

## THEME 02

# Contemporary Collapsology

COLLAPSE

APOCALYPSE

SOCIO-CULTURAL  
TRENDS

The en of the world is an ancient theme, prevalent in mythology, religion and arts throughout the ages. In recent years, we have witnessed rising popularity of this theme, albeit a secularized version, in popular media. Furthermore, we do not only tremble at the thought of the Apocalypse anymore: now, it is welcomed and even aspired to. Analyzing and understanding this emerging paradigm of “collapsology” will reveal some of the deep structural transformations of our socio-cultural fabric and our perception of the current state of economic and political systems.

## Our observations

- In his book [Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed](#), historian Jared Diamond defines “collapse” as “a drastic decrease in human population size and/or political/economic/social complexity, over a considerable area, for an extended time.” (p.3) His book analyzes the collapse of various historical civilizations and identifies five influential factors: climate change, hostile neighbors, trade partners that provide alternative sources of goods (and services), environmental problems, and society’s response to these risks. Of course, the last of these factors is the only endogenous factor, and often revolves around the short-term interests of those in power and those who own the means of production and the long-term needs of society at large.
- There is growing interest, especially in France, in “[collapsology](#)”, which is a movement that favors a collapse of current socio-political structures, because human history is full of collapsing civilizations that in turn became fertile ground for new ones. Mostly driven by climate change, this school urges us to turn our “current collapse” into a positive one, in which we actively build new economic, political and social systems (e.g. small-scale bio-regions, economic models not based on growth) that are attuned to the finitude of the earth’s resources and foster living in harmony with nature.
- In his book [Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?](#), theorist Mark Fisher sees capitalist realism as the “widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.” (p.6) He attributes this idea to two cultural critics of “late capitalism”: Frederic Jameson (who famously said that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism”) and Slavoj Žižek (a Marxist philosopher who uses movies and popular media to explore hidden ideologies and capitalist hegemonic dominance in post-modern societies, e.g. [The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology](#)).
- Three years ago, we wrote about the [historical recurrence of periods of “crises”](#), and that according to the book *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy*, we are in the midst of a twenty-year crisis period that started with the 2007 financial crisis and morphed into a broader socio-political crisis. Steve Bannon, Trump’s former Chief Strategist of the White House, was heavily influenced by these ideas and endorsed Trump as he saw him as the only person that could leverage this period of crisis to “drain the swamp” in Washington and lay the foundation for a new socio-political system (i.e. a “High”). Even after Bannon was ousted in August 2017, he has continued to support Trump for this reason.
- A recent [study](#) shows that the fundamental political demarcation in the UK is no longer the “left-right” divide but the “centrist-anarchy” divide. Those in the anarchist ideological camp, comprising up to 40% of the population, have low trust in government, business and media and hail from both the left and right. Similarly, another [study](#) shows that both the far-left and far-right share a common urge for chaos, “sharing motivations associated with ‘chaotic’ motivations to ‘burn down’ the entire established democratic ‘cosmos’” (p.1). Their shared longing for chaos and anarchy is best illustrated by the hugely popular meme “[some men just want to watch the world burn](#)”, an expression from the movie *The Dark Knight* that refers to the Joker: a personage that wants to spread chaos and anarchy because “[the only sensible way to live in this world is without rules](#)”.
- In the 1960s, ethologist John Calhoun performed [experiments](#) with mice to study the effects of population growth on individual behavior. By setting up the mice in a “utopian” environment, with plenty of food, no enemies and housing, he observed that initially the mouse population grew exponentially. However, as the space in the “mouse utopia” became increasingly socially defined, some groups of mice showed new behavior, such as extreme aggression as well as narcissistic isolation. In the end, the mouse population shrank significantly, due to a declining birth rate as a result of lower breeding and a higher death rate caused by increased violence. Calhoun dubbed this “extinction phase” and social breakdown the “[behavioral sink](#)”, and used it as a [metaphor for the fate of man](#) living in an overpopulated world by referring to the biblical Book of Revelation. Similarly, the [Human Voluntary Extinction Movement](#) defines its purpose as follows: “Phasing out the human race by voluntarily ceasing to breed will allow Earth’s biosphere to return to good health. Crowded conditions and resource shortages will improve as we become less dense.”

