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A Tragic Scenario, Narrowly Cast

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The Collapse of Western Civilization
Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway
Columbia University Press, 2014

The Climate Conundrum

The anthropogenic roots of climate change have long been clear, and the dangers of inaction can be seen in melting glaciers and increasingly frequent extreme weather events. We already know how to solve the problem—rapidly scaling up to 100% renewables, increasing energy efficiency, and moderating consumption levels among the affluent—and we have the technology to do so. So why are we not taking action?

This question has long intrigued two well-known historians of science, Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway. Their widely acclaimed book *Merchants of Doubt* (2011) chronicled one important part of the answer: a decades-long misinformation campaign against public interest regulations. Conservative scientists, whose Cold War anti-communism made them see the specter of “socialism” in any environmental or public health regulation, and corporate funders, seeking to protect their profits, collaborated through a network of “think tanks” to undermine scientific consensus and thwart action on issues from second-hand smoke to acid rain to climate change.

The Collapse of Western Civilization, Oreskes and Conway’s latest work, revisits this narrative through a different lens: a “view from the future” recounted by a twenty-fourth century Chinese historian. Although the authors describe *Collapse* as a hybrid of science fiction and history, it is

more useful to view it as a scenario. Scenarios explore the scope of the possible, tracing paths out from the present to see how actors and drivers may interact, thereby providing insights into the uncertainty that lies ahead. Scenarios can generally be grouped into three broad categories: continuity, progressive change, and decline. *Collapse* is a scenario of decline. The question is whether it is a useful one.

As a cautionary tale of the dangers of climate inaction, *Collapse* is valuable. Oreskes and Conway underscore the fragility of the global ecosystem and the impact environmental change, particularly the passing of tipping points, can have on human society. They do not shy away from describing the vast human toll climate change might take, especially through displacement and disease. We often speak of climate action as “saving the planet,” but, as the book makes clear, it is just as much about saving ourselves.

As a scenario exercise, however, *Collapse* leaves much to be desired. The real world contains a multitude of different actors jockeying for influence and diverse drivers pushing the global future in different directions. Richly textured scenarios incorporate a wide range of such actors and drivers so that the view of the future they provide is as complex as we know the present to be. In *Collapse*, however, the actors are few, and the range of drivers is narrow. Moreover, although Oreskes and Conway vividly portray the dangers of climate inaction, the constrained concept of agency they present limits the range of alternatives.

Missing Actors

Collapse centers on the nexus addressed in *Merchants of Doubt*: that between science and business, knowledge and power. Scientists lack the mettle to compete, and, according to the authors, this is to some extent their own fault. Oreskes and Conway indict the restrictive conventions scientists hold dear: the division of scientific practice into discrete disciplines, the prioritization of “tractability” in problem-solving, and the standard of 95% statistical significance for truth claims together prevent scientists from properly grappling with the problem of climate change and effectively communicating its severity to the public. At times, Oreskes and Conway steer close to the claim that bolder climate action would come if only “scientists communicated better.”

However, they rightfully reserve their harshest criticism for those whom they view as willfully distorting science. In *Collapse*, the “carbon-combustion complex”—an array of industries dependent on the extraction of fossil fuels—funds a network of think tanks to sow the seeds of doubt about scientists’ claims, seeds that the scientists’ own hesitance tragically helps water. All the while, the global political and economic elite remain wedded to a market fundamentalism hostile to the degree of centralized planning necessary to meet the challenge posed by climate change, and thereby help propel the unfolding disaster.

This battle between science and business is presented as a battle of ideas—or, one might say, between “facts” and “ideology.” However, such a subjectivist approach suffers from the general limitations of an idealist rendering of history, as one sees clearly in the explanations offered for past economic transitions. The rise of social liberalism and social democracy in the early twentieth century occurs simply because “intellectuals came to see the invisible hand...as the quasi-religious notion that it was.” The role of labor organizing and unrest—so central to spurring political action to tame the ills of capitalism—is left out of the story. Similarly, neoliberalism, goes from a minority view in the 1950s and 1960s, held mainly by a group of thinkers aligned with Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman, to a key determinant of economic policy in the 1970s and 1980s simply because “neoliberal ideas attracted world leaders searching for answers to their countries’ declining economic performance.” No attention is paid to the long and well-funded political effort in the United States to undermine the New Deal consensus (or the shakiness of the post-war consensus in Europe), changes to the global economy that weakened the power of labor unions, or the crunch in corporate profits in the 1970s that ignited the Reagan/Thatcher counterrevolution in the 1980s. The discussion in *Collapse* echoes Milton Friedman’s famous line “When [a] crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.” But someone has to be there to help politicians see those ideas in the first place.

