



richardheinberg.com

MuseLetter #350 / April 2022 by Richard Heinberg

The Failure of Global Elites

In the 1970s, global political and corporate elites had all the information they needed to put the world on a path toward long-term stability. Systems science was sufficiently advanced that a team of its practitioners organized a [scenario study](#) to see how trends in industrial production, population, food, pollution, and resource usage might interact over the next few decades; the study showed that continued growth in population and industrial production would prove unsustainable. Political scientists were beginning to sort demographic, economic, and historical social data for clues to understanding why societies sometimes descend into internal violence; data seemed to show that there was a [rough correlation](#) between rising economic inequality and declining social stability. Also, the science of ecology was revealing that forest, ocean, desert, freshwater, and soil ecosystems are inherently complex and resilient, but that they are subject to catastrophic tipping points when subjected to high enough levels of pollution or loss of habitable space. It was [clear what should be done](#) in order to put society on a sound footing: discourage population growth, cap the scale of industrial production, reduce economic inequality, clean up past pollution, reduce current and future pollution, and leave plenty of space for nature to regenerate.

Elites didn't do those things. Initially, during the Nixon and Carter years, US politicians enacted some thoughtful, far-reaching policies. Then, increasingly, and regardless of the party in power, they simply found excuses to stop pressing ahead or to backtrack. They set their pet economists to work [writing books and reports](#) insisting that growth is always good; that economic inequality is excusable because eventually the wealth of the few will surely "trickle down" as benefits to the many; and that, in President Ronald Reagan's feel-good but tragically misleading words, "There are no such things as limits to growth, because there are no limits to the human capacity for intelligence, imagination, and wonder."

Elites weren't entirely unified on these points. Those who tilted toward the left of the political spectrum were skeptical about trickle-down economics and pushed for more social welfare programs and environmental regulations. But their proposals were, for the most part, relatively tame. Virtually no influential members of the global elite proposed deliberately reining in industrial production, and only a few nations made significant efforts to reduce population growth. Political conservatives (i.e., folks who strove to conserve existing social power relations) tended to be more resolute: their agenda consisted of an [unyielding promotion](#) of industrial expansion, population increase, and conversion of nature into goods and services, with as few regulations on pollution as possible.

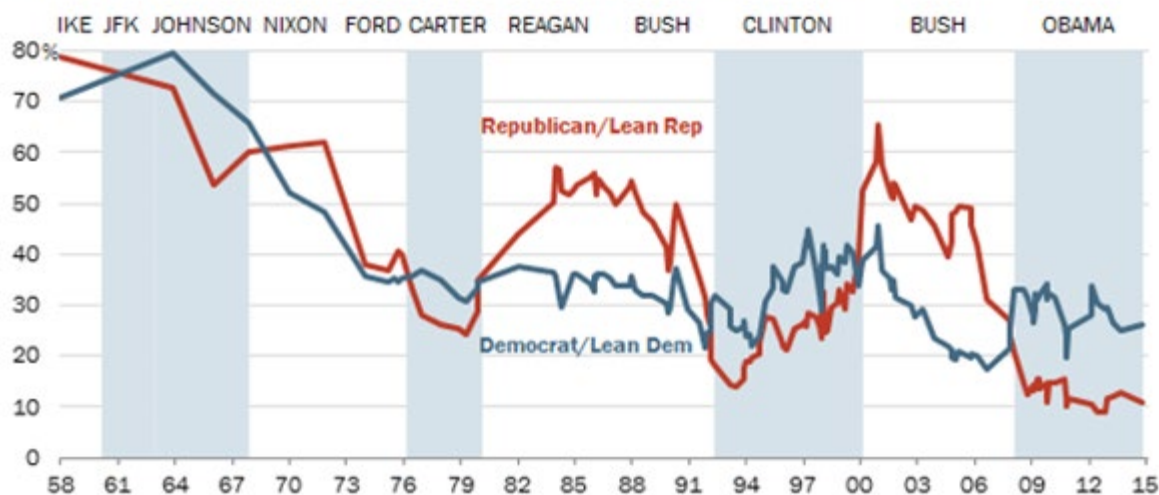
Even if the ideological contest was in some ways a stalemate (with Western democracies like the US seeing repeated shifts between liberal and conservative political dominance), conservatives effectively succeeded in blocking societal stabilization, their success greatly

aided by the fact that liberals hadn't really argued for stopping growth in population or industrial production. Indeed, for all their disagreements, liberals and conservatives settled on one thing: growth, globalization, and neoliberal economic policies would help solve all problems, from poverty to pollution. Unfortunately, they were thereby united in a perilous lie.

