

We are in an era of creative destruction... A bunch of the institutions that we rely on currently will, to some degree, decompose. I believe that much of what we count as democratic politics today will fall apart, because we are simply not going to be able to deal with the scale of change that we are about to face. It will profoundly disable much of the current political class.
John Elkington, *New Yorker*, February 5, 2008

This quotation caught my attention last winter and provoked my thinking about two questions: are practitioners in the field of environmental conflict resolution (ECR) part of the political class and, if so, what is the significance for ECR of a predicted disabling of that political class due to synchronous stresses?

This article examines these questions in the context of a session I presented at the May 19 ACR EPP Section meeting in Tucson entitled "Stresses, Limits, and Risk: Imagining the Future of ECR." The purpose of the session was to engage colleagues with diverse personalities and perspectives in an initial discussion of the future suggested by John Elkington's quote and the potential implications for our field. The article offers a summary of the session's key points as well as my own perspective in hopes of contributing to the growing number of essential conversations world-wide addressing the question: What shall we do?

Climate change on the scale described in the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize-winning report by the International Panel on Climate Change poses a profound challenge to American democracy. Our EPP session addressed four additional stressors likely to shape America's future: *energy demand and supply, environmental damage, global instability and widening income gaps, and population growth rate differences*. These five tectonic stressors, potentially multiplied by (1) the increasing speed and extent of global connectedness and (2) the escalating destructive power of small groups, form the heart of an argument about the future by Thomas Homer-Dixon in *The Upside of Down* (Island Press 2006). The argument, in part, warns that looking at a single stressor such as climate change misses the profound risks from multiple, synchronous stresses that we cannot isolate or control. A full discussion of Homer-Dixon's thesis is beyond the scope of this article, but it relies heavily on systems theory, complexity, brittleness associated with layered, managed solutions, and adaptive cycles in nature that include periods of collapse.

Part One: Institutions and Values

The first part of our EPP session focused on these questions: *What are the institutions and values that form the foundation for EPP work, and what gives us authority and legitimacy?* The obvious place to start is our constitutional form of democracy, with its three branches of government and core democratic values such as freedom, equality, and free speech and association. Our discussion moved beyond government to consider whether private sector institutions and values are part of our EPP foundation, including “cultural” values. For example:

- *Do we rely on the influence of large economic players such as the automobile and oil industries?*
- *Do we rely on economic values associated with so-called free markets?*
- *Are we dependent as a professional field on a cultural expectation that there are no limits, as argued by Wendell Berry: “[T]he commonly accepted basis of our economy is the supposed possibility of endless growth, limitless wants, limitless wealth, limitless natural resources, limitless energy, and limitless debt[?]”*

The small group discussions covered diverse perspectives on this topic, as might be expected. I invite participants to respond directly to this article. Here is my view: EPP practitioners are in essence an extension of government, particularly the executive branch. Our clients often are federal and state executive branch agencies: they typically fund our efforts, and there is a recurring question about how to balance their needs and interests with our values about being non-partisan. Members of the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution’s Roster appear even more tightly linked to government from this perspective.

The EPP field today has a hard argument to make that it is not closely linked to government, powerful economic interests, and our culture of limitlessness. We *are* an extension of the political class in American society. That suggestion understandably may sit heavily on some, and doubtless will feel inconsistent with some personal values linked to identity. My purpose is not to accuse but to stimulate some hard thinking about who “we” are based on the sources of our authority and legitimacy, and how we may be perceived in a future period of social upheaval that questions, disrupts, and even dismantles institutions and values.

Part Two: Social Breakdown and the Role of EPP

Our EPP session returned to Elkington’s proposal of a future characterized by creative destruction of political institutions and the political class and considered these questions:

- *Can you imagine a plausible scenario for social breakdown influenced by climate change, either alone or as one of multiple stressors?*
- *In your scenario what is the role for what we do in developing and implementing environmental and public policy? Consider both sudden change and long-term change.*
- *How might climate change lead to a disabled political class in the U.S.? How might this occur: quickly, or over an extended period?*
- *What would be the impacts on legitimacy and authority of federal, state, and local government?*
- *How might these impacts extend to development and implementation of environmental policy?*
- *How might familiar institutions and values be changed through creative destruction in your scenario?*
- *What can you not imagine, and why?*

Evidence to support an argument that we are experiencing synchronous effects of the five stressors identified by Homer-Dixon, which could lead to such a scenario, is not hard to find:

Climate change: A challenging talk during the ECR 2008 conference by Dr. Jonathan Overpeck (a coordinator for the IPCC Climate Change report that was awarded the 2007 Nobel Prize for Peace) highlighted potential climate impacts and the confidence attached to future scenarios by the IPCC panel based on current knowledge.

One interesting perspective is the U.S. military's approach to climate change, apart from other stressors. According to a recent article by a military lawyer, "Stability is at the heart of our national security policy. . . The loss of stability is the primary threat of global climate change." James Stuhltrager, "Global Climate Change and Security," *Natural Resources and Environment* 22, No. 3 (Winter 2008). In terms of risk and military strategy, Stuhltrager describes the disastrous effects of global climate change as a "low probability-high consequence" event.

