

Doing Imperfect Dystopia – Imperfectly: An Antidote to Abject Global Pessimism

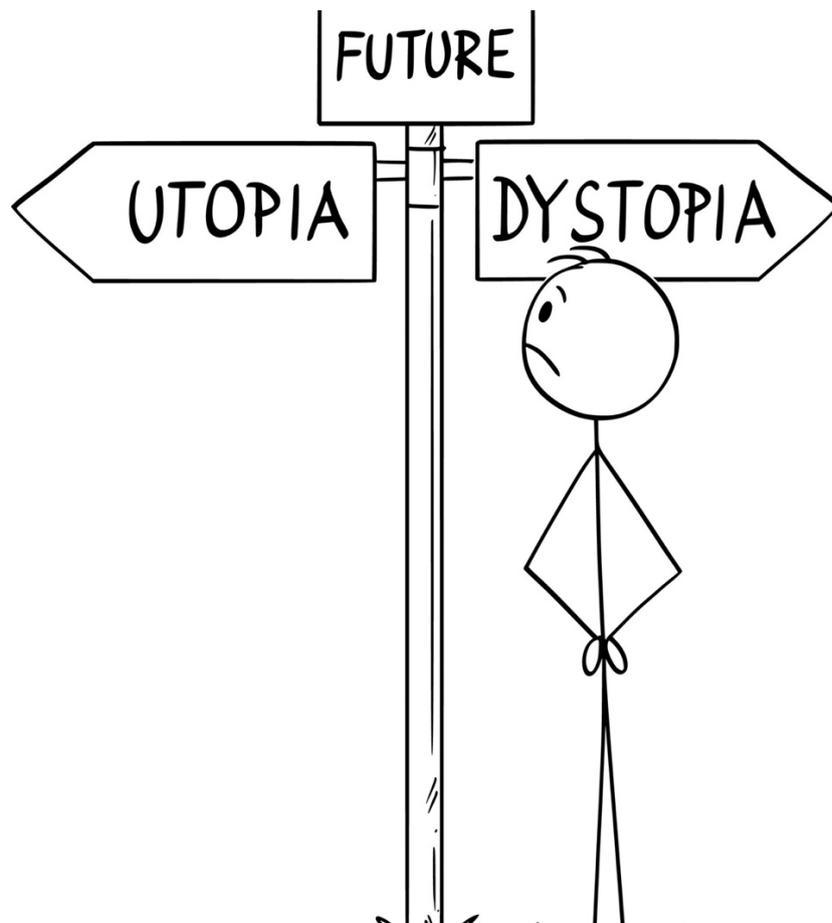
[By Dr. John Bruni](#)

Founder & CEO

SAGE International

Host of the [STRATEGIKON](#) &

[The Focus](#) Podcasts



Since the Industrial Revolution took off in Great Britain, then the world's biggest empire in 1760, we the people have become its biggest beneficiaries.

Capitalists who drove this revolution gave us a period of material and financial wealth unattained by pre-industrial societies. Yes, people were exploited under terrible conditions working to keep the industrial fires burning, and yes, people in far-off colonies whose lands were confiscated by monied

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colonial interests were exploited and maltreated, sometimes in horrific ways by those same interests. Ultimately, as wealth was generated and distributed around the world, we were all boats lifted on the same tide in spite of the perpetuation of poverty and class.

As industry and its attendant science matured, medicines evolved and were distributed to larger parts of the world. People began to live longer lives. New imperial networks of trade saw more varieties of goods traverse the world's oceans at faster rates and in larger volumes. As demand surged with supply, new transport technologies developed allowing people to travel not only by rail but by steamship and eventually by air.

The two World Wars of the 20th Century shook the old imperial order to the core, an order which collapsed under the new global titan, the United States – an ambitious republic that sought to remake the world in its image. Having no aristocratic or totalitarian pretensions, all political roads that were not leading to Moscow, the other victor of World War II, led to Washington.

Industry was turbocharged by the United States. Having had its homeland untouched by World War II, save for that famous attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and with every Western competitor grievously damaged by the war or destroyed entirely, America became the home to an innovative industrial base the likes of which had never been conceived before. Atomic power, computing power, air and space power gave the US dominance. More traditional industries experimented with organisational improvements making them both more efficient and effective than the centrally planned economic juggernaut and communist rival, the Soviet Union, which collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions in 1992.

All this American-led human ingenuity was responsible for cleaner, more refined extractive and manufacturing industrial techniques. These improvements to what was a particularly dirty enterprise did not take hold until the late 1990s. Furthermore, in the 1980s many Western manufacturers raced to exploit the cheaper labour in developing countries where environmental laws were lax or non-existent. Western countries could manufacture ecologically problematic materials in these countries, largely in Asia (mostly in the People's Republic of China), some in Latin America (Mexico & Brazil) and some to a lesser degree in Africa (South Africa). This off-shoring of American and Western industry generally did much to also shift the locus of bourgeois development to these countries while laying waste to the middle and working classes among the advanced economies of North America, Europe and Oceania.

