

It's the end of the world as we know it

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'The future is no longer... what it might have been if humans had known to use their brains and their opportunities more effectively. But the future can still become what we reasonably and realistically want'- Aurelio Peccei, 1981 (in Meadows et al 2004: 1)

In this critical reflection, I will create a pragmatic view of the near future, through an imaginary conversation between grandfather and grandchild. This conversation will focus on examining how the increase in consumerism can lead to an environment which can no longer cope with the pressures of society's demands as well as the role human nature has in creating its own man-made risks, which, evidently, may cause the destruction of the universe.

My imaginary conversation is set almost 90 years after the great Boxing Day tsunami hit the coast

of Sumatra, Indonesia in 2004, where one of the greatest tsunamis known to mankind has hit the West coast of the United States, crashing into the Humboldt Bay Nuclear Power Station causing nuclear devastation, and consequently, an end to mankind.

With the exception of two apparent survivors who managed to keep themselves alive after screening in an underground bunker from decades before, sitting alone on the dusty, pebbled, shore of Brighton, a town, that just days ago, was filled with fun and enjoyment.

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Nya: Grandfather... I don't understand how all this could have happened. What have we done?

Grandfather: You see Nya, the world we lived in was somewhat, a greedy society, we all wanted the latest technologies. New Computers, Televisions, iPhones, iPads. You and I included. However, there came a point where the planet was under too much strain to keep up with these demands, this is known as the limits of growth.

It is the idea that as population and psychical capital increase, society will have to divert their other capital onto these problems, eventually, so much capital is used on these issues, that there is no more for growth of the industrial sector, and when this declines, so does the economic sector, such as food services, and when these sectors decrease, so does the human population (Meadows, 2004).

According to a sociologist named Beck (1992) we lived in something he called a 'risk society.' Risk society is where we have a way of 'dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself' and taking new risks as opposed to staying with the original dangers we already know of. However Nya, as a society, we make risks based upon the knowledge we have of something. So for example, we polluted the air with chemicals, yet we knew the risks these chemicals had on human health and the planet. Humanities growth and industrial production growth combined were creating risks to the survival of the earth with polluted emissions and waste (Meadows et al, 2004).

The management of these risks, according to Beck (1992), is the way we made use of and acknowledged or avoided the risks that are placed in front of us. In the situation we were put in, with the increased chance the planet would longer be able to survive, governments decided to use Nuclear power instead of the burning of fossil fuels. However, although carbon dioxide poisoning did indeed decrease, this risk was replaced with new risks such as toxic waste and of course, the chance of mass explosions if something happened to go wrong. These are known as manufactured risks (Giddens, 2002). Giddens would argue that it was because of

society's manufactured risks, such as nuclear power and global warming that caused ice caps to melt that resulted in a wave that destructed the nuclear power plant. When instead we could have used renewable energy, such as solar panels, which would not have had as many damaging consequences.

Nya: But what do the technologies we used have to do with the destruction of the entire planet?!?!

Grandfather: Well then, we lived in something known as a consumerist society, an ever increasing consumerist society. This meant that we were constantly buying into goods in order to create a wealthier economy. One of the main arguments to why we consume is status. Ransome (2005) argued that we consumed things to gain an identity and actively construct who we are. So someone with money may buy the biggest car available, one with more emissions and pollutants in the air than a regular car. The size and price of this car would



give off the impression the owner was wealthy. In this consumerist society, we felt the need to keep up to date with the latest technologies. Wallerstein (2004: 2) said:

"Imperative of endless accumulation of capital had generated a need for constant technological change, a constant expansion of frontiers- geographical, psychological, intellectual, scientific". This idea, Nya, suggests that Capitalism is inherently expansionist, the guiding principle was not to make the world better, but to accumulate more money with the process of commodification at its centre. Everything and anything can be bought and sold on the market. Therefore making demand

for technologies higher. With the increase in demand for technology, comes an increase in demand for power. This is why we had a large expansion in nuclear power plants.

