable. This view, perhaps not surprisingly, has also become a popular strain in Hollywood, as reflected in the growing number of disaster movies (Berg, 2008), and in science fiction (Milner, 2009).

Regardless of whether the grounds for such pessimism are valid, the spread of doom and gloom thinking, and the actual and perceived crises situations depicted above, have significant political implications for responses to the state we're in. The following section briefly discusses these.

The politics of doom and gloom

It is a common view that people or societies "need a crisis" before they start taking a problem seriously and that often "things have to become worse first before they become better". While this view may hold true in some situations, such as where accidents lead to a review and tightening of safety regulations and measures, it is misguided and dangerous when projected onto the kind of developments sketched above. Why? Because, apart from that many people would consider it desirable to prevent large scale suffering and death, things simply don't get better as a result of major disasters, ongoing environmental degradation, widespread poverty and misery, and socio-political disintegration. In fact, they get worse, and by getting worse further undermine the capacity of societies to deal with these problems.

That disasters don't lead to better solutions or conditions, for most people, is persuasively argued and demonstrated in Naomi Klein's book *The Shock Doctrine* (Klein, 2007). Basically, an account of how neo-liberal ideology has been able to gain prominence around the world, the book points at the role of disasters and crisis situations, both natural and created, in advancing responses and wherever possible imposing solutions that increase inequality, poverty and powerlessness to the (very lucrative) benefit of major companies and individuals, many of

whom also get to play key roles in politics and decision-making. Furthermore, the institutional reforms that are pushed through as necessary or desirable measures entrench such solutions or policies, shifting the balance of power towards private rather than public interests. Democracy is another victim of the exploitation (or even creation) of disasters or crises for political-economic purposes, as public access to information, openness and transparency, civil rights and liberties, let alone public input in decision-making, are all suspended or compromised. Where opposition against such 'solutions' stood in the way, it has often been crushed by police and military force, and by the imprisonment, torture and killing of opponents.

While the introduction of neo-liberal policies and measures has often been accompanied by, or even been made possible, by the use of force and the suspension of democratic institutions in the wake of disasters or crises, crises and crisis discourse also undermine and erode democracy in more subtle ways. Although less blatant and obviously offensive, these processes are not less pernicious by undermining democratic values, institutions, and practices, and may bring about a slow but certain death of democracy, especially under the conditions of converging and permanent crises described in the previous section.

First, the scale and complexity of the converging crises are such that people may easily feel overwhelmed by enormity of the challenge. Many people may find that they do not have the knowledge, ideas or means to address the problems, let alone solve them. Worse, some may adopt the view that, if the end is nigh anyway, it makes little or no sense to even think or worry about such problems, let alone trying to do something about them. Thus, the mounting discourse of doom and gloom is likely to (further) erode the public sense of political efficacy and to increase apathy, feelings of powerlessness, and fatalism.

Second, related to the previous point, given the complexity of the issues, many people will be inclined to leave these problems to the experts to address or resolve, a tendency which is already strong in modern societies that rely heavily on science and technology, and where experts already play a key role in most areas of policy development and decision-making. Despite critical discussions in the social science literature about the role of science in the generation of risks and the risk society (Beck, 1992; Hajer, 1995), many people, including scientists, continue to put their faith in science and technological solutions based on science to get us out of the mess. As James Lovelock, the father of *Gaia* notes: "We will need a small

permanent group of strategists who, as in wartime, will try to out-think our Earthly enemy and be ready for the surprises bound to come" (Lovelock, 2006, p. 153). Such a view is also not rare in environmental circles (Ophuls, 2011; Ophuls & Boyan, 1992; Shearman & Smith, 2007)

