

The Five Stages of Collapse – Dmitry Orlov

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross defined the five stages of coming to terms with grief and tragedy as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, and applied it quite successfully to various forms of catastrophic personal loss, such as death of a loved one, sudden end to one's career, and so forth. Several thinkers, notably James Howard Kunstler and, more recently John Michael Greer, have pointed out that the Kübler-Ross model is also quite terrifyingly accurate in reflecting the process by which society as a whole (or at least the informed and thinking parts of it) is reconciling itself to the inevitability of a discontinuous future, with our institutions and life support systems undermined by a combination of resource depletion, catastrophic climate change, and political impotence. But so far, little has been said specifically about the finer structure of these discontinuities. Instead, there is to be found continuum of subjective judgments, ranging from "a severe and prolonged recession" (the prediction we most often read in the financial press), to Kunstler's evocative but unscientific-sounding "cluster****," to the ever-popular "Collapse of Western Civilization," painted with an ever-wider brush-stroke.

For those of us who have already gone through all of the emotional stages of reconciling ourselves to the prospect of social and economic upheaval, it might be helpful to have a more precise terminology that goes beyond such emotionally charged phrases. Defining a taxonomy of collapses might prove to be more than just an intellectual exercise: based on our abilities and circumstances, some of us may be able to specifically plan for a certain stage of collapse as a temporary, or even permanent, stopping point. Even if society at the current stage of socioeconomic complexity will no longer be possible, and even if, as Tainter points in his "Collapse of Complex Societies," there are circumstances in which collapse happens to be the correct adaptive response, it need not automatically cause a population crash, with the survivors disbanding into solitary, feral humans dispersed in the wilderness and subsisting miserably. Collapse can be conceived of as an orderly, organized retreat rather than a rout.

For instance, the collapse of the Soviet Union - our most recent and my personal favorite example of an imperial collapse - did not reach the point of political disintegration of the republics that made it up, although some of them (Georgia, Moldova) did lose some territory to separatist movements. And although most of the economy shut down for a time, many institutions, including the military, public utilities, and public transportation, continued to function throughout. And although there was much social dislocation and suffering, society as a whole did not collapse, because most of the population did not lose access to food, housing, medicine, or any of the other survival necessities. The command-and-control structure of the Soviet economy largely decoupled the necessities of daily life from any element of market psychology, associating them instead with physical flows of energy and physical access to resources. This situation, as I argue in my forthcoming book, *Reinventing Collapse*, allowed the Soviet population to inadvertently achieve a greater level of collapse-preparedness than is currently possible in the United States.

Having given a lot of thought to both the differences and the similarities between the two

superpowers - the one that has collapsed already, and the one that is collapsing as I write this - I feel ready to attempt a bold conjecture, and define five stages of collapse, to serve as mental milestones as we gauge our own collapse-preparedness and see what can be done to improve it. Rather than tying each phase to a particular emotion, as in the Kübler-Ross model, the proposed taxonomy ties each of the five collapse stages to the breaching of a specific level of trust, or faith, in the status quo. Although each stage causes physical, observable changes in the environment, these can be gradual, while the mental flip is generally quite swift. It is something of a cultural universal that nobody (but a real fool) wants to be the last fool to believe in a lie.

Stages of Collapse

Stage 1: Financial collapse. Faith in "business as usual" is lost. The future is no longer assumed resemble the past in any way that allows risk to be assessed and financial assets to be guaranteed. Financial institutions become insolvent; savings are wiped out, and access to capital is lost.

Stage 2: Commercial collapse. Faith that "the market shall provide" is lost. Money is devalued and/or becomes scarce, commodities are hoarded, import and retail chains break down, and widespread shortages of survival necessities become the norm.

Stage 3: Political collapse. Faith that "the government will take care of you" is lost. As official attempts to mitigate widespread loss of access to commercial sources of survival necessities fail to make a difference, the political establishment loses legitimacy and relevance.

Stage 4: Social collapse. Faith that "your people will take care of you" is lost. As local social institutions, be they charities, community leaders, or other groups that rush in to fill the power vacuum, run out of resources or fail through internal conflict.

