



## Addressing Tipping Points for a Precarious Future

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### Commentary 8.3

Turning the Tides? Parallel Infrastructures and the Revolt of the Corporate Elites

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#### **[–]** Abstract and Keywords

The forces which impede transformational tipping points are very strong, entrenched and locked in. To overcome these will require polycentric governance, cooperating corporations, alliances between civic and religious groups, and the onset of more autonomous yet accountable local and regional governance. These may form parallel infrastructures of change in corporate ethos and accounting, in the ecological awakening of religions, and in the effective democratization and economic autonomy of local governance.

*Keywords:* tipping points, parallel infrastructures, ecological awakening, corporate ethics, full reporting, localism, democracy

At the end of 2012, the signs were proliferating of the lateness of the hour for a global turn towards sustainable development. The projections for greenhouse gas emissions suggest that humanity is well on course for a 4–6°C global average temperature rise by the end of the century. The scenarios for economic, social, and ecological disruption, or even collapse, are ever more alarming. Yet in the US general election campaign of 2012, neither climate change nor wider ecological stresses and resource crises were discussed or even discussable. The presidential candidates studiously avoided all mention of climate disruption. Only when the election was won did President Obama dare to raise the issue, and then only when the devastation wrought on the north-eastern US seaboard by Hurricane Sandy had made it 'safe' to talk freely about it. Such has been the group-think of US policymakers, lobbies, and media about climate change and the broader question of ecological limits: these issues are so deeply disturbing to the settled assumptions of neoliberal economics and politics that they cannot be allowed to be made real.

Yet this is the unavoidable truth for modern states and businesses. No matter how much they hubristically feel they are entitled to define the 'facts' of the world to suit themselves, hard reality will have the final word. Already in the aftermath of the elections of 2012 and the impact

of Hurricane Sandy, US politicians are beginning to break ranks and abandon the conspiracy of silence about global ecological risks and tipping points. That said, the weight of established interests lobbying for business as usual remains immense. And the persistence of the Western economic crisis that **(p.328)** broke in 2007 means politicians will continue for some time to be distracted by financial fire-fighting and the challenges of unemployment, recession, and debt.

What can potentially lead to a change in the 'lock-in' to a network of systemic dependencies and constraints that inhibit any honest and far-sighted confrontation with global ecological risks and the threat of dangerous tipping points? There is so much to overcome, as summarized in Chapters 6.1 and 8.1:

- Deep internalization of the neoliberal view of the primacy of free markets, deregulatory policy, and individualistic consumer choice;
- The consequences of this in actual market development, leading to oligopolistic business powers exercising immense influence over politics, especially in the USA;
- A demoralization of political discourse and professional ethos, as evident in the financial scandals exposed since 2007 and in the hollowing-out of the idea of citizenship (see Andrew Dobson's analysis in 8.2);
- Path-dependency on a vast scale, with lock-in to fossil fuel-powered centralized infrastructures for energy, transport, and food;
- A profound mismatch between the timetables of politicians and democratic culture and the timescales of investment and adjustment for resilience and sustainable energy use;
- Little political gain for anyone confronting the need for radical changes in production and consumption as part of a century-long strategy for sustainable development.

In the light of all this, it seems clear that we cannot expect leadership and 'tipping conversion' among those most embedded in the neoliberal system, namely policymakers at national level and producers in resource-based industries. They are likely to confront change rather too little and too late, largely in response to the experience of being 'awed and shocked' into action by environmental and social change. So we need other agents of systemic change, capable of offering leadership, exemplary influence and leverage over the political system. These need to be capable of:

- deploying sufficient power in production and consumption systems to change existing interests, or to confront them in political lobbying;
- connecting with sympathetic community interests and energizing citizens for sustainable living, in a context of deep loss of trust in politics and widespread lack of agency for change; **(p.329)**
- holding sufficient financial power to have a major role in funding investments in sustainable technologies along entire value chains.

My contention and hope are that agents already exist who can meet these requirements. They have in common a capacity to influence behaviour, values, and investment at significant scale; dismay at the lack of urgent action on climate disruption and other global risks; a long-range perspective, transcending in some ways the electoral cycles of nation states, and less vulnerability to the lobbies so powerful at national level in politics; and potential to inspire 'followership' in national politicians, who might be encouraged to act in the wake of these

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agents' pioneering work. They are all capable of forming alliances and action-oriented partnerships for what Elinor Ostrom (2010) calls the 'polycentric governance' needed for resilient societies and sustainable development paths (see 5.1, 6.6, 8.1):

- Corporations and major public sector investors concerned with the risks arising from fossil-fuel dependency and climate disruption;
- Religious organizations and communities;
- Cities and local/regional governments.

Corporations such as Unilever have become increasingly outspoken about the risks being run by the global economic system and by its dominant national governments. They see their long-term competitiveness or even survival jeopardized by business as usual. Truly striking denunciations of neoliberal economic culture have come in the past year from Paul Polman, CEO of Unilever, whose global strategy for sustainable development is remarkable for its ambition and radicalism. For example:

The very essence of capitalism is under threat as business is now seen as a personal wealth accumulator.