Third, linked to the previous two points, there is a growing tendency to reify nature as the source of environmental problems and threats. Rather than looking at human societies and practices as the source of environmental problems, nature or aspects of nature (such as CO2) are defined as the problem that needs to be controlled or as the enemy to be vanquished, as reflected in the quote from Lovelock above. Thus, climate change and other environmental issues are predominantly defined in physical terms that require technical and managerial solutions, to be found and applied by experts. This depoliticisation of environmental problems diverts the public's attention from the fundamentally political-economic or socio-cultural nature of the environmental problematique, and reduces the likelihood of the kind of public action that will be required to bring about the significant change that is needed to address the sources of these problems. As noted by Swyngedouw (Swyngedouw, 2011, pp. 266-268), many thinkers argue that we live in a post-democratic or post-political world in which real politics has been replaced by techno-managerial governance. Although this may involve so-called stakeholders, issues and solutions are interpreted in technical-scientific terms on which consensus is sought, without questioning the existing political-economic and social order.

Not surprisingly, given the tendencies described above, the solutions that have been advanced to address environmental problems not only fail to effectively deal with these problems in the longer term, but are also harmless, and preferably beneficial, to the prevailing political-economic interests. For instance, the terms on which emission trading schemes for greenhouse gases have been introduced in various parts of the world (including the EU and New Zealand), not only fail to bring about significant reductions in emissions, but have avoided imposing costs, especially on key industries. In the case of the EU, the allocation of emission entitlements even produced considerable windfall profits. In the meantime, rising energy prices and the introduction of social austerity measures aimed at reducing government debt, impact disproportionately on people on low incomes or dependent on social welfare. While the public is called upon to make sacrifices for the greater good, the rich continue to

increase their incomes and wealth, further aggravating the high levels of inequality that, in many countries, have increased from the beginning of the neo-liberal era.

While the rising social tensions and political protests resulting from these converging crises and the responses of governments constitute a form of political mobilisation and re-politicisation of the major problems facing humanity, and have brought about political regime changes in a range of countries, notably in the Arab world, as yet, they have not brought about fundamental change in the still widely prevailing neo-liberal economic paradigm, with the exception, perhaps, in several Latin American countries (more about this below).

Arguably, the most pernicious factor in the erosion of democracy stems from another, cultural, crisis, not yet mentioned before. The crumbling of really existing socialist systems and the victory of liberal democracy, capitalism and neo-liberal ideology in the world may not have produced the 'end of history' in the sense of the cessation of political and other change, but it appeared to have marked the end of political idealism and of idea of the perfection or even improvement of societies. Pragmatism, materialism, greed, and selfishness have become the dominant values, not just in the West, but also in the former and so-called socialist countries. Economic growth is the top-most priority of governments, relegating humans and nature to the status of means and resources, and is held up as the solution to all problems. This development has been supported by postmodernism, dismissing political ideals, grand narratives, and the idea of progress as naïve at best and as dangerous at worst. With the death of utopia, and in the face of multiple and permanent crises, there seems no place left but dystopia. Or should people just accept a return to the situation of the distant past in which people did not hold any visions for the future (Heilbroner, 1995)? And should they resign themselves to the gloomy view expressed by Felipe Fernández-Armesto that "The day of democracy looks as if it has arrived: but it will prove to be a false dawn or a short spell of wintry night" (Fernández-Armesto, 1996, p. 700).

What to do? Decentralisation and Relocalisation?

It is an understatement to say that formulating and advancing responses to these developments that maintain or even strengthen democracy, and that can be considered desirable and feasible from the point of view of most if not all people in societies, poses a big challenge. As discussed above, crisis situations are commonly exploited by the powerful to further bolster their power and privileges, and appear to offer little if any chance of making

things better, on the contrary. People and societies who seek to regain some control over their own future face formidable obstacles. As Heilbroner argues, the main question is not what kind of future people should aspire to, but "whether it is *imaginable*—I stress this crucial word—to exercise effective control over the future-shaping forces of Today" (Heilbroner, 1995, p. 95).