Now society is clearly on a path toward critical instability. Climate change threatens to swamp coastlines, trigger severe droughts and floods, and make access to food and water far more problematic for billions of people. At the same time demographers predict global population will reach almost [10 billion](#) people by 2050, adding to the challenges. Levels of inequality and debt have been rising for decades. [Hormone-disrupting chemical pollution](#) is altering sperm counts in humans and a host of other animals, threatening near-universal [sterility](#). Wild nature is [in retreat](#) almost everywhere, with numbers of mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, fish, and insects nosediving. Current waves of economic, political, and climate [refugees](#) portend future floods of displaced humanity as the socio-ecological system unravels further. And in the US, the core nation of the global industrial system, political polarization, gridlock, and increasing levels of political violence impede the ability of elites to solve even the problems they deign to acknowledge.

Trust in government by party: 1958-2015

Trust federal government to do what is right just about always/most of the time ...



Survey conducted Aug. 27-Oct. 4, 2015. Q15. Trend sources: Pew Research Center, National Election Studies, Gallup, ABC/Washington Post, CBS/New York Times, and CNN Polls. From 1976-2014 the trend line represents a three-survey moving average.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Credit: [Pew Research Center](#)

In America, trust in government has been declining since the 1950s, throughout the period of economic globalization. As the transformation of former Midwestern industrial heartlands into “flyover country” led to vanishing economic opportunity for large swathes of the populace, respect for elites increasingly turned to widespread and [deep suspicion](#).

Sensing the threat to their own legitimacy and control, elites tried harder to sell their policies by promising that everyone would eventually benefit from globalization's cheap consumer products, or by distracting their bases with hot-button cultural issues. But declining perceived legitimacy led to deeper divisions among the elites themselves. In the last decade, those divisions erupted into the election of Donald Trump, the passage of

Brexit in the UK, and the rise of nationalist-populist-authoritarian leaders around the world. For elite aspirants, new communication technologies, especially social media, offered the opportunity to influence the public continually and instantly; however, these new technologies were especially useful to members of the anti-establishment (including alt-elites like Trump) in spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories.

Now big segments of the American public don't just disagree with elites on specific policies; rather, they hate at least some elites with a burning passion. Large numbers of conservatives believe that liberal leaders are fundamentally evil—that they are quite literally pedophilic, Satan-worshipping baby killers. Meanwhile supporters of liberal elites believe that conservative leaders, most of whom have morphed into Trumpian alt-elites, are neo-Nazis bent on enforcing Christian nationalist, misogynist, homophobic white supremacy. While many of these beliefs aren't true, the anger is real and seemingly unquenchable.

As political temperatures rise to searing levels, the public is increasingly riled by labels and posturing, while the actual core failure of elites—both liberal and conservative—goes unnamed and undiscussed. That core failure consists of permitting society to proceed along a path of unchecked growth that inevitably produces worsening economic inequality and environmental degradation. Efforts to maintain continual growth have been financed by mountains of debt that can never be repaid and could come crashing down in mere days. And, from a physical standpoint, growth has been founded on the depletion of finite natural resources, thus ensuring that expansion will be self-limiting and will likely end in the mother of all crashes. Though the situation is simple to grasp in outline, the public understands almost none of it, because elites—liberal, conservative, and alt—benefit from this lack of awareness.

Liberals wring their hands over problems of social injustice, no doubt genuinely outraged but also hoping to maintain the support of women, people of color, immigrants, and LGBTQ+ folks. Yet none of these interest groups is encouraged to see its plight (which I have no desire to minimize) in the context of the uber-story of our times—the arc of unsustainable fossil-fueled population and consumption growth bending toward an inevitable collision with environmental limits.

Meanwhile, conservatives work overtime twisting together new conspiracy theories they can tighten around the necks of powerful liberals. Did you know that the “Great Reset”—a phrase employed by Klaus Schwab, Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum—is actually a plan by shadowy masters of government and finance to use Covid-19 (which was, of course, planned well in advance) as an excuse to gain total dictatorial control over every person on Earth? If *they* can force you to wear a mask or get vaccinated during a pandemic, what else can *they* make you do? Did you know that climate change is a hoax ginned up by crafty scientists hungry for more research funding—and that those same shadowy government and financial elites (along with Hollywood movie stars) are going to use global warming as an excuse to take away your car and force you to eat fake meat? Well, if you didn't already know, it's time to wake up—and make sure you're wearing a tinfoil hat to block attempts *they* might use to control your mind!

