

The End of Progress¹

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Summary

This podcast tells the story of how a novel proposal about the deep structure of our civilisation emerged from my research into climate heating and the Covid-19 pandemic. I outline how, in the pursuit of progress, an apparently compulsive urge to crystallise anything and everything that is fluid has generated a level of complexity in human civilisation that makes it increasingly vulnerable to sudden change and possible collapse. I share some strategies for personal survival.

Introduction

I guess we all try to make sense of what is happening to us and around us.

I'm going to tell the story of how I found a helpful, if tragic, perspective on these difficult times that we are living through. It's a big perspective – how we've made civilisation and how it makes us.

I'm going to talk about digitalisation and growth without limits. I'm going to talk about how sudden dramatic change can be triggered.²

And I'm going to have a lot to say about *Crystallisation* and *Fluidity*. An original, at least to me, proposal about the foundations of our civilisation. And how this probably means we are within sight of the end of 'progress'.

And lastly, I'm going to share my experience of how we can begin to meet this oncoming peril.

Origins

After rediscovering film-making a few years ago, I had the idea of making a film of what I might have to say to my grandchildren, what I might have to offer them. Very soon, climate change emerged as the key topic, and I researched and made four films about the 'climate emergency'.³ When I began, even calling it an 'emergency' felt scary; now, nearly everyone is scared.

While working on the last of these videos, *The Climate Tsunami*, a new (at least to me) idea emerged. It was an 'aha' moment.

Crystallisation and Fluidity

Crystallisation – where something *fluid*, and possibly alive, becomes pinched up into structure, becomes crystallised.

Where had this come from? While researching the climate-emergency videos, I had been impressed by the global scale of the fossil-fuel industries; they were familiar – I grew up in the Durham coalfield.

I lived above a layer of ancient forests, 'fluid' swamps, wildernesses that had become fossilised, 'crystallised' into coal, and I'd seen this coal translated into vast wealth. Since then, fossil fuels have spiralled into powering our civilisation. It was only a small step to see how fossil oil and gas, conveniently fluid, become 're-crystallised' into plastics, into corporations, into profit, into wealth, And into pollution.

This was followed by another 'aha'.

I realised that words and speech were crystallised experience; my fluid thoughts and imagination have been crystallised into these words.

Was this crystallisation of fluidity just an idea or a metaphor? Could crystallisation be generic, I wondered?

Crystallised Professions

Some years ago, I'd had direct experience of something fluid becoming crystallised. When I was beginning my mid-life education as a facilitator and a therapist, there were more than a hundred⁴ ways of doing what I now call 'human-condition work', ranging from meditation to clinical psychology. Over the last 30 years I have seen this wonderfully fluid and innovative psychological field segmenting into what are claimed to be 'evidence-based'⁵ brands, and even seeking state control.⁶

I found myself excluded. Very annoying.

Sadly, and even tragically, the richly diverse, fluid, psychological field of 'human-condition work' had gone missing, leaving crystallised psychological professions competing for market share.⁷

Looking back now, this lived experience has seemed convincing evidence that crystallisation was possibly some kind of deep structure of our civilisation. A bold thought, it took some months to digest. I started looking for similar situations in human history where fluidity had crystallised into solidity.

Examples came tumbling out

- The fluidity of time has been crystallised into hours, minutes and seconds
- The fluidity of speech crystallises into writing and reading
- The fluidity of gravity has been crystallised into kilogrammes and tons
- The fluidity of barter crystallises into money, into cash
- The fluidity of shelter crystallises into property
- The fluidity of sound crystallises into music

I began to see our civilisation as a huge incremental accumulation of crystallisation. Myriad instances of it, embedded in daily life. Invisible, but holding us all together – laws, rules, habits, that shape feeling and imagination, and thoughts and action.

Crystallisation contributed a direction to our occupation of the planet, the pursuit of 'moving forward', of 'progress'.

Progress

In recent decades, 'progress' and crystallisation have become moved on from steady, if impressive improvement. In what might turn out to be an ultimate form of crystallisation, anything and everything that was fluid has been digitized – images, sound, health, distribution, finance, conversation, entertainment, news. The crystallised 'virtual' dominates daily life. And this tremendous expansion of crystallisation, plus cheap food and cheap energy, has enabled huge economic growth.

'Progress', enormous and, for many people, very dynamic.

Now that half of us live in cities, some of this is full of virtue. Food, energy, transport. They all have to work, and the technologies of crystallisation have eased the burdens of both paid and unpaid work. But while crystallisation has lots of local benefits, I began to see that it also has a huge downside.

