

“Overshoot and its Forbidding Consequences”

A review by Dick Burkhardt of

“Welcome to the Great Unraveling –

*Navigating the Polycrisis of
Environmental
and Social Breakdown”*

(From the Post Carbon Institute, 2023)



First, societal instability, then breakdown, then collapse. That’s the path we’re on, as seen by the Post Carbon Institute (Richard Heinberg, Asher Miller, et al) in this short (63 pages) and very readable book, echoing more elaborate analyses of our global predicament by Michael Dowd, Jem Bendell, and others. It all goes back to the limits-to-growth foreseen in the 1970s, now exceeded into overshoot: “Now, as the brief fossil fuel era draws to a close, the era of consequences begins”.

But this book is not just about the well-known perils of climate change and the formidable requirements for a global economy that fully ditches fossil fuels. It also looks at the escalating inequality and social disruption, including political polarization, cultural wars, authoritarian regimes, scapegoating, and violence - especially how these intertwine with over-stressed economies: “Many of those left behind or who supplied the industrial system with cheap labor and raw materials are responding with political radicalization”. In addition, “with global integration we’ve lost the resilience that redundant local production and distributed inventories formerly provided.”

But it gets worse: “Infrastructure will decay. Alliances will fail. Nations will be rent by tribalism. Environments will cease to be habitable.” It all goes back to the fundamentals: “The chief enabler of, and limit to, societal growth is available energy” – with population dynamics in lock step. And “From the times of early state societies, inequality had tended to increase until checked by revolt, war, pestilence, or economic collapse.” Meanwhile, “most policy makers were effectively asleep at the wheel” when it comes to well-informed and intelligent responses. For example, during the Great Depression, authoritarian threats to democracy and justice were typical, coming “from both the left and right ends of the political spectrum”.

Digging deeper into the “social unraveling”, the book cites psychological research showing that “those with social power tend to lash out when that power is threatened, often scapegoating the less powerful”. This “may feed efforts to increase ethnic and religious distrust in order to splinter popular consensus for progressive economic policies.” Escalating flows of migrants and refugees are predictable as economic, climate, and political turmoil spreads.

The book advises us to think in terms of “systems” with complex and unforeseen interactions, “of situations in which the word *normal* no longer has meaning.” Thus, expect economic contraction over the long haul, punctuated by intermittent crises with only partial recoveries, despite “green” technologies. If not another pandemic, it will be another war, or compounding crises. Expect that in another generation, “peak civilization” will very likely be in the rear-view mirror, despite AI, or perhaps even because of AI if its primary uses turn out to be war and repression.

Success requires that “nonviolence and fairness be pursued internationally”. That is, a partial retreat into localism will promote resilience, but going too far will escalate conflicts over resources and habitat. In some situations, as resources run short, investments will become a matter of triage – first save what’s most viable and needed for future generations, skipping over the luxuries and niceties that have become so

dominant in the wealthier parts of our societies. All the while, remember that “becoming absorbed in the blame game won’t stop the Unraveling and can considerably worsen it”.

Dick Burkhart, Seattle, WA
206-721-5672, dick2burk@gmail.com