Just who are these dastardly elites? Though politicians take most of the heat, some ire might be justifiably directed at economists—who aren't all themselves super-elites, but who deserve a special “award” for being the legitimizers of the elites in the policy arena. They are our modern priesthood, setting the rules of the game and creating justifications for growth-at-any-cost. They call themselves scientists, when in fact they mostly just cram data into unexamined and untested models.

But economists' follies don't absolve the media, politicians, or corporate leaders—indeed, everyone in the top, say, ten percent of global income earners. Why couldn't these people have seen for themselves what was happening? After all, it doesn't take genius-level intelligence or higher math skills to foresee that the exponential growth of population and consumption on a finite planet will inevitably lead to disaster. I'm reminded of Upton Sinclair's pithy saying: "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it."

In all of this, I refer primarily to elites in the US and Europe (as these people have had outsized influence during the past few decades—centuries, even). But elites in less wealthy nations, including China and India, have learned their lessons well: different contexts, same failure. The only notable exceptions to otherwise universal failure are leaders of many Indigenous societies, who have [steadfastly opposed](#) overexploitation of nature.

It's difficult to convey the degree and depth of elites' failure without descending into lurid disaster porn. We face not just political or economic crisis, but societal and ecosystem collapse, with all that implies. It's hard to think very far along those lines without getting both fearful and angry.

Complaining about elites is easy these days: as economies, ecosystems, and governmental institutions start to come apart, everyone naturally blames the people in charge. Elites have targets on their backs. But usually the criticism aimed at them is unfocused, uninformed, or disinformed. Even if you personally favor a specific set of elites, in all likelihood that group is being vilified by someone else—and probably for reasons that have little to do with the overarching failure that all elites are responsible for. One is tempted to feel a little sympathy for these people. They weren't around when key decisions were made back in the 1970s that ensured we would be seeing the commencement of crisis after crisis right about now. The current crop inherited a mess. But they've done little to stop that mess from getting worse.

Still, failure has persisted even when scientists—some of whom are virtually the only elite truth-tellers around—have sought to reframe our overshoot problem in technocratic terms, with a simple cause (carbon emissions) and an equally simple solution (an energy transition away from fossil fuels and toward solar panels and wind turbines). Even though this prescription can't deliver a full solution to our ecological-social dilemma and promises merely to gingerly push society in the general direction of greater sustainability, elites seemingly still can't bring themselves to do much.

Now they are left in an untenable situation. They can no longer avoid confronting problems that took decades to materialize, and that cannot be solved quickly or painlessly.

Looking back at complex societies around the world through the past few millennia, it's clear that the failure of elites is nothing new. Indeed, given enough time, elites nearly always fail. They get too greedy, they overestimate their own intelligence, and they discourage people around them from conveying bad news. When they do fail, societies sometimes just descend to a lower level of social organization. People dust themselves off and move on, returning to a simpler village-based way of life. Other times, when crisis comes, elites divide, with factions taking advantage of failure by presenting themselves as problem solvers or avengers. This rarely leads to a peaceful outcome. But it's a pretty good summary of what's happening now.

The best strategic response for ordinary people would probably be to build grassroots horizontal power networks and get out ahead of the failing elites by doing whatever will minimize the crisis ahead. This makes sense especially at a time when global integration is

unraveling, supply chains are broken, and there are plenty of opportunities and incentives for substituting local products for imports. Nevertheless, institutions of horizontal power—coops, citizen assemblies, intentional communities—take time to organize.

If I were to offer some advice for elites, it would be as follows. It was never going to be easy to do the right thing, and it will be even harder now. Start by telling the truth. You're going to get blamed anyway. Why not use your position of influence to increase public awareness of what's really happening and why? But, dear reader, don't hold your breath waiting for elites to get it right. I've used this essay to channel my own exasperation at cowards in high places, some of whom have enriched themselves to obscene degrees even as so many others languished. Rail against them a little or some, based on your level of outrage, but I'd advise directing the bulk of your energy to moving on. Anything that further divides us makes it harder for humanity to do whatever is still possible. A better path would be building personal and [community resilience](#) ahead of what's coming. Ease the suffering. Save what can be saved.