We have to bring this world back to sanity and put the greater good ahead of self-interest.

We need to fight very hard to create an environment out there that is more long term focussed and move away from short termism.

(Paul Polman, quoted in Confino 2012)

Other corporations are making similar moves - for example, Wal-Mart, Marks and Spencer, Puma, Patagonia. Far more needs to be done. But the makings of a coalition of the willing are clear among major corporations whose interests are threatened by ecological disruption and whose collective financial clout could enable them to form 'parallel infrastructures' for investment, accounting, reporting, and engagement with customer-citizens. **(p.330)** Many of these companies are concerned with food supply and have greater sensitivity to what is happening at local and regional levels to ecosystems than any major fossil interests or national governments do. Their interests in long-term security are shared by the US Department of Defense. The Pentagon is now a major investor in renewable energy, motivated by self-interested security concerns but capable, like Unilever and other global corporations, of being a catalyst for change across many important supply chains.

My hope is that by the end of this decade these corporations will do three things. First, they will begin to construct parallel infrastructures for 'doing capitalism' to challenge the existing models of finance, accounting, reporting, and investment. Second, they will become openly and consistently hostile to fossil capitalist interests. Third, they will deliver ultimatums on climate action and low-carbon energy investment to political elites. Democratic policymakers will thereby be given an incentive to lead and to break ranks from the carbon-generating interests. This will not be a noble or inspiring spectacle, but it is the best we can hope for, and it will be effective.

These efforts will be accompanied and supported by a gradual shift towards an 'ecological awakening' among the major religions. This is already in evidence in Christian churches, some parts of the Islamic world, and in Buddhist and Daoist traditions. The global population remains

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overwhelmingly committed to religious identity and observance in varying degrees. We may witness a major expansion in religious belonging in China and elsewhere, galvanized by the onset of scarcities and ecological disruption. Such a development will not be automatically for the good, of course: heightened religious sentiment could well be a factor in local and regional conflict. But the potential for religious traditions, which have immense holdings of land, money, and buildings and which have potentially unrivalled resources of community trust and influence, to be positive catalysts for change and members of 'coalitions of the willing' with pro-sustainability advocates in business and civil society, is very great. The faith communities too can form 'parallel infrastructures' for finance, investment, and enterprise, and already are doing so, as evidenced by the many initiatives promoted and documented by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (Palmer and Finlay 2003; Colwell *et al.* 2009; see also [www.arcworld.org](http://www.arcworld.org)).

A third force for change is the emergent 'parallel infrastructure' of local and regional governance for sustainable development. Ever since the Rio conference of 1992 the Local Agenda 21 framework has inspired considerable **(p.331)** local and regional action on environment and renewables worldwide. It has also generated a political narrative of increasing potency. The full force of this widely shared analysis was expressed in the wake of the Rio+20 Conference in 2012. Mayors, regional governors and local authorities released damning statements on the performance of national leaders. A quotation from the international network of local authorities for sustainability, ICLEI, exposes the frustration:

We now see that all the good will, energy, brain capacity and money that went into the Rio+20 process have resulted in dozens of pages of paper, which contain hardly any commitment by governments. Instead, national governments reaffirm what they had already resolved long ago, list non-binding intentions, and acknowledge the activities by other actors such as local governments ... Do cities have to step in where governments are failing to take effective action? Cities are cooperating internationally without borders, without customs, without military forces. They can address the issues of the future without the global power play that we see going on at inter-governmental level ... We suspect that the mechanisms, rules and routines of international diplomacy are outdated and incapable of designing and bringing about a sustainable future.

(ICLEI 2012)

The failure of national politics to match up to the challenges at hand has reinvigorated alliances of mayors, cities, and localities. This robust response from many local decision-making elites has been marked by the emergence of numerous coalitions for investment and sharing of experience across the world, with business, and with other sectors of civil society. As with business and religious elites alarmed by unsustainable developments, these policy elites have the capacity to make major investments in new forms of production and consumption; they have procurement power on a significant scale; they can command in many cases more trust and influence than can national politicians; and they can often plan for the long run more effectively than national policymakers can.

An objection to this analysis might be that in the absence of national action, none of these agents for bottom-up and 'together-across' change can make the difference we need to see. But the combined force, whether coordinated or not, of these interests operates at international scale, and can catalyse change in multiple value chains. Crucially, all of these forces have the capacity to develop self-reinforcing institutions for investment, engagement of citizens, and for sharing of technologies, bypassing those embedded in carbon-intensive business as usual.

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Should they deploy this **(p.332)** power, they could embolden and champion national politicians who are otherwise boxed in.

This is the scenario for transformational tipping thresholds. The essential elements of this revolt – or gradual build-up of revolts – are in place now. The agents for change will extend and devise what I have called ‘parallel infrastructures’ for finance, energy, production, and consumption. The coalitions needed to make the revolts succeed need to be formed, active and bold in leadership well before the end of this decade. My hope and expectation are that this will be the case.

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