Two families of crystallisation have been harmful in their influence on our daily life: religions and capitalism. Capitalism: in Europe seven centuries ago, surplus value, the profit on investments in work, and labour, began to be crystallised as the renting out of money.

And alongside this, religions. For me, spirituality has gradually settled as a capacity for love, for appreciation of the wondrous, and an intention of experiencing the fluidity of the world, as it unfolds in the moment.

From this perspective, spirituality has too often become crystallised in ‘people of the book’, people literally, of the book, the churches and bishops of religion. Talking love, but running empires of faith and worship.

The crystallisations of religion and capitalism have a global reach.

For me as a child, the world map was full of empires; huge areas of the globe had been seized and crystallised into compliant sources of material and labour for capital, supported by pan-European religiosity.

Capital sees Nature as territories for exploitation and profit. Capital generates a belief that everything is measurable,⁸ and that if something is fluid and immeasurable, it can be ignored, it ‘doesn’t count’. The Christian God says to Humanity, ‘Use and consume Nature, it is OK’. Generations of us have grown up with religious affirmations of ‘domination’ and ‘subordination’ as ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable’.⁹ Nature, separated from Humanity, has become our ‘environment’.

These crystallisations of fluidity shape perceptions of ‘progress’, ‘us and them’, ‘winners and losers’, ‘profit and loss’, ‘good and evil’, ‘sinners’ and ‘saved’, and so on.

After a decade or so of attention to capital and its crystallisations, I eventually came to understand that it is carcinogenic;¹⁰ it has to grow, and that many, if not all of its enterprises, amount to metastases.

A big claim, and to break the media taboo against talking about capital, what do we all not want to hear? Capital captures and crystallises key elements of fluid planetary vitality; the skin and flesh, thoughts and material of the planet are extracted into the hands of capital’s owners.

Further crystallisation by investment in processing and marketing increases this fluid capital. Capital’s owners are increasingly enriched but exploited and dispossessed

creatures, not only human, are impoverished and depleted, and the externalities of our participation in capitalist production – i.e. pollution – distort the planet’s climate.

A very tricky dilemma, because for many people, due to crystallisation, ‘progress’ continues to have a momentum and dynamic independent of planetary health and well-being.

Creators and Creation

While this is necessarily a personal narrative, it is embedded in a planet-wide story where, until recently, the life task was survival. ‘Progress’ was an aspiration for tiny numbers of people. A huge surge of crystallisation has changed that.

Historically, human crystallisation has long featured exploitation of vulnerable people and vulnerable populations, but they and their Lords still lived on the skin of the planet, in ways that didn’t change the climate.

Successful human survival meant participation in planetary fluidity, in which we were both a *creation* of nature and *creators* of nature. For century after century, energy from wind and water, and human and animal labour, drove the day. Nobody thought twice about cutting down trees to build houses, and heat them, or to make ships, or to smelt iron.

But then, as the forests began to disappear, as early as the 17th century, coal – cheap and plentiful – began to replace wood; capital turned from wool, land and expropriation to profiting from the crystallisations of technology.¹¹ An industrial feeding frenzy began, fed by coal, steam and capital.

The crystallisation of fluidity accelerated.

- Innovation was crystallised into patents and copyright
- Open land was crystallised into maps and charts
- Space was crystallised into latitude, longitude, miles, kilometres, and light years

- Electricity was crystallised into volts, ohms and amps
- Craftwork became crystallised into factories and assembly lines

And then, well within my life-span, there has been another even greater acceleration of crystallisation, as coal partnered with oil and gas and capital in another industrial, consumer revolution.

Think – financialisation, shopping, cars, fashion, tourism, kitchens. Luxury.

Consumer-based economies have been doubling in size in around 20 years, and some of the biggest are set to double again in the next 15 years. The scale and complexity of all this crystallisation is enormous, and growing.

- Typing crystallised into word processing
- Letter-writing crystallised into email
- Scientific networking crystallised into the internet
- Shopping is crystallising into the internet
- Search engines crystallise globalised knowledge
- Social media has crystallised conversation
- Production crystallised into automation
- Businesses and corporations crystallised into globalised conglomerates
- International transport crystallised into containerisation
- Life was crystallised into DNA

Very impressive, and enormously complex, and yet for many of us, quite ordinary, ‘Progress’ seems to be alive and well. However, awareness is increasing that the energy needs of our consumer civilisation are enormous. We all eat and drink energy. And produce carbon dioxide. And the planet is heating up. Continuing on this scale seems increasingly unlikely.

