



December 2015

Bleak Visions, Blind Spots

Patrick Schroeder

A Rough Ride to the Future

James Lovelock

Penguin, 2015

In his new book *A Rough Ride to the Future*, James Lovelock weaves together an account of his own intellectual journey with ruminations on the future of humanity in the Anthropocene. Lovelock is best known as the father of Gaia theory, which proposes that organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings to form a self-regulating system that maintains the conditions of life on Earth. As one might expect, he is fascinated by the processes of environmental change and technological evolution. However, he is less interested in—and even dismissive of—the possibility of social evolution. By assuming the fixity of human behavior and social institutions, he greatly constrains the possibilities for how the future might unfold, thereby leading his readers to a vision of dictatorship and doom. Collapse scenarios can be valuable in forcing us to grapple with the very real possibility of crisis and catastrophe in the twenty-first century, but the policy responses that Lovelock proposes are deeply problematic. However, if we broaden our minds to include the evolution of human values and forms of social organization, the ride to the future need not be so “rough.”

Mitigation vs. Adaptation: A False Dichotomy

It might come as a shock to learn that Lovelock, a noted environmentalist, thinks that attempting to reduce carbon emissions is a waste of time. He does not deny climate change, to be sure; he

simply argues that our knowledge of the global climate system is too limited for us to come up with an effective scheme for climate stabilization. Instead of further “meddling” with the climate system through efforts such as geoengineering, he believes that humanity should let the Earth system self-regulate and focus on adapting to a new hostile environment. Lovelock dismisses calls to “save the planet.” Instead, he asserts, we should focus on saving ourselves; Gaia will be able to look after herself.

Lovelock sets up a rigid dichotomy between mitigation and adaptation, but they are by no means mutually exclusive. Although far from perfect, the climate models relied on by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) clearly show a significant difference between a world in which global atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations stabilize at, say, 450 parts per million (ppm) and one in which they are allowed to rise to 600 ppm or even 700 ppm. Ambitious mitigation efforts could help avoid levels at which real catastrophe is likely to set in, thereby easing the challenges of adaptation. But this would require the exercise of significant political will, something Lovelock never considers.

Ambitious climate mitigation would also require strategies to which Lovelock is actively hostile. Although he admits that renewable energies could be a solution to climate change, he decries wind farms as eyesores and bemoans the huge sums of public money that have been “squandered” on inefficient renewable energy projects. Inexplicably, he does not carry this complaint over to fossil fuel extraction, which destroys local environments and is subsidized at far higher rates than renewable energy, or his preferred solution, nuclear power, which is again heavily subsidized and environmentally risky. Moreover, in critiquing renewable energy, a rapidly developing field, he chooses not to consider the possibility of more efficient technologies or innovative financing mechanisms.

Lovelock is correct when he notes that our current policies and solutions will not achieve the results required to avoid significant climate change, and his frustration with slow, protracted political processes is understandable. But he errs in concluding that we must resign ourselves to life on a worst-case planet. More, not less, needs to be done to limit the rise in greenhouse gas concentrations.

Coping with Catastrophe

What does “adaptation” mean to Lovelock? First and foremost, it involves accepting an exceedingly grim future. In his view, by the end of the century, billions of people will perish, and only a few million will survive. This lucky few will live in cities that are built like the termite mounds of the Australian desert and designed using the principles of biomimicry.

In tracing his anticipated trajectory, Lovelock is not afraid to ask difficult questions. “Are we seeking the survival of the largest number of humans, regardless of their condition,” he muses, “or seeking the survival of as many as we can keep in acceptable condition?” This raises many thorny questions. Who decides who survives? Who decides what an “acceptable condition” is? Although Lovelock provides no answers to such questions, he offers a clear one to his own: he would opt for the survival of those with advanced technological capabilities, who would shut themselves off in climate-regulated fortress cities. The rest of humanity would be left to suffer the consequences of catastrophic climate change, even though many did not significantly contribute to the problem in the first place.

Modifying our cities to better withstand climate change and its likely consequences is certainly an important part of any adaptation strategy, but we can—and must—do better than constructing fortresses for the lucky elite while leaving the masses behind. Already, many urban areas across the planet are beginning to adopt measures to increase the resilience of buildings and transportation systems in the face of extreme weather events and to enhance their disaster management capabilities. Many cities are linking up to tackle this common challenge, forming information exchanges and international cooperation networks. This approach reflects recognition that they are not independent and self-contained as Lovelock imagines, but deeply linked through flows of goods, people, and information.

Survival Politics

Cooperation, however, is not part of Lovelock’s vision. The planet, as he makes clear, will not be able to support 7 billion people at the same standards of living that the inhabitants of cities like New York, London, Paris, or Singapore experience today. What then should we do for the billions

struggling worldwide to improve their lot? Lovelock largely ignores this essential question, preferring to focus only on the privileged few.

Moreover, Lovelock leaves unexplored whether a life of luxury in urban metropolises is a legitimate image of the “good life.” Revising human aspirations to focus less on material accumulation and more on well-being is, in fact, an essential task in the twenty-first century. Reducing the carbon footprint of consumers in industrialized countries and shifting the current economic system away from its pursuit of unmaintainable and unsustainable growth could create ecological space for developing countries to improve their living standards and increase their resilience and adaptive capacities. However, Lovelock dismisses such a strategy out of hand because it involves cooperation at an unprecedented depth and scale.

How are the privileged few supposed to govern themselves in order to survive? In Lovelock’s view, the survival of humankind will only be possible under a temporary dictatorship. Democracy has no place in his climate-proofed cities because its egalitarianism is inefficient, and inefficiency is an obstacle to survival. His termite colony analogy is revealing: such colonies are tightly regimented like army camps and frequently engaged in tribal wars with other nests. Fortunately, we humans can do much better than termites.

Moreover, there is no evidence that dictatorships will be more successful than societies based on egalitarian and democratic principles in adapting to planetary environmental change. Indeed, the scientific discoveries and immense technological progress of the last half-century occurred mostly in open, democratic societies. Looking ahead, equality and democracy provide the best hope for the innovations and socio-technical transition we so urgently need.

Silicon Salvation

Although Lovelock dismisses the possibility of value shifts and social evolution, he does leave open one option for changing human behavior: joining technology and humanity. Arguing that human evolution is now tightly coupled to the evolution of technology, he speculates that humanity will fuse with complex electromechanical systems. The merging of biological and

artificial silicon-based life will enhance an ever-increasing ability to harness information, and our individual minds will come to function together, resembling the interaction of the neurons in the brain.

But is the only way to build a global consciousness to turn ourselves into cyborgs? Advances in artificial intelligence could help foster the transition to sustainable societies, provided that the majority, rather than the privileged few, are able to reap the benefits. It could enhance our collective problem-solving abilities and enable us to rely increasingly on renewable energy sources, many of which are intermittent in output. But we need not wait for technological breakthroughs to foster the spirit of global solidarity and cooperation that will be necessary to avoid catastrophic climate change. We have the tools to do so now, if only we can muster the will to use them.

About the Author



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About the Publication

Published as a Book Review by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

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Cite as Patrick Schroeder, "Bleak Visions, Blind Spots," *Great Transition Initiative* (December 2015), <http://www.greattransition.org/publication/bleak-visions-blind-spots>.

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