

Responding to a Reading

Universal basic income and rewilding can meet Anthropocene demands

Are we doomed to societal collapse? Not if we break the mould of ever-greater production and consumption

Enough concrete has been produced to cover the entire surface of the Earth in a layer two millimetres thick. Enough plastic has been manufactured to clingfilm it as well. We produce 4.8bn tonnes of our top five crops, plus 4.8 billion head of livestock, annually. There are 1.2bn motor vehicles, 2bn personal computers, and more mobile phones than the 7.5 billion people on Earth.

The result of all this production and consumption is a chronic, escalating, many-sided environmental crisis. From rapid climate change to species extinctions to microplastics in every ocean, these impacts are now so large that many scientists have concluded that we have entered a new human-dominated geological period called the Anthropocene.

This dangerous new epoch ends the unusually stable planetary conditions over the past 10,000 years that allowed farming and complex civilisations to emerge. With the spectre of rapid environmental change leading to societal collapse looming, what is to be done?

Using modern science to reanalyse human history can help us understand future problems in more fundamental ways. Our analysis shows that just five successive types of human society have spread worldwide: hunter-gatherer, agriculturalist, mercantile capitalist, industrial capitalist and, following the second world war, today's consumer capitalist society.

Each subsequent stage relies on greater energy use and greater generation and flows of information and knowledge. These result in a much larger population, rising per capita productivity and greater collective agency. Seen in this light, a new sixth type of society will require both greater energy provision and improved systems to communicate knowledge and manage information.

To usher in a new way of living, the core dynamic of ever-greater production and consumption of goods and resources must be broken, coupled with a

societal focus on environmental repair. Two increasingly discussed ideas do just this.

Universal Basic Income (UBI) is a policy whereby a financial payment is made to every citizen, unconditionally, without any obligation to work, at a level above their subsistence needs. Small-scale trials of UBI show most people would still work, but UBI could break the link between work and consumption. We all do it, saying: “I work so hard, I deserve that fancy meal, new gadget, or long-haul flight.” Consumption is the payback for being ever-more productive at work. Indeed, it makes little sense to curb consumption when we know we will have to be ever-more productive at work regardless of our choices.

UBI reduces dependency, giving people the agency to say no to undesirable work, and yes to opportunities that often lie out of reach. With UBI we could all think long-term, well beyond the next payday. We could care for ourselves, others, and the wider world, as living in the Anthropocene demands.

Another idea is Half-Earth – the simple but profound idea that environmental repair could come from allocating half the Earth’s surface primarily for the benefit of other species. Half-Earth is less utopian than it first appears, as we have become an urban species. Mass-scale forest restoration is already underway, with commitments across 43 countries to restore 292m hectares of degraded land to forest, 10 times the area of the UK.

And at a deeper level, our views on nature are forged by the society we live in. Acknowledging the Anthropocene re-establishes that humans are part of nature, and so rewilding projects, where large areas are managed to allow natural processes to run, are increasingly popular. Slowly, a new nature aesthetic is being born.

But can we really escape booming production and consumption? The fate of species encountering vast new resources is exponential growth and then collapse, epitomised by the rapid expansion and eventual death of bacteria growing in a Petri dish. While rarely recognised, we humans have recently become the exception to this rule: birth rates on all continents are declining and the global population is on track to stabilise. More information, in the form of girls’ education, has done something truly extraordinary in the context of 4bn years of life.

UBI would give people the right to choose when it comes to fulfilling their own basic needs, and rewilding Earth does the same of other species’ needs. This would be a legacy of a new chapter in Earth’s history that we could be proud of.