While this battle between science and business has had a major impact on climate policy, scientists and economic elites are not the only actors shaping our collective future. Such other actors and, indeed, even a concept of a broader society are largely absent from the storyline. The public is portrayed as an undifferentiated mass—swayed by the misinformation campaigns of the “carbon-combustion complex,” participating in food riots, or being relocated as climate

change forces them to leave their homes. Few actors other than scientists appear as advocates or truth-tellers. Oreskes and Conway mention a few artists and environmental activists, but they appear only as isolated individuals swimming against the powerful current of denial and delusion, not as part of a broader movement of citizenry. Indeed, the possibility that increasing global interdependence could create a global climate movement—even one that fails—is not even considered.

The range of actors in *Collapse* is narrow even within the focus on elites. Non-governmental organizations have been at the forefront of lobbying for climate action; however, they are largely absent in *Collapse*, except for the occasional reference to “religious leaders.” We do get a glimpse of governmental multilateral organizations in the “Unified Nations for Climate Protection,” which comes into existence years after the United Nations mysteriously collapses due to the failure of international climate change negotiations. But the fate of the rest of the UN family of affiliates, as well as that of the global financial institutions which today disproportionately shape public policy, is left unaddressed. Moreover, the narrative’s focus on the “carbon-combustion complex” limits the understanding of business in two ways. On one hand, by leaving out sectors of the economy like consumer goods, transportation, and industrial agriculture, it underestimates the entrenchment of fossil fuels in the modern global capitalist economy. On the other, it ignores that some, albeit far too few, businesses actually lobby for climate action. Oreskes and Conway acknowledge the existence of such an “enlightened neoliberalism,” but they ignore the possibility of alternative patterns of ownership, such as employee-owned cooperatives, that go far beyond that.

Other than the extreme consequences of climate change, *Collapse* assumes considerable social-ecological continuity. However, the future is not just the present taken to new extremes; it will be filled with surprises, and not just those stemming from climate disruption. Environmental tipping points apart from climate are more than plausible, such as those associated with biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, and deforestation. Resulting crises and the responses to them will significantly shape the global trajectory. These crises, moreover, will not just be ecological.

Consider how much the twenty-first century has been shaped already by 9/11 and the 2007/2008 financial collapse. We can also be sure of surprising developments in cultural norms and technological capabilities over the course of the next century. *Collapse* does not grapple with such fundamental changes, let alone how they might interact with climate change.

The Roads Not Taken

In any scenario, there will be branch points at which key decisions can steer the trajectory of the future in fundamentally different ways. As a result, the best scenarios of decline will identify the many roads not taken, glimmers of alternative stories of global development that might have been. Insofar as an explicit alternative is present in *Collapse*, it is China: an authoritarian state with the power to radically transform society from above. The centralized planning of China is juxtaposed with the market fundamentalism of the West. Although Oreskes and Conway would like to see less hostility to planning, China appears less as a desired alternative than as a foil intended to scare Western elites into action.

If one sets that alternative aside, the only positive path forward suggested in *Collapse* is for scientists to become bolder and for politicians to listen to them, thus abandoning their faith in the supremacy of the “free market.” But how likely are politicians to listen more attentively to the admonitions of scientists? Politicians rarely become enlightened on their own; the pressure put on them by social movements is what generally drives the “enlightening.” Oreskes and Conway show clearly the dangers humanity would face from inaction, but both the notion of agency by which this could be changed and the agents to do so are missing.

A more developed sense of agency would have led the authors to explore multiple pathways into the future. Had they developed a complete scenario exercise rather than a single tale of dystopia, Oreskes and Conway could have more fully engaged their creative side. Although continuity might spell collapse, how would the future look if the “enlightened” version of neoliberalism to which they allude took hold? And what about a future in which the decisions that led to civilizational collapse were not made, disaster was avoided, and humanity charted a fundamentally different course? It is often easier to imagine dystopias than utopias, but to stir people to action, one must inspire, not just scare.

Despite such limitations, the intellectual partnership between Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway has clearly benefited the public dialogue. Like them, many hope to see scientists become bolder, corporations less powerful, and politicians less averse to planning. *Collapse* is unlikely to spur any of these changes on its own, but it will enliven public discourse and keep people thinking. Perhaps the next collaboration between Oreskes and Conway—if there is one—will go further in spurring broad-based citizen action commensurate with the powerful forces of skepticism and elite power that to date have hobbled bold and effective action.

About the Author



Jonathan Cohn is the Managing Editor of the Great Transition Initiative and the moderator of the corresponding Great Transition Network. Through volunteerism, research, and advocacy, Jonathan has demonstrated a commitment to environmental sustainability and social justice. Before coming to the Tellus Institute, he was a researcher at the New Economics Institute, Common Cause, and the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, and worked in the development team at the Baltimore Center for Green Careers. He received a B.A. in English and history (Honors) from Georgetown University in 2010, and received a M.A. from Columbia University and a M.Sc. from the London School of Economics through their dual degree program in international and world history in 2012.

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