Energy demand and supply: How about \$4/gallon gasoline, or \$138/barrel oil? Consider the effects on the aviation industry in the United States over the past year including rising ticket prices, charges to check luggage, and the recent grounding of airplanes by United. Homer-Dixon makes a compelling argument about the critical importance of Energy Return on Investment, or EROI, and how declining petroleum supplies increase costs associated with meeting our increasing worldwide energy demands.

Environmental damage: CNN recently reported a story on ocean water quality issues entitled “Dawn of the Dead Zones.” California banned commercial and recreational salmon fishing this year due to a collapse of the fishery. And water deliveries from northern to southern California have been significantly restricted due to the population decline of the delta smelt, raising serious questions about future water allocations to agriculture, cities, and the environment.

Global economic instability and widening income gaps. In the U.S., the Federal Reserve took the unprecedented step of propping up the private investment bank Bear Sterns to prevent a credit market collapse this past spring.¹ Recent volatility of commodity prices around the world and the impacts on availability of basic necessities fill the media. One-half the developing world’s population of 2.7 billion people live on less than \$2 a day. In 2006 the world also had 793 billionaires with a combined wealth of \$2.6 trillion. The *NY Times* reported on April 16 that some individual hedge fund managers are entitled to compensation approaching \$3 billion apiece. Instability and income gaps are frequently excused as part of the price of capitalism, but my growing view is that we are faced with increasingly significant long-term consequences and that the excuses are losing their power to reassure.

Population growth rate differences and megacities. There is an ongoing debate about global population growth that merits attention in the context of other stressors. According to Homer-Dixon, in 50 years the total population of rich nations is projected to be close to its current level (1.2 billion) while the population of poor nations will increase by 2.5 billion (to 7.8 billion). If these estimates are accurate they forecast a profound population imbalance with significant implications for peace and stability.

My sense is that the discussion groups in our session reached similar places: a scenario of social breakdown driven by climate change and other stressors is imaginable and even plausible. Not unexpectedly, the groups struggled to imagine the role of EPP in such scenarios. We did not jointly discuss a more challenging question: whether such a scenario is likely or even certain. One important driver would be the pace of climate change—gradual or abrupt—and uncertainty dominates the discussions. A conclusive answer is not within our

¹ This article was written in June 2008 and may appear dated in light of subsequent events in world financial, stock, and commodity markets. One example is the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in September 2008, the subsequent chaos in markets, and the extraordinary actions of central banks in response. The basic premise of the article appears to be more compelling in light of these events.

present reach, but there clearly are good reasons to improve our field's appreciation for the spectrum of potential outcomes and risks. My argument for some next steps follows.

Part Three: Next Steps

The last part of our EPP session addressed "what shall we do" questions, including:

- *Is there a discussion to have as a field? Is it already happening?*
- *What might be the questions?*
- *What are the obstacles?*
- *Is it too big? Too far off?*
- *Does uncertainty overwhelm?*

The SRO crowd at a session on climate change at the ECR 2008 conference and the content of some of the discussion suggests the answer to the first bullet is "yes." Framing questions to move that discussion forward is an important next step. Next year's EPP conference on climate change in Denver will reflect attention to this task and, perhaps, progress toward answers that can provide the basis for action.

Here is my perspective: opinions about the likelihood of a social breakdown scenario suffer from an authority problem at this time. The scope, complexity, and uncertainty that must be addressed in formulating an opinion will make it very difficult to persuade for the foreseeable future. Climate scientists took the step of assigning confidence levels—e.g., low confidence, high confidence—to their predictions of climate change effects in the IPCC reports, and this is as authoritative as it gets. However, translating these physical impacts to social ones is not a science. Here I believe an approach that focuses on risk is instructive. The American military appears to evaluate climate change alone as a high consequence event with implications for social stability, despite the uncertainty associated with the science. I suggest our field adopt a similar approach that begins with opening our eyes, acknowledging the potential for group denial, and committing ourselves to inquiry and dialog. My justification is the potential for unprecedented consequences for our democracy if the merely plausible becomes reality.

I'll close with this quote from C.S. Holling (by way of Homer-Dixon):

The only way to approach such a period, in which uncertainty is very large and one cannot predict what the future holds, is not to predict, but to experiment and act inventively and exuberantly via diverse adventures in living.

Homer-Dixon and others argue that an uncertain future likely will place a premium on resilience, experimentation, and invention, and I encourage you to consider this general proposition and begin to generate ideas about how to promote these qualities as individuals and as a field. Along the way, consider the question raised above about our link to government and the ruling class. Are we more comfortable waiting for government to support our involvement in efforts to address the future, and do we need to move out of our professional comfort zones? My answer to both questions is "yes." If deep change is needed rather than managed solutions, where do our interests lie? Can our field take the initiative in promoting the kinds of cross-cutting, silo-dissolving, risk-taking experiments that will educate and support the process of building social capacity for a future period of profound change? My answer to these questions is: Let's have this conversation. But in the meantime, don't wait to experiment before the answers are clearer. Let's think, let's talk, but let's also act.

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June 2008