So where are we, the inhabitants of this planet, in all this? With a life eased by crystallisation and enriched by the fluidities of capital, many of us, it seems, are surfing on digital progress. Continued economic growth is the default choice. We pursue it, or go along with it. But

the vast capital splendour of our consumer economies casts a political shadow.

Thawing

I was slow to recognise that crystallisation can be followed by *thawing*.

Industries thaw and vanish. Political institutions thaw. Jobs thaw and vanish. And as incomes thaw and vanish, people get evicted and live on the street or in their cars, dependent on food banks. Crystallised inequity and injustice thaw into fluid crowds in the street. Crystallised institutions of government thaw into corruption and criminality, leading to surges of refugees fleeing violence and poverty. And the ‘crystallisation/progress’ whirlwind leaves millions of people feeling left behind.

It’s perhaps no surprise that despite the best efforts of climate conferences and eloquent scientific opinion, any idea of actively downsizing our human economies and daily life, to match what the planet can support, continues to be politically unacceptable. But, but, but....

We are living on a planet that is daily automatically revising its homeostatic balance, without fear or favour of the consequences. The more detached, gigantic, complex and virtual we become, the more we are enthralled by the efficiencies of civilisation; the more we become vulnerable. Neither the planet nor its other inhabitants have a vested interest in the survival of a crystallised human civilisation.

But let’s step sideways from this for a moment. In my lifetime, as economic growth accelerated, the predictable time-lines of school, job, retirement and pension, thawed. I became a life-long member of the precariat, a roller-coaster life of multiple sources of role and profession, the ‘gig economy’ (my father could never understand that I didn’t have a job).

All this and a notable educational event, making a film¹² and writing a book about Catastrophe Theory installed an essential understanding: that

biology, society and civilisations often unfold in ways that are non-linear, where a combination of underlying, out-of-sight influences trigger sudden dramatic change. Or via ‘tipping-points’, abrupt collapse. Think of declarations of war, elections and some marriages.

At the moment, top of the list of underlying and out-of-sight influences on civilisational well-being are, as we’ve heard: limitless economic growth, the matching complexity of crystallisation, plus the vast amount of energy required to keep it all going. Oh yes, and ‘globalisation’.

The more I looked at this surging complexity, all very highly optimised, the more it seemed vulnerable to anything that could trip it into non-linear behaviour. What might that be? Methane from thawing arctic permafrost? Or a volcanic eruption, or a cascade of bank failures?

Covid-19

In late 2019, a wild, fluid, barbarian invader, the Corona virus, entered human lives from the planetary wildernesses. A cross infection, it seems, to people from wild animals; via globalised air travel, it spread very rapidly to the rest of the planet.

In defence against the Covid-19 pandemic, the fluidity of daily life has been crystallised planet-wide, into ‘lockdown’, ‘social distancing’, quarantine, isolation and wearing masks, and the production of vaccines. More than two million people have died, leaving an ocean of grief and loss.

While banks, stock markets and hedge funds and their lakes of fluid capital flourished under ‘lockdown’, much of ‘business-as-usual’ has more or less overnight become ‘no-business-at-all’, with enormous and continuing human and economic hurt. It seems very ironic that the world-wide response to the Covid-19 pandemic should be a very extreme example of the crystallisation that appears to structure our

civilisation, and that has shaped our pursuit of ‘progress’.

Harbinger?

My initial response to this dramatic and sudden intrusion of the wild Covid-19 virus into our civilisations was to see it as a harbinger, or dress rehearsal. A reminder of where our commitment to crystallisation without limits may be taking us, if climate heating continues; if it continues its ascent towards 3° centigrade or more, above pre-industrial levels. But recently, I’ve realised that the Covid-19 pandemic may be more than just a harbinger, a reminder of our vulnerability. Quite likely, I suspect, it is a first instalment of a coming collapse of the civilisational necklace that the planet wears.

But ‘collapse’ isn’t quite right. As we’ve already heard, along with crystallisation there has always been *thawing*. We’ve seen the crystallisation of gender and sexuality thaw. We’ve seen sexual and racial discrimination thaw. And we’ve seen empires thaw. Failed businesses thaw, via ‘liquidation’. As global temperatures increase, we can expect extensive thawing of key institutions of civilisation.

Can a whole civilisation *thaw*? We may be about to find out. I wasn’t looking for it, this is what showed up.

The Covid pandemic seems to illustrate that no matter how magnificent and improbable our civilisation, permanence and reliability can indeed thaw into desolation and dissolution and deaths. It has happened many times before. Due to climate heating, it seems to be on the way to happening again.

