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## The Upside of Down

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Earthquakes have long occupied a cherished place in the hearts of those looking for signs their own times are the end times. Thomas Homer-Dixon, a Canadian academic, begins *The Upside of Down* with a dramatic scene from the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. He describes the successful demolition, by dynamite and cannon, of a row of mansions that would otherwise have provided the subsequent raging inferno with further fuel for its destructive rampage.

Homer-Dixon is quite enamoured of geological metaphors. He refers often to “social earthquakes” and “earthquake-like events” and his main argument is that five “tectonic stresses” - population, energy, environmental, climate and economic - are developing beneath the “surface” of society to make social breakdown a real possibility. Social breakdown is one variety of “a more general kind of system breakdown” which can also be observed in an earthquake but it is especially complex because it involves a multiplicity of simultaneous shocks - or “synchronous failure”.

If our society can mend its ways, he believes, we might just be able to prevent social breakdown from degenerating into catastrophe.

Homer-Dixon is not a millenarian in the religious sense but the content and structure of his argument amounts to an essentially secularised version of the apocalypse. The “upside of down” is the possibility in a situation of social breakdown for creative adaptation, yet just as the language of the Christian apocalypse tends to be dominated by lurid images of beasts with multiple heads and horns rather than the salvation of the righteous, most of this book is devoted to evidence - much of it engagingly presented - pointing to very bad times ahead. If you took Homer-Dixon's warnings to heart, far from “reducing the force of underlying stresses”, cultivating a “prospective mind”, increasing resilience and preparing to respond flexibly and imaginatively to breakdown, your first instinct would surely be to stock up on tinned food and search the backyard for the bomb shelter that Uncle George built back in 1942.

Homer-Dixon presents much useful information about the problems developing as a result of the different rates of population growth in rich and poor countries, human-induced climate change, environmental damage, the growing scarcity of oil and the widening gap between rich and poor. Drawing on the history of ancient Rome, he argues that when a society is no longer able to find enough high-quality energy, it's ripe for collapse.



*San Francisco, 1906.*

Yet scholars who treat human society as a “system” can seem remarkably oblivious to the danger of reductionism. Homer-Dixon, for instance, has precious little to say about culture, language, religion, ideology or even - most remarkable in a professor of political science - politics. It’s easy enough, for instance, to accept that the problems he identifies such as environmental damage, terrorism and deadly diseases have little respect for national boundaries. It’s much harder to see how “we” are going to resolve any of them either through our existing state structures and political institutions or, for that matter, without them. While he acknowledges that politics is at the heart of both the serious problems and possible solutions to them, *The Upside of Down* is marred by a failure to grapple fully with the implications of this recognition. He ends up by calling for “some kind of democratic world government” - surely the last refuge of the bewildered.

Meanwhile, I’m off to look for that bomb shelter.