Perhaps not surprisingly, many environmentalists and others who seek solutions to the present and future environmental, economic, and social woes of society look at the local or regional level. If, as Monbiot argues, "The efforts of governments are concentrated not on defending the living Earth from destruction, but on defending the machine that is destroying it" (Monbiot, 2012), we may well give up on governments altogether and try to address these problems ourselves in and with our own communities.

Decentralisation or relocalisation ('Think globally, act locally') arguably has been a central theme in the environmental movement from its early beginnings (Radcliffe, 2000; Sale, 1996; Schumacher, 1973). It has been advocated by many environmentalists (thinkers and practitioners) on ecological, social, and political grounds. Ecologically, the assumption is people have an interest in protecting local and regional ecosystems as they are also the first to experience the effects (ecological feedback) of their actions. Similarly, people have an interest in participating in the enhancement and protection of their own human (modified and social) environment, as this strengthens social cohesion, reduces social problems, and improves the quality of life. In poor countries, decentralisation is often seen as even more important, given the dependence of communities on local resources for their survival, making it an essential condition for sustainable development (Esteva & Prakash, 1988; Ghai & Vivian, 1992). Politically, community-based environmental management offers opportunities for public participation and input in local decision-making, enhancing local democracy (Cortner & Moote, 1998; Dryzek, 1987; Weber, 2000).

Much can and has been achieved by individuals and relatively small groups within local communities, from dealing with local sources of pollution, reducing waste and protecting natural values, to practising organic farming and permaculture, establishing community gardens and farmers' markets, and encouraging people and local businesses to improve their environmental performance, and establishing co-operative businesses, including banks, among other things (Durning, 1989; John, 2005; Scott Murdock & Sexton, 1999). In many countries,

local environmental action has been advanced by a range of programmes, movements and organisations, including *Agenda 21*, environmental villages or Envirotowns, and the Transition Town movement (Jackson & Svensson, 2002; Totnes, 2010; Young, 1997).

Relocalisation is also advocated by some as a strategy for increasing the self-reliance and resilience of communities in preparation of the expected energy crunch, the destabilising effects of climate change, and to better cope with the socio-economic effects of the economic crisis. The Transition Town organisation explicitly states that its aim is a "community-led charity that is strengthening the local economy, reducing the cost of living and preparing for a future with less oil and a changing climate" (Totnes, 2010). Another form of local action aimed at the preparation for emergencies and disasters, and the possible collapse of society, can be found in the survivalist movement, which has considerable support in the United States. Although the movement is diverse, with the more radical groups including firearms in their stockpiles, a common element in this movement is that it takes the probability or even likelihood of societal disintegration or the apocalypse very seriously.

However, while much good work is being done by local groups, with valuable results, what can be achieved at that level is highly circumscribed by national and even international policies and institutions. The scope for addressing the underlying causes of environmental, social, and economic problems at the local level is very limited, as they are systemic and inherent to the prevailing political-economic system that is increasingly global in nature. As long as economic imperatives continue to dominate national policy making (for instance, with regard to agriculture, transport and energy), the extent to which local governments are able, and will be allowed, to implement their own policies, especially if these conflict with national interests and policies, will be very limited because of the formal/legal rules to which they are subject and which can be changed at will by national governments, and because of the financial and resource constraints that they face. These limitations and constraints become even more apparent in crisis situations, as reflected in the developments in the Canterbury region in the wake of the recent earthquakes.

Moreover, the idea that decentralisation is inherently desirable is based on questionable assumptions. First, politics in small scale political systems is not necessarily more democratic; it can be, and often is, dominated by local elites, with low levels of public involvement and even interest in local decision-making; it may be even less democratic than at the national