Stage 5: Cultural collapse. Faith in the goodness of humanity is lost. People lose their capacity for "kindness, generosity, consideration, affection, honesty, hospitality, compassion, charity" (Turnbull, *The Mountain People*). Families disband and compete as individuals for scarce resources. The new motto becomes "May you die today so that I die tomorrow" (Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*). There may even be some cannibalism.

Although many people imagine collapse to be a sort of elevator that goes to the sub-basement (our Stage 5) no matter which button you push, no such automatic mechanism can be discerned. Rather, driving us all to Stage 5 will require that a concerted effort be made at each of the intervening stages. That all the players seem poised to make just such an effort may give this collapse the form a classical tragedy - a conscious but inexorable march to perdition - rather than a farce. Let us sketch out this process.

Financial collapse, as we are currently observing it, consists of two parts. One is that

a part of the general population is forced to move, no longer able to afford the house they bought based on inflated assessments, forged income numbers, and foolish expectations of endless asset inflation. Since, technically, they should never have been allowed to buy these houses, and were only able to do so because of financial and political malfeasance, this is actually a healthy development. The second part consists of men in expensive suits tossing bundles of suddenly worthless paper up in the air, ripping out their remaining hair, and (some of us might uncharitably hope) setting themselves on fire on the steps of the Federal Reserve. They, to express it in their own vernacular, "fucked up," and so this is also just as it should be.

The government response to this could be to offer some helpful homilies about "the wages of sin" and to open a few soup kitchens and flop houses in a variety of locations including Wall Street. The message would be: "You former debt addicts and gamblers, as you say, 'fucked up,' and so this will really hurt for a long time. We will never let you anywhere near big money again. Get yourselves over to the soup kitchen, and bring your own bowl, because we don't do dishes." This would result in a stable Stage 1 collapse - the Second Great Depression.

However, this is unlikely, because in the US the government happens to be debt addict and gambler number one. As individuals, we may have been as virtuous as we wished, but the government will have still run up exorbitant debts on our behalf. Every level of government, from local municipalities and authorities, which need the financial markets to finance their public works and public services, to the federal government, which relies on foreign investment to finance its endless wars, is addicted to public debt. They know they cannot stop borrowing, and so they will do anything they can to keep the game going for as long as possible.

About the only thing the government currently seems it fit to do is extend further credit to those in trouble, by setting interest rates at far below inflation, by accepting worthless bits of paper as collateral and by pumping money into insolvent financial institutions. This has the effect of diluting the dollar, further undermining its value, and will, in due course, lead to hyperinflation, which is bad enough in any economy, but is especially serious for one dominated by imports. As imports dry up and the associated parts of the economy shut down, we pass Stage 2: Commercial Collapse.

As businesses shut down, storefronts are boarded up and the population is left largely penniless and dependent on FEMA and charity for survival, the government may consider what to do next. It could, for example, repatriate all foreign troops and set them to work on public works projects designed to directly help the population. It could promote local economic self-sufficiency, by establishing community-supported agriculture programs, erecting renewable energy systems, and organizing and training local self-defence forces to maintain law and order. The Army Corps of Engineers could be ordered to bulldoze buildings erected on former farmland around city centers, return the land to cultivation, and to construct high-density solar-heated housing in urban centers to resettle those who are displaced. In the interim, it could reduce homelessness by imposing a steep tax on vacant residential properties and funneling the proceeds into

rent subsidies for the indigent. With plenty of luck, such measures may be able to reverse the trend, eventually providing for a restoration of pre-Stage 2 conditions.

This may or may not be a good plan, but in any case it is rather unrealistic, because the United States, being so deeply in debt, will be forced to accede to the wishes of its foreign creditors, who own a lot of national assets (land, buildings, and businesses) and who would rather see a dependent American population slaving away working off their debt than a self-sufficient one, conveniently forgetting that they have mortgaged their children's futures to pay for military fiascos, big houses, big cars, and flat-screen television sets. Thus, a much more likely scenario is that the federal government (knowing who butters their bread) will remain subservient to foreign financial interests. It will impose austerity conditions, maintain law and order through draconian means, and aid in the construction of foreign-owned factory towns and plantations. As people start to think that having a government may not be such a good idea, conditions become ripe for Stage 3.