Doomism

I guess, as so often when climate heating and its likely consequences are contemplated, some of you reading this will say, this is ‘doomism’: ‘we need hope’; ‘what can we do?’; ‘what *will* we do?’.

The planet is heating up, and the time when this could have been decisively interrupted is probably past, ‘progress’ is on the way to ending. It’s a future that’s already on our doorstep. The impending loss of most, if not all, of our crystalline civilisation is likely to be distressing. It demands emotional competence;¹³ if we can trust ourselves to feel the pain of it, we may emerge more able to step out of passivity and despair, and into active engagement with whatever the ‘end of progress’ brings.

At least that’s what I found.

Making my four climate films often entailed a lot of grief and tears as I foresaw some of the current and future loss that seems likely. Production of the films was a form of ‘composting’ or ‘transmutation’ of the pain of living in the heart of the climate emergency, of feeling the planetary tragedy, and sharing what I found.

If you are wondering what you can do – find some form of creativity, something that touches your heart, that can enable a dynamic connection with the pain and hurt of a future thawing of our civilisation. Think of the task as a deep dive into feeling, finding a voice, showing up, and speaking out. Personal will do, collective may be better.

If we can do some of this, if and when food, shelter and healthcare become threatened or scarce, we are likely to become more capable of surfing the unpredictable stress. And through valuing, recovering and installing the *resilience*, the *adaptation*, the *mutuality* and the *fluidity* that crystallisation undermines, along with survival, we may also become more capable of following an ethos and practice of love – seeking the flourishing of the Other.

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Notes and References

- 1 This is an extended version of a psyCommons podcast – <https://soundcloud.com/denis-postle/the-end-of-progress> (accessed 27 April 2021).
- 2 Denis Postle, *Catastrophe Theory*, Fontana, London, 1982.
- 3 Denis Postle, Climate-emergency videos:
 - *The Climate Tsunami* (2020) 50 mins; <https://vimeo.com/376824623>
Complacency and complicity in the globalisation and consumption that is taking humankind towards massive social disruption and possible extinction, pointing to alternative ways of framing our ongoing human tragedy.
 - *Business-As-Usual* (2019) 10 mins; <https://vimeo.com/298238163>
The likely consequences of current life-styles, what there is to be lost and the choice between ‘graceful degradation’ and catastrophe, and offering a proposal for interrupting inevitable near-term human extinction.
 - *Extinction for Skeptics* (2018); <https://vimeo.com/332811346>
A celebration of day 2 of the Extinction Rebellion action at London’s Oxford Circus, with a layer of material spelling out why it was necessary.
 - *Messages from the Blue Planet* (2018) 60 mins; <https://vimeo.com/257467422>
Messages from the Blue Planet gives the planet a voice. It tells us of its concerns, challenges core human attitudes and offers perspective on where we might be heading.
- 4 Denis Postle, *Therapy Futures: Validity in the Psychological Therapies*, Lulu.com, 2012, Chapter 9, p. 90.
- 5 In contrast to the fluidities of daily life, ‘evidence-based’ means that only crystalline, statistical, numerical knowledge is regarded as valid.

- 6 *SCoPEd Framework* (14 July 2020): A draft framework by three UK professional psychology organisations for the education and practice of counselling and psychotherapy. They aim to agree an evidence-based framework to inform the training requirements, competences and practice standards for counsellors and psychotherapists who are working with adults.
- 7 Denis Postle, *Regulating the Psychological Therapies: From Taxonomy to Taxidermy*, PCCS Books, Ross-on-Wye, 2007.
- 8 Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature*, Zed Books, London, 2007, p. 42 (Kindle edn): ‘Capital is quantitative in its core, and imposes the regime of quantity upon the world: this is a “necessity” for capital’.
- 9 Denis Postle, *The Mind Gymnasium: Power: The Hidden Presence*, CD-ROM <https://tinyurl.com/abpwe>, 2003, 35 pp.
- 10 Kovel, *Enemy of Nature* (note 8), p. 39: ‘Capital is not in itself a living organism, needless to say, it is rather, a kind of relationship like that set up by a cancer-causing virus that invades a living human being, forces them to violate ecological integrity, sets up self-replicating structures, and polarizes the giant force field. It is humanity living as capital, people who become capital’s personification.’
- 11 Joseph Henrich, *The Weirdest People in the World*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2020, Kindle

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12 Denis Postle, *Happy Catastrophe*, Professor Christopher Zeeman, BBC TV Horizon, 28 July 1975.

13 Denis Postle, CD-ROM