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## Connecting the dots

A few weeks ago, we explored three [posthumanist paradigms](#). However, we didn't discuss the most radical version of post-humanism: a scenario in which humans go extinct and our current societies and civilizations collapse. This "collapse" is an ancient theme, explored in many religions (e.g. the Last Judgment present in all Abrahamic religions), myths (e.g. the [flood myth](#) found in many cultures around the world), literature and arts (e.g. the movie [2012](#) (2009) that was part of the [2012 phenomenon](#) driven by the eschatological end of the Mayan calendar). Fantasizing about the Apocalypse is making a comeback in our contemporary culture, philosophy and media. But why? One could claim that collapse is an intrinsic "directionality" of reality. In physics, the process of "entropy" implies that any closed and stable system will eventually dissolve into more chaos and disorder. This not only holds in physics but also in social sciences, such as in the process of "creative disruption", in which new innovations make old technologies superfluous and destroy their socio-technical system, periods of hegemonic shift, in which new challengers undo the geopolitical order of the previous hegemon, or from one generation to the next, as youngsters generally want to do things differently than their parents and grandparents and dream of creating a new society. Currently, we could be witnessing such seismic shifts in various parts of our society and culture, as systems move from an "old" phase to a new one. For example, the [next technological revolution](#) could be in the making, driven by improvements in AI, the fact that the [end of America's hegemonic cycle](#) is nearing as China is on the rise, and the approaching new generational cycle, in which Gen Z embodies the [Artist archetype](#) (with corresponding characteristics), while new [utopian visions](#) of society are emerging that transcend our capitalist system of production and consumption (i.e. [post-growth economies](#) and [post-materialist consumption](#)). In this sense, the "collapse" is just a phase in cyclical movements and a continual process of rebirth and decay, growth and collapse that is found all around reality. But collapse as a phase has both a negative and a positive side. On the negative side, the phase of collapse means that the destruction of our current political, economic and social systems. On the positive side, collapse is followed by the "post-Apocalyptic world", in which man has the opportunity to rebuild his world, culture and civilization. And it is this positive part that has gained much popularity in recent years. So what is it that we long for in the post-Apocalyptic world? First, there is a deep and fundamental belief that society's systems are "broken": social mobility is declining as inequality is mounting, politicians seem unable to harmonize polarized society and partisan politics cannot overcome society's biggest challenges (e.g. climate change, affordable housing or healthcare for younger generations), many fear losing their "[bullshit jobs](#)" or don't even like their job (e.g. 84% of workers are [not fully engaged](#) in their job) while others have to keep working to make ends meet (the Yellow Vests' slogan is: "[The end of the world, the end of the month, same struggle](#)"). Exactly this feeling that change cannot be accomplished within the system and that therefore the system should change, is what unites far-left and far-right voters. Indeed, this dystopic feeling (i.e. the belief

that there is no alternative to the current state) shows that extremist parties in our current system are on the same page with respect to collapsology. Second, there is more and more longing for personal agency and meaningful political engagement. As we increasingly inhabit abstract and complex systems (e.g. modern bureaucracies, multinational companies, global cities, international social networks), we feel that we no longer belong somewhere but anywhere instead (see David Goodhart's book [The Road to Somewhere](#)). As such, many post-Apocalyptic media content shows us a world in which small communities have real interaction (e.g. [The Walking Dead](#)), and in which we have a tangible impact on our political systems. Furthermore, this could be a requirement for turning our nascent ecological collapse into something positive (e.g. [city foodscapes](#)). Lastly, modern technology provides us with more freedom, but can distort our [natural rhythms](#) and possibly suppress our biological inclinations. As such, we increasingly feel out of touch with natural and concrete life: we no longer possess the skills to survive outside highly domesticated areas (e.g. cities, smart homes), which is a deeply-rooted psychological need, and are becoming increasingly detached from nature (which also causes [mental problems](#)). This problem is exacerbated by ever-increasing population growth that not only puts pressure on our resources but also on social and political spaces. Calhoun's mice experiments show that increasing social and political density can induce social division and conflict, which we're experiencing with rising extremism and increased social isolation. Calhoun likened this to the First of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, who is said to embody the Antichrist and to induce the destruction of a corrupted world. Similarly, to a large extent, digital technology and big tech now define our social and cultural spaces and increasingly mediate our relation to the living world and social spaces. This gives us new ways of relating, but also leads to different social behavior, such as [hate speech](#) or [less ethical online behavior](#). As such, Scott Galloway has [dubbed](#) Alphabet, Amazon, Apple and Facebook the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse due to their unbounded power in all parts of our everyday lives. In contrast, post-Apocalyptic worlds, in all their brutality and destruction, force us to take matters into our own hands, work the land for food and survival, rebuild new societal structures and communities from the ashes of the previous civilization, and gain an immediate relationship to the world around us (i.e. not mediated by digital technologies). This could help explain the popularity of survival series (e.g. [Ultimate Survival](#), [Naked and Afraid](#)). Many of the "romantic" imperatives and latent wishes of the post-Apocalyptic world are already coming to us in less violent and dangerous forms. For example, in leisure, we want to live closer to nature, e.g. by camping and a [vanlife](#). In economics, we perceive the rising (or returning) cult of craftsmanship as an attempt to gain more control over our own means of production and denounce the "abstract labor" that is prevalent in post-industrial or late capitalist societies. Politically, new forms of "counterculture", such as cryptocommunities, bottom-up and

## Implications

- The Apocalypse as a subject is on the rise in films, series, but also in videogames in which the aim is to retreat from society and venture into new worlds. Negatively, this is because apocalyptic games offer "sustained escapism from our own reality", writes Alfie Bown in his book [The PlayStation Dreamworld](#) (p.40). But on the positive side, videogames like [The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild](#), [Neo Scavenger](#), or [The Forest](#) depict a world in which gamers can interact in a deep way with the environment and practice survival skills.
- Collapsology could become a defining feature of the "formative experience" of younger generations, which would render new value patterns and ideas about the Good Life. In the model of The Fourth Turning, "Crisis" (i.e. Collapse) will be followed by a "high" period (i.e. the post-Apocalyptic world), which will value strong institutions and social conformity, with a solid pragmatic problem-solving worldview. Theoretically, Gen Z'ers are then likely to become more socially conservative and less liberal, which is already visible in their more [prudish](#) and [materialist](#) lifestyles, [declining tolerance](#) of minorities and [increasing wish for authority](#) to make others behave as they wish.