If Stage 1 collapse can be observed by watching television, observing Stage 2 might require a hike or a bicycle ride to the nearest population center, while Stage 3 collapse is more than likely to be visible directly through one's own living-room window, which may or may not still have glass in it. After a significant amount of bloodletting, much of the country becomes a no-go zone for the remaining authorities. Foreign creditors decide that their debts might not be repaid after all, cut their losses and depart in haste. The rest of the world decides to act as if there is no such place as The United States - because "nobody goes there any more." So as not to lose out on the entertainment value, the foreign press still prints sporadic fables about Americans who eat their young, much as they did about Russia following the Soviet collapse. A few brave American expatriates who still come back to visit bring back amazing stories of a different kind, but everyone considers them eccentric and perhaps a little bit crazy.

Stage 3 collapse can sometimes be avoided by the timely introduction of international peacekeepers and through the efforts of international humanitarian NGOs. In the aftermath of a Stage 2 collapse, domestic authorities are highly unlikely to have either the resources or the legitimacy, or even the will, to arrest the collapse dynamic and reconstitute themselves in a way that the population would accept.

As stage 3 collapse runs its course, the power vacuum left by the now defunct federal, state and local government is filled by a variety of new power structures. Remnants of former law enforcement and military, urban gangs, ethnic mafias, religious cults and wealthy property owners all attempt to build their little empires on the ruins of the big one, fighting each other over territory and access to resources. This is the age of Big Men: charismatic leaders, rabble-rousers, ruthless Macchiavelian princes and war lords. In the luckier places, they find it to their common advantage to pool their resources and amalgamate into some sort of legitimate local government, while in the rest their jostling for power leads to a spiral of conflict and open war.

Stage 4 collapse occurs when society becomes so disordered and impoverished that it can

no longer support the Big Men, who become smaller and smaller, and eventually fade from view. Society fragments into extended families and small tribes of a dozen or so families, who find it advantageous to band together for mutual support and defense. This is the form of society that has existed over some 98.5% of humanity's existence as a biological species, and can be said to be the bedrock of human existence. Humans can exist at this level of organization for thousands, perhaps millions of years. Most mammalian species go extinct after just a few million years, but, for all we know, Homo Sapiens still have a million or two left.

If pre-collapse society is too atomized, alienated and individualistic to form cohesive extended families and tribes, or if its physical environment becomes so disordered and impoverished that hunger and starvation become widespread, then Stage 5 collapse becomes likely. At this stage, a simpler biological imperative takes over, to preserve the life of the breeding couples. Families disband, the old are abandoned to their own devices, and children are only cared for up to age 3. All social unity is destroyed, and even the couples may disband for a time, preferring to forage on their own and refusing to share food. This is the state of society described by the anthropologist Colin Turnbull in his book *The Mountain People*. If society prior to Stage 5 collapse can be said to be the historical norm for humans, Stage 5 collapse brings humanity to the verge of physical extinction.

As we can easily imagine, the default is cascaded failure: each stage of collapse can easily lead to the next, perhaps even overlapping it. In Russia, the process was arrested just past Stage 3: there was considerable trouble with ethnic mafias and even some warlordism, but government authority won out in the end. In my other writings, I go into a lot of detail in describing the exact conditions that inadvertently made Russian society relatively collapse-proof. Here, I will simply say that these ingredients are not currently present in the United States.

While attempting to arrest collapse at Stage 1 and Stage 2 would probably be a dangerous waste of energy, it is probably worth everyone's while to dig in their heels at Stage 3, definitely at Stage 4, and it is quite simply a matter of physical survival to avoid Stage 5. In certain localities - those with high population densities, as well as those that contain dangerous nuclear and industrial installations - avoiding Stage 3 collapse is rather important, to the point of inviting foreign troops and governments in to maintain order and avoid disasters. Other localities may be able to prosper indefinitely at Stage 3, and even the most impoverished environments may be able to support a sparse population subsisting indefinitely at Stage 4.

Although it is possible to prepare directly for surviving Stage 5, this seems like an altogether demoralizing thing to attempt. Preparing to survive Stages 3 and 4 may seem somewhat more reasonable, while explicitly aiming for Stage 3 may be reasonable if you plan to become one of the Big Men. Be that as it may, I must leave such preparations as an exercise for the reader. My hope is that these definitions of specific stages of collapse will enable a more specific and fruitful discussion than the one currently dominated by such vague and ultimately nonsensical terms as "the collapse of Western civilization."