level, given the existence of fewer checks and balances and a smaller support basis for divergent interests and views. Second, local communities and political bodies do not necessarily assign a high priority to environmental and long-term interests, but also give precedence to economic growth and development based on the exploitation of local resources and outside investment. Third, local thinking can be parochial and narrow rather than global and broad, and stifling or even oppressive of minorities and divergent views. Discourse in the local political arena often emphasises a false notion of common interests, denying the existence of significant (class and other) interests, inequality, and differences between people. Fourth, decentralisation may disregard differences in capacity and advantages between regions and aggravate regional inequality if not accompanied compensatory policies at the national level. Were decentralisation to be accompanied by a significant weakening of the state, especially in countries with a history of multi-ethnic tensions, growing conflict, exploitation and rule by local warlords are not unthinkable consequences. Fifth, more radical notions of decentralisation that emphasise local or regional self-sufficiency, let alone autarky, would necessarily imply the abandonment of most modern technology in all areas of life. While a return to a pre-industrial life might be deemed desirable or even necessary by some, many people will not share that view. Finally, a significant decentralisation of political power would only increase the problem of co-ordination between political systems, in particular with regard to environmental and other issues that require collective action at the national and international level.

Anyway, whatever the merits or demerits of decentralisation, barring a catastrophe that would *de facto* dissolve all nation-states and means of supra-regional communication, it is unlikely that local or regional government will become the dominant political system anytime soon. As long as the main centres of power and decision-making reside at the national and international level, with governments as well as (increasingly) transnational economic interests, the ability of local and regional governments to adopt and implement policies and institutional changes that control the *drivers* behind there crises referred to above, and that are also "future-shaping forces" (Heilbroner, 1995, p. 95), will be very limited, confined at most to mitigating their effects. Although this does not mean that efforts towards mitigation are not worthwhile or valuable, we should be under no illusion that, on their own, they offer long-term solutions to these systemic problems. Pursuing the latter requires thinking and action at the national and international levels.

What to do? Strategic action at the national level

The international system of nation-states is relatively recent creation, usually attributed to the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648. In many parts of the world, notably those parts that were subjected to European colonisation, nation-states are even more recent creations, some five decades young. While nation-states have played a significant role in the economic advancement (notably of European nations and the United States), their effectiveness in this respect has come to be seen as doubtful, not just for many developing nations, but, in an era of economic globalisation, for all nations. Many experts and commentators on globalisation and international politics have proclaimed the retreat or demise of the nation-state, as it is seen as ineffective and obsolete. While neo-liberal economists see and like a "flat world" in which unconstrained trade and international investment flows bring prosperity everywhere, many environmental analysts see environmental state failure and have mounting visions doom and gloom (Friedman, 2005; Hay, 1996; Strange, 1996).

For several reasons, however, the proclamation of the death of the nation-state is premature. First, although there are a few failed states and some others (such as Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia) that have been split up, nationhood (or nationalism) remains a dominant value or aspiration around the world. Although few states meet the original ideal of the nation-state (in which the state is socio-culturally homogeneous), both nationalism and statism are alive and well. Even in the European Union, where the sovereignty of national governments has been purposefully diminished, nation-states have not been abolished. And if they would be, it probably would be to create a super-state, the United Nations of Europe, able to continue to defend European interests in the international arena.

Second, globalisation, especially economic globalisation, should not be reified as an autonomous force. As Naomi Klein makes abundantly clear, it is a process that in many cases has been imposed, often with force, on countries, by the United States government, with the assistance of international organisations, to the benefit of national (US) interests that stand to gain from the elimination of barriers to international trade and investment (Klein, 2007). Economic globalisation, and the many adverse results that it has produced, has generated a strong reaction and opposition around the world, perhaps most so in Latin America, where it has led to the election of many governments that now pursue alternative economic policies. Countries and governments differ in the extent to which they have pursued free trade and economic globalisation, maintained regulation and public ownership, and continued to play an

active role in the management of their economies. If not forced into globalisation, governments react differently to pressure to open their borders to trade and foreign investment. States still play a linchpin role in economic decision-making and in determining the terms on which countries engage with economic globalisation (Eckersley, 2002; Weiss, 1998).