Nya: So then, how did the Tsunami occur? Are we one of the reasons for that too?

Grandfather: This isn't completely our fault. Tsunamis often occur due to a series of underwater earthquakes and other explosions that naturally occur due to tectonic plate movement. However, with our increasing destruction of forests in order for animals to survive, to give us McDonalds, those cows eventually gave off too much methane, and as you may know Nya, methane has serious impacts on the atmosphere. Although many concerned environmentalists tried their very hardest to explain to us the seriousness of the depleting ozone layer, once again, as a risk society, we continued to destruct our planet. A group of authors named Meadows, D. H et al (2004) suggested that Chlorofluorocarbon, also known as CFC's, an organic compound likely to be found in refrigerators and deodorant cans amongst other things was consumed so much by the human species that it consequently reached the planet's atmosphere. This then released a chlorine atom, causing a reaction with the ozone layer. Subsequently, this reaction had a huge impact on temperature change, and thus, a traumatic increase in the melting of the ice caps, leading to the great wave that destroyed our planet.

Nya: So how come we didn't see this coming?

Grandfather: Well the things is, many people did know it was coming. We were regularly told by professional environmentalists that we were destroying the planet. Some authors, such as Mason, J (2005 p11) went as far as to say that we began destroying the planet several millennia ago during the beginning of agriculture and farming, where we

consequently placed human beings above all other life in the food chain. This gave us no kinship or sympathy for other beings around us such as animals. What he meant here, is that we have always been selfish beings. We have always wanted what is best for us, rather than what is best for our future ancestors. Other environmentalists such as Leech (2009) gave us plenty of facts about the rate in which we were damaging our resources, arguing how westernised countries such as America were using too many resources, stating that the US makes up only 5 per cent of the overall human population, yet they consume over 30 per cent of the entire planets resources. These statistics suggests that we were either too selfish to calm down on the resources we use, or maybe, we just didn't realise how quick these resources would run out. Way back in 2009, Leech, E also told us that as well as being in the midst of a mass extinction, if we recycled one days' worth of paper for the New York Times on Sunday, this would have saved around 75,000 trees. It is these statistics, Nya, that sometimes make me wonder why then in 1978, there were 4,200 square kilometres of Amazonian land that had been cleared, and in 2003 there were 67,764 square kilometres of cleared land (Mother Nature Network, 2014) and yet, we knew about this increase but did nothing to sort it.

We were also warned about the dangers of nuclear power and radiation poisoning. There was in fact, a nuclear explosion that happened in 1986 just before I was born. It was known as the Chernobyl Accident. It happened in Ukraine and only 30 people died (World Nuclear Association, 2014). However, it was believed to have caused deaths later on in life. One of the main issues here was that only 5 per cent of radioactivity from the plant was released, indicating that if more was tragically released, there would be many more deaths. Other environmentalists such as Greenpeace (2014) also warned us of the dangers of Nuclear power

suggesting that if a meltdown were to happen, the unclear radiation could kill thousands of people and leave land unusable too.

All these things were indicators of a disaster waiting to happen. Yet we sadly were not quick enough to change our lifestyles before this disaster happened. There are many limits to the growths in society that we initially feel are good. As a consumer society we continue to buy into products that may be beneficial in the short term, but disadvantageous in the long term.

Nya: So what you're basically saying then is... we caused the destruction even though we saw it coming?

Grandfather: Well yes, that's exactly right.

Nya: Maybe it was good then that the humans got wiped out after what they did to the planet.

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Picture 1:

<http://medioambientales.com/wp-content/2013/02/Zonas-riesgo-tsunami-2013.jpg> (accessed 30/4/2015)

Picture 2:

<http://www.birdspiders.com/gallery/index.php/Tarantula-Habitats/Rainforest-deforestation-Amazonas-Venezuela> (accessed 30/4/2015)