

Entropy: Life Beyond Industrial Civilisation

Samuel Alexander, Simplicity Institute, Melbourne, 2013, xvii + 179 pp

Reviewed by Richard Slaughter

Among the most dramatic and consequential fractures in the world today are perhaps not so much those that arise from the age-old dilemmas of race, religion, poverty and power, significant though these undoubtedly are. Rather they arise from the deep and unavoidable conflict between those who know that a continuation of business-as-usual leads to Dystopian 'overshoot and collapse' futures, and those who either do not know this or choose to deny it.

The notion that certain features of affluence - such as mass air travel and the ever-accelerating consumption of increasingly scarce resources - can no longer be assumed is one that is widely resisted. And one can understand why. For three hundred years the industrial system has been driven by anthropocentric myths of power, wealth, growth and dominance over natural process and they will not readily be overturned. The cultures of banks, trans-national corporations and most governments simply do not allow for any radical change of values and direction. Overlapping waves of high-tech innovation have also turbo-charged what some have termed 'wild globalisation.' The overall result is that the world stands on the edge of social, economic, climate, environment and resource chaos.

This is not a situation that benefits anyone - except, perhaps, those few countries such as Russia and a few other northern nations that will receive temporary relief from the early manifestations of global warming. It is not a situation that far-sighted and responsible governments, businesses or households would condone for a moment if the outlook had been clearly understood back when there were greater degrees of freedom and autonomy to fashion appropriate responses. The essence of our situation was made clear over 40 years ago with, for example, the emergence of the first *Limits to Growth* book and it has been progressively clarified thereafter. But this work - and indeed, the futures / foresight domain with which it is arguably associated - was subject to considerable abuse, set aside and then widely ignored.

Consequently there is today a rising awareness that the entry of humanity into the Anthropocene era is forcing us to acknowledge that we should have seen and understood the early signs before now and, as a result, have long ago set out on a different course. That this did *not* happen is the central dilemma and tragedy of our age. It signals the decline - and possible the end - of our species dominance on this planet.

What, then, to do?

Some look around for practical answers. They may choose to associate with the Transition Towns movement, permaculture or similar hands-on initiatives. Some feel drawn to seeking change in specific domains and professions, attempting to open them up to their own nascent futures and exploring viable responses. Some

turn to politics in the hope that it can provide answers. Others look to what they see as the potential in the latest IT apps, in the power of social networks or in young people in general. Samuel Alexander took a job in a university I used to work in and again, like many other concerned people, he decided to write a book. The genre he chose to employ was that of documentary-style Utopian fiction.

The main purpose of Utopias is to explore a version of the 'ideal' or 'best' society in their time, and many have tried their hand at this demanding craft. In general, however, Utopias have not thrived in the modern period (i.e., during the 20th and early 21st centuries). One reason for this is that affluent societies have been progressively equipped with many of the tools and devices that, early on, appeared Utopian. Another is the problem of credibility. Few people, I imagine, find any version of a Utopia credible, viable or even useful, in these often-cynical post-modern days. After all, many were tried out in practice back in the 1960s and the fate of most of those 'intentional communities' is well known. At the same time, of course, we saw the rise and seemingly endless replication of every kind of Dystopia. I've disagreed with some people on this question as I don't accept that Dystopias are necessarily 'negative' or 'depressing.' In my view it is – or can be – profoundly useful to have clear images and depth understanding of the kinds of futures you might want to avoid. Still, I have to admit that, despite wide propagation in various media, they don't seem to have had much effect on our collective slide towards a global Dystopia of our own making. As one individual confided to me 'I can still make money while the oil runs out.' Clearly there are some for whom Dystopia presents merely another set of 'opportunities.'

Hence, at the outset I applauded Alexander's brave choice to commit himself to writing a Utopia under these conditions. It is by no means an easy task and one that is fraught with pitfalls and dangers. For example, it is inevitable that one's personal 'filters,' values and preferences cannot but permeate such a text. Indeed, in the latter parts of this short and accessible book, there were moments when I found myself wilting a little under the unrelenting optimism of the enterprise. While I had no problem at all with the well-grounded critique of our industrialised, materialistic, corporatised culture, I found aspects of this quietist, artistic, island society almost as problematic.

The bulk of the story takes place on an isolated island purchased by a philanthropist from the New Zealand government. So far, so good. But jam jars in place of cups? Mud brick houses and yurts? Humble beauty and homeliness as a social norm? Human lives conceived as an aesthetic project? All this may well appeal to some. It may indeed be necessary and appropriate in some full-on post-crash scenarios but it certainly does not and, in my view, cannot, sustain anything like a universal appeal. So, with any such work, what one makes of the peaceful, adaptive monoculture described here will really depend on just what interior resources and views one brings to it. Read in an unreflective, common sense way, it conveys the essence of the kind of society that could, indeed, claw its way back up the developmental hill to the point where a viable society of sorts could exist. I say 'of sorts' because I simply could not see how sustained exposure to nature mysticism and a kind of idealised spirituality could sustain –

or even just manage - the sheer diversity and centuries-old intractability of humankind.

What also struck me about this book is the way that it appears to be mainly inspired by people and insights from somewhat earlier times. Among those cited are Diogenes, Emerson, Thoreau, Mills, Nietzsche and, more recently, Tainter. This is not to dismiss the salience of these people or, indeed, that of the world's 'wisdom traditions' that are referenced throughout. Rather, I found myself pondering the absence of more contemporary understandings. Valuable work over recent decades on values, worldviews and stages of human and cultural development were largely overlooked. This led me to speculate again that one reason why early Utopias were 'stilted' and unconvincing was that their grasp of human and social systems was so consistently inadequate. I'd argue that we are no longer in that position of systemic blindness to the shaping power of the human and social interiors. So if one wants to re-invigorate the Utopian form today then it's essential to bring to bear what we have learned over the last half-century about the influence of core values, how specific worldviews shape reality and how stages of development open out or foreclose human and cultural options. To omit these is to 'skim the surface' as it were and to leave one wondering how a society without such knowledge could possibly cohere, let alone survive.

Overall, I have to salute the intention behind this work. The author is one of what is currently a small minority of people who understand fully that the present trajectory of our civilisation is not 'upwards toward the stars' but 'downward into Dystopia.' Like others who also get this, he wants to do something about it. And in this he is entirely right. His 'charter of the deep future' (pp. 119-21) is a small gem hidden away late in the work that bears repeated reading and reflection.

Towards the end of the book there's a twist in the narrative that propels it in a quite unexpected direction. This tempered my earlier disappointment with the rather constrained conditions of social sustainability. It left me hoping that this gifted and articulate writer might one day re-visit this territory. But perhaps this time draw more fully on some of the later sources of inspiration, insight and symbolic power noted above. If writing a Utopia is a tough gig - and it is - then it surely makes sense to employ the most penetrating insights available. By so doing we increase the chances that a clearer awareness of strategies, escape routes and descent pathways from the self-constructed trap currently taking shape around us can, and will, emerge.

Richard Slaughter, Foresight International, Brisbane, Australia.

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