Third, related to the previous point, the capacity of states to protect their interests cannot be generalised. While small countries and states may be weak and dependent on others, and hence vulnerable to external intervention, others have considerably more means and power to pursue and defend their interests. Notwithstanding claims about the decline of the United States, it is still a most formidable military, economic and cultural power. At the same time, the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) have become economic powerhouses that are increasingly assertive in pursuing what they perceive as their (national, political-economic) interests, while many others seek to enhance their capacity through international co-operation, agreements and alliances.

Having established that nation-states are alive and well does not mean to say that they are (very) effective in, and sufficiently capable of, addressing the multiple, converging crisis discussed above. On the contrary, their performance in this respect falls far short of what is required. Economically and socially, despite the staggering increases in economic statistics (GDP, production and consumption) since the onset of the industrial revolution, the economic and social well-being and security of many people, even in the richest countries, remains precarious. And while the standard of living of most people has improved, this has come at a high environmental price, as reflected in almost all environmental statistics. But although, at least in part, these problems can be attributed to states (state failure), it would be wrong to draw the conclusion that, therefore, addressing these problems is best left to the market, or that states and governments have less of a role to play. If anything, the role of states in addressing these issues needs to be considerably enhanced and strengthened, while, as noted above, retaining, and preferably enhancing democracy.

How this can be done remains a most challenging question, but one that, despite the gloom and doom scenarios that have been outlined above, is not unanswerable. On the contrary, it seems to me that parts of the answer already can be found in ideas expressed in the literature and debates on these issues, and in actual, recent developments. What, perhaps, makes it

difficult to see or accept this is impatience and the fact that inevitably people are trapped in their own situations. Like some historians have tried to take a galactic view of history (Fernández-Armesto, 1996), we can try to take a long term perspective to the issues that we are facing, looking at these ideas and developments as the starting points of a process of fundamental change.

The transformative ideas and developments that can be referred to as: first, ideas and processes of engagement with the notion of sustainability and the need to integrate economic and social with bio-physical realities; second, ideas and processes seeking to get the market out of the state (a reversal of the trend to get the state out of the market), and to create an economic system that is more stable, accountable, equitable and democratic; third, growing recognition of the myopia of present liberal democracies and the search for institutional arrangements that bring the future into collective decision-making; fourth, growing demands for a reform of the international system, to make it more democratic and to reflect the shift in geopolitical realities; fifth, processes of socio-political change that produce a global civil society and that provides the agency to bring about changes based on universal values and principles, including the recognition of difference.

Although there are grounds for arguing that the notion of sustainability is being abused for business-as-usual purposes, this does not render it meaningless. Having become a global discourse and a stated principle or goal of international and national policies and institutions, the notion of sustainability has become firmly entrenched, not unlike the notions of justice and freedom, which are arguable abused as much if not more, but which have not, therefore, become meaningless. What makes the notion of sustainability fundamentally important is the recognition that humans need to integrate (rather than trade off) their economic and social needs and aspirations with the (physical) environmental conditions that enable them to meet not needs and aspirations. Humans depend on nature, are part of nature, and shape nature. Throughout human history, humans have often ignored those fundamental linkages (although arguably because they were not aware of them) at their own expense, as well as that of other parts of nature.

The institutionalisation of the notion of sustainability, and the many policies and actions that are undertaken under this umbrella by governments, businesses and citizens, should be regarded as the first, mostly symbolic, steps in a longer-term process towards a closing of the

loops of human production and consumption (Lafferty & Meadowcroft, 2000). The simple reason for that optimism is that non-sustainable practices inevitably produce biophysical realities that cannot be ignored, despite efforts to compensate for local degradation by drawing on the resources of other countries, via trade or force. But sooner or later, all countries will be paying the price for unsustainable exploitation and there will be no further opportunities to prolong unsustainable lifestyles. In other words, sustainability is not just a discourse or rhetoric but a bio-physical necessity that increasingly forces itself upon societies and the world as a whole. Arguably, it is easier for societies to ignore justice and freedom than it will be to ignore sustainability.