By the 2010s, the folly of this economic development strategy was laid bare.

In the Western countries, with no replacement for the jobs lost from industrial off-shoring, a permanent underclass was created in rustbelt communities

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where industries had once thrived. This either plunged those directly affected into despair and apathy, resigned to permanent unemployment, underemployment or a life of crime, or, radicalised the economically disenfranchised.

Extremist political movements of the left and right developed on the fringes and then became mainstream.

On the left, 'the Woke', partly drawn from the radicalised underclass, and some from the remnant bourgeoisie, fighting to maintain their social position, turned identity politics into an instrument from which they could undermine their respective political and financial elites. What was a country? What was a community? What was a gender? What was a person? And who was responsible for all the ills and injustices in the world? Rich, old white men of privilege were their answer. So corrosive have the Woke been that to criticise them will incur their instant unreasoned wrath via a multitude of social media platforms. On the other side of the coin is the extreme right. Unlike the Woke where they've managed to successfully deconstruct society right down to the individual, the right has a far more conservative and simplistic agenda. It is racist, largely misogynist, elitist, statist, collectivist and repressive. What both the radicalised left and right have in common is an absence of defined leadership cadres. At the moment they are just disaggregated groups screaming at each other with no clear agenda for taking power. Their incoherent rantings have ironically left the existing elite structures in place and probably will continue to do so.

The two hundred years since the Industrial Revolution have brought at least two centuries' worth of industrial pollutants to the world's waterways, soil, and air. Deforestation in parts of Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa effectively the lungs of the world, seems to be ongoing despite its very real and existential threats to the global ecology and human existence.

Money and development drive this phenomenon. Technological hubris too. Somehow, we think we'll be able to escape any coming calamity brought about by avarice and greed simply by throwing a bunch of scientists at the problem. Bizarrely, we think that America's Silicon Valley tech billionaires will create a space age Noah's ark and transplant human and earth-born life to the uninhabitable dust-bowl planet Mars. Few are giving any serious thought to improving life on Earth. Not the Woke, not the far right and not the Wall Street or Davos elites. Fiddling around at the edges is all that we are achieving and giving the occasional motherhood statement about how important it is that we do something and do it now. Do what? When? There's no money in this form of thinking. There's also no plan. The capitalism that has driven our society for the past two hundred years is an unseeing, unthinking force. Described by the 'father of capitalism', Adam Smith, as 'the hidden hand'. The house around which money is accumulated (Earth) can burn to the ground, but the 1 per cent in control of 'the economic system' can go

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down rich, and establish an archaeological record of their social position and material wealth. It's that same sort of magical thinking the Pharaohs had when they were entombed with their riches in the pyramids of ancient Egypt.

The international community struggles with the continuing global pandemic, COVID-19, a pandemic that has already left a trail of destruction in its wake. Whether our systems of growth and profit will survive is yet to be seen. Populations around the world are ageing at historically unprecedented rates. People in the advanced economies are not reproducing at levels necessary to replace natural population losses. Some countries, like Japan, are well within negative territory. Even the People's Republic of China, with a population of 1.4 billion is rapidly ageing. This will have a major impact on the country's ability to project economic growth for the country's future domestic development, let alone for it to project military power. Economic growth can only sustain itself if there's an expanding market to sell goods and services. Fewer people, smaller markets, smaller markets, smaller profits over the long haul.

What to do?

It is necessary that our world prepare not for Zero Growth (Zero-G), but for Minus Growth (Minus-G).

Those of us in our 50s and 60s have built our thinking on living in a world based on an ever-upward trajectory both in terms of population numbers and economic forecasts. We have to prepare our children to inherit a world that is smaller, poorer, and less developed than ours was. And yes, there will always be exploitative elites taking 'their percentage' politically and financially. However, their ability to access the resources and power they once had in a globalised world will be circumscribed by the fact that with an ageing and declining population, human capital, the only capital that really counts, will be in short supply.

The good news is that we don't need the brilliance of American tech-billionaires and their space arks or scientists to save us.

Unused urban and rural spaces will eventually be reclaimed by nature. Forests will regrow and our air and waterways will eventually recover. If we can avoid civilisational collapse through war or renewed pandemics, human civilisation will find a newer, smaller, and possibly more sustainable equilibrium. The path to this more serene future will be littered with political and economic disruption, sometimes spilling over to extreme internecine violence and war. Perhaps in time our grandchildren, although less materially endowed than us and with simpler diets, lifestyles, and expectations will see the time of their forebears as a time of failed promise and dystopia. There's no reason to believe that 100 years from now, (that's just three generations),

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the world will be a more stable and far better place than the one we currently inhabit.

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