

This Time We're Taking the Whole Planet With Us

By [Chris Hedges](#)

Theme: [Environment](#), [History](#)

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I have walked through the barren remains of Babylon in Iraq and the ancient Roman city of Antioch, the capital of Roman Syria, which now lies buried in silt deposits. I have visited the marble ruins of Leptis Magna, once one of the most important agricultural centers in the Roman Empire, now isolated in the desolate drifts of sand southeast of Tripoli. I have climbed at dawn up the ancient temples in Tikal, while flocks of brightly colored toucans leapt through the jungle foliage below. I have stood amid the remains of the ancient Egyptian city of Luxor along the Nile, looking at the statue of the great Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II lying broken on the ground, with Percy Shelley's poem "Ozymandias" running through my head:

"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Civilizations rise, decay and die. Time, as the ancient Greeks argued, for individuals and for states is cyclical. As societies become more complex they become inevitably more precarious. They become increasingly vulnerable. And as they begin to break down there is a strange retreat by a terrified and confused population from reality, an inability to acknowledge the self-evident fragility and impending collapse. The elites at the end speak in phrases and jargon that do not correlate to reality. They retreat into isolated compounds, whether at the court at Versailles, the Forbidden City or modern palatial estates. The elites indulge in unchecked hedonism, the accumulation of vaster wealth and extravagant consumption. They are deaf to the suffering of the masses who are repressed with greater and greater ferocity. Resources are more ruthlessly depleted until they are exhausted. And then the hollowed-out edifice collapses. The Roman and Sumerian empires fell this way. The Mayan elites, after clearing their forests and polluting their streams with silt and acids, retreated backward into primitivism.

As food and water shortages expand across the globe, as mounting poverty and misery trigger street protests in the Middle East, Africa and Europe, the elites do what all elites do. They launch more wars, build grander monuments to themselves, plunge their nations deeper into debt, and as it all unravels they take it out on the backs of workers and the poor. The collapse of the global economy, which wiped out a staggering \$40 trillion in wealth, was caused when our elites, after destroying our manufacturing base, sold massive quantities of fraudulent mortgage-backed securities to pension funds, small investors, banks, universities, state and foreign governments and shareholders. The elites, to cover the losses, then looted the public treasury to begin the speculation over again. They also, in

the name of austerity, began dismantling basic social services, set out to break the last vestiges of unions, slashed jobs, froze wages, threw millions of people out of their homes, and stood by idly as we created a permanent underclass of unemployed and underemployed.

The Mayan elite became, at the end, as the anthropologist Ronald Wright notes in “A Short History of Progress,” “... extremists, or ultra-conservatives, squeezing the last drops of profit from nature and humanity.” This is how all civilizations, including our own, ossify and die. The signs of imminent death may be undeniable. Common sense may cry out for a radical new response. But the race toward self-immolation only accelerates because of intellectual and moral paralysis. As Sigmund Freud grasped in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” and “Civilization and Its Discontents,” human societies are as intoxicated and blinded by their own headlong rush toward death and destruction as they are by the search for erotic fulfillment.

The unrest in the Middle East, the implosion of national economies such as those of Ireland and Greece, the increasing anger of a beleaguered working class at home and abroad, the growing desperate human migrations and the refusal to halt our relentless destruction of the ecosystem on which life depends are the harbingers of our own collapse and the consequences of the idiocy of our elite and the folly of globalization. Protests that are not built around a complete reconfiguration of American society, including a rapid dismantling of empire and the corporate state, can only forestall the inevitable. We will be saved only with the birth of a new and militant radicalism which seeks to dethrone our corrupt elite from power, not negotiate for better terms.

The global economy is built on the erroneous belief that the marketplace—read *human greed*—should dictate human behavior and that economies can expand eternally. Globalism works under the assumption that the ecosystem can continue to be battered by massive carbon emissions without major consequences. And the engine of global economic expansion is based on the assurance that there will always be plentiful and cheap oil. The inability to confront simple truths about human nature and the natural world leaves the elites unable to articulate new social, economic and political paradigms. They look only for ways to perpetuate a dying system.

Globalization is the modern articulation of the ancient ideology used by past elites to turn citizens into serfs and the natural world into a wasteland for profit. Nothing to these elites is sacred. Human beings and the natural world are exploited until exhaustion or collapse. The elites make no pretense of defending the common good. It is, in short, the defeat of rational thought and the death of humanism. The march toward self-annihilation has already obliterated 90 percent of the large fish in the oceans and wiped out half of the mature tropical forests, the lungs of the planet. At this rate by 2030 only 10 percent of the Earth’s tropical forests will remain. Contaminated water kills 25,000 people every day around the globe, and each year some 20 million children are impaired by malnourishment. Carbon dioxide in the atmosphere [is now above](#) the 350 parts per million that most climate scientists warn is the maximum level for sustaining life as we know it. [Editor’s note: The preceding sentence has been revised since this article was first published here.] The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that the measurement could reach 541 to 970 ppm by 2100. At that point huge parts of the planet, beset with overpopulation, droughts, soil erosion, freak storms, massive crop failures and rising sea levels, will be unfit for human existence.

Jared Diamond in his essay "The Last Americans" notes that by the time Hernan Cortés reached the Yucatán, millions of Mayan subjects had vanished.

"Why," Diamond writes, "did the kings and nobles not recognize and solve these problems? A major reason was that their attention was evidently focused on the short-term concerns of enriching themselves, waging wars, erecting monuments, competing with one another, and extracting enough food from the peasants to support all these activities."

"Pumping that oil, cutting down those trees, and catching those fish may benefit the elite by bringing them money or prestige and yet be bad for society as a whole (including the children of the elite) in the long run," Diamond went on. "Maya kings were consumed by immediate concerns for their prestige (requiring more and bigger temples) and their success in the next war (requiring more followers), rather than for the happiness of commoners or of the next generation. Those people with the greatest power to make decisions in our own society today regularly make money from activities that may be bad for society as a whole and for their own children; those decision-makers include Enron executives, many land developers, and advocates of tax cuts for the rich."

It was no different on Easter Island. The inhabitants, when they first settled the 64-square-mile island during the fifth century, found abundant fresh water and woods filled with the Chilean wine palm, a tree that can reach the size of an oak. Seafood, including fish, seals, porpoises and turtles, and nesting seabirds were plentiful. Easter Island's society, which split into an elaborate caste system of nobles, priests and commoners, had within five or six centuries swelled to some 10,000 people. The natural resources were devoured and began to disappear.

"Forest clearance for the growing of crops would have led to population increase, but also to soil erosion and decline of soil fertility," Paul Bahn and John Flenley write in "Easter Island, Earth Island." "Progressively more land would have had to be cleared. Trees and shrubs would also be cut down for canoe building, firewood, house construction, and for the timbers and ropes needed in the movement and erection of statues. Palm fruits would be eaten, thus reducing regeneration of the palm. Rats, introduced for food, could have fed on the palm fruits, multiplied rapidly and completely prevented palm regeneration. The over exploitation of prolific sea bird resources would have eliminated these for all but the offshore islets. Rats could have helped in this process by eating eggs. The abundant food provided by fishing, sea birds and rats would have encouraged rapid initial human population growth. Unrestrained human population increase would later put pressure on availability of land, leading to disputes and eventually warfare. Non-availability of timber and rope would make it pointless to carve further statues. A disillusionment with the efficacy of the statue religion in providing the wants of the people could lead to the abandonment of this cult. Inadequate canoes would restrict fishing to the inshore waters, leading to further decline in protein supplies. The result could have been general famine, warfare and the collapse of the whole economy, leading to a marked population decline."

Clans, in the later period of the Easter Island civilization, competed to honor their ancestors by constructing larger and larger hewn [stone images](#), which demanded the last remnants of the timber, rope and manpower on the island. By the year 1400 the woods were gone. The soil had eroded and washed into the sea. The islanders began to fight over old timbers and were reduced to eating their dogs and soon all the nesting birds.

The desperate islanders developed a belief system that posited that the erected stone gods, the *moai*, would come to life and save them from disaster. This last retreat into magic characterizes all societies that fall into terminal decline. It is a frantic response to loss of control as well as despair and powerlessness. This desperate retreat into magic led to the Cherokee ghost dance, the doomed Taki Onqoy revolt against the Spanish invaders in Peru, and the Aztec prophecies of the 1530s. Civilizations in the last moments embrace a total severance from reality, a reality that becomes too bleak to be absorbed.

The modern belief by evangelical Christians in the rapture, which does not exist in biblical literature, is no less fantastic, one that at once allows for the denial of global warming and of evolution and the absurd idea that the righteous will all be saved—floating naked into heaven at the end of time. The faith that science and technology, which are morally neutral and serve human ambitions, will make the world whole again is no less delusional. We offer up our magical thinking in secular as well as religious form.

We think we have somehow escaped from the foibles of the past. We are certain that we are wiser and greater than those who went before us. We trust naively in the inevitability of our own salvation. And those who cater to this false hope, especially as things deteriorate, receive our adulation and praise. We in the United States, only 5 percent of the world's population, are outraged if anyone tries to tell us we don't have a divine right to levels of consumption that squander 25 percent of the world's energy. President Jimmy Carter, when he suggested that such consumption was probably not beneficial, became a figure of national ridicule. The worse it gets the more we demand illusionary happy talk. Those willing to cater to fantasy and self-delusion are, because they make us politically passive, lavishly funded and promoted by corporate and oligarchic forces. And by the very end we are joyfully led over the cliff by simpletons and lunatics, many of whom appear to be lining up for the Republican presidential nomination.

“Are the events of three hundred years ago on a small remote island of any significance to the world at large?” Bahn and Flenley ask. “We believe they are. We consider that Easter Island was a microcosm which provides a model for the whole planet. Like the Earth, Easter Island was an isolated system. The people there believed that they were the only survivors on Earth, all other land having sunk beneath the sea. They carried out for us the experiment of permitting unrestricted population growth, profligate use of resources, destruction of the environment and boundless confidence in their religion to take care of the future. The result was an ecological disaster leading to a population crash. ... Do we have to repeat the experiment on this grand scale? Do we have to be as cynical as Henry Ford and say ‘History is bunk’? Would it not be more sensible to learn the lesson of Easter Island history, and apply it to the Earth Island on which we live?”

Human beings seem cursed to repeat these cycles of exploitation and collapse. And the greater the extent of the deterioration the less they are able to comprehend what is happening around them. The Earth is littered with the physical remains of human folly and human hubris. We seem condemned as a species to drive ourselves and our societies toward extinction, although this moment appears to be the denouement to the whole sad show of settled, civilized life that began some 5,000 years ago. There is nothing left on the planet to seize. We are now spending down the last remnants of our natural capital, including our forests, fossil fuel, air and water.

This time when we go down it will be global. There are no new lands to pillage, no new peoples to exploit. Technology, which has obliterated the constraints of time and space, has turned our global village into a global death trap. The fate of Easter Island will be writ large across the broad expanse of planet Earth.

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