The often brutal economic and social effects of the imposition of economic globalisation, in rich and poor countries, including the spiralling inequality in income and wealth, and the onset of the latest economic crisis, are opening the eyes of many people, including a growing number of economists, to the social unsustainability of the prevailing capitalist economic system. Although governments appear unable and unwilling to bring about fundamental change to that economic system, trapped as they are by the economic imperatives that they have created for themselves, it seems almost inevitable that such change will be forced upon them by the continuing risk of collapse, or by actual collapse. Although there is far from any consensus on what kind of economic system and policies will or should take its place, it is likely to involve a return to stricter regulation and moves towards greater transparency and accountability. Moreover, it seems reasonable to expect that governments will, more strictly than before, subject trade and international investment to an assessment of their social and environmental impacts rather than blindly accept their claimed benefits. Such assessments may well herald the beginning of a process that gives citizens a say in economic decisions and practices.

That liberal democracies appear unable to deal with issues that require a long-term view and commitment is another shortcoming that has become worse with the capture of the state by the market, the associate privatisation of publicly owned companies, and the demise of socialist regimes, which turned planning into an almost dirty word and deregulation into a dominant mantra. However, the lack of planning and long-term policy and the weakness or absence of regulation (regulatory failure) is proving costly and problematic, for instance, with regard to the (threat of) breakdown of crucial infrastructure (electricity and sewerage networks), the (economic, social and environmental) costs of accidents (such as oil spills) and

disasters (inadequate disaster prevention or mitigation measures), the costs of environment remediation (among other, of hazardous waste sites), and the loss of natural resources and services. Confronted with these rising costs, including those associated with insurance, governments are under growing pressure to make more adequate provisions for such longer-term risks and needs. In the literature, the need for the development and adoption of long-term policy to provide for future needs and to create sustainable systems, for instance related to energy, is now often referred to as transition management rather than planning, which was deemed to be too top-down and insufficiently reflexive (Kemp & Rotmans, 2009; Voß, Smith, & Grin, 2009). On the other hand, it has been argued that the practice of transition management is prone to domination by experts and that the role of politics and democracy need to be given greater consideration in such processes (Hendriks, 2009; Meadowcroft, 2009).

Hence, the search for ways to reduce the myopia of liberal-democratic systems ties in with the other two themes and developments already referred to: the growing recognition of moving towards sustainability and of the desirability of greater public involvement, accountability and democracy in economic management and future development. However, it is likely that advancement on this front will require more significant political-institutional change than most analysts and politicians are willing to admit. What extent and kind of change that can realistically be achieved remains a question that deserves and requires considerably more thought and discussion (Bűhrs 2010).

Ideas and calls for reforming the international governance system, notably associated with the United Nations, have been gaining momentum with the changes in the global constellation of political economic power in the last few decades. The rise of China, India, and Brazil as major economic powers, in particular, has already led to the expansion of the informal fora by which international co-ordination in economic matters is being pursued (from G7 and G8 to G20), and makes the existing formal institutional arrangements (of the United Nations and international organisations like the IMF) increasingly untenable, for reasons associated with legitimacy and the need to forge effective international cooperation and agreements. This need has become increasingly apparent not only in the financial-economic realm, but also with regard to international environmental issues, in particular climate change. Notwithstanding the growing importance of non-state actors in the international arena, nation-states still are the main players in international negotiations on whether and how to change and/or strengthen

the international system and enhance the effectiveness and fairness of international agreements.

Finally, these transformative processes are accompanied and increasingly driven by the growth of what has been referred to as global civil society. The enormous and unprecedented expansion of global communication, among other through the social media, is also creating growing international and global networks that have become important catalysts for change, as evidenced by the spread of the Arab Spring, which has also inspired mass action in European countries and the United States. Although one should be careful not to underestimate the ability of sitting governments to suppress opposition and to cling to power with the help of police and armed forces, there is a point where the loyalty to a government is tested beyond the limits of what people are willing to accept, and its power is being hollowed from on the inside, causing it to collapse. Like the fear for revolution inspired European governments to introduce political and social reforms in the 19th century, there is arguably a growing awareness of the need for reform, even if only based on enlightened self-interest, among political leaders today. A failure to deliver on promises for reform is likely to add fuel to the demand for more fundamental change, opening up the possibility of radical and extremist leaders rising to power.

These transformative ideas and developments may still be at an early stage of development, but the converging crises described above are bringing about a demand for change and a momentum that may provide a boost to their implementation, not on the basis of some kind of grand utopian design, but through a process of trial and error. There is no guarantee of success, but neither reason to despair. Although human history is often said to repeat itself, humankind finds itself now in a situation that is in many respects unprecedented, to the extent that history can only provide limited guidance for the future. What is needed to address the mess we're in are bold, new ideas and courses of action that would have been considered unrealistic and even unthinkable in the past, but that nonetheless are unfolding.

Conclusion

The multiple and converging crises that the world faces are giving rise to a discourse of doom and gloom and a revival of apocalyptic messages. To a large extent, present doom and gloom thinking is fed by secular and scientific analyses and actual developments rather than by religion and beliefs. There is a plausibility, probability, and to some extent already a reality to

these crises that is difficult to deny, although denial and optimism (cornucopianism) surely still plays an important role, incited and supported by vested interests. But even regardless of the validity of the doom and gloom messages and scenarios, the sense of deep and permanent crisis that they engender has itself important negative political implications, in particular for democracy.

Crisis situations are not necessarily harbouring a better world; on the contrary, they often make things worse. In part, this is because crises are deliberately exploited by powerful groups and individuals to advance their own private ends and interests, while the public at large is left with the damage, misery, and costs. They also often compromise or even suspend human and civil rights and democratic institutions and practices, while power is granted or grabbed by the already powerful, often under the guise of techno-managerial management that is deemed necessary to solve the crisis. With the convergence of multiple and enduring crises there is a risk that this concentration of power becomes an enduring phenomenon, justified on the basis of ongoing threats and uncertainty.

Decentralisation or relocalisation is a recurrent and even dominant approach to the multiple crises advocated in the literature. However, although this approach can be empowering and meaningful in its achievements, it also has significant limitations. In particular, this approach does not, and cannot, address the structural causes of the multiple crises, which lie beyond the local and regional level. Addressing these structural, political-economic forces that underlie and drive these crises requires change at the national and international levels.

Achieving change at these levels, although difficult, is not impossible. In fact, it is already happening, driven by a range of ideas and developments associated with the notion of sustainable development, growing recognition of the need for stronger economic regulation and accountability as well as for green and more equitable economic systems, and for longer-term policy development, and calls for strengthening international institutions and enhancing their legitimacy and effectiveness. Although many of these ideas and developments are not yet dominant, they are being taken up and moved forward by a growing number of individuals and groups internationally, in what can be said to constitute an emerging global civil society.

Although, ultimately, the most challenging political, economic, social, and environmental problems facing humanity require co-ordinated responses at the global level, nation-states still

are the main institutions for collective action aimed at these problems, notwithstanding rhetoric about the withering of the state in an era of globalisation. As developments in recent years in Latin America demonstrate, national governments can choose to disengage from the neo-liberal policies and institutions that have been responsible for aggravating the mess that we're in. They illustrate that systemic political-economic change producing significant benefits can be achieved at the national level, while continuing engagement with the more positive aspects of globalisation. Although the development of democratic and sustainable political-economic systems is likely to be a long and non-linear process, increased cooperation between the countries that actively pursue such systems strategically offer the best prospect of evading the doom and gloom scenarios that many observers hold in stock for us. It is, indeed, time to say goodbye: not to the future of humankind or the world, but to the systems that are responsible for our existing environmental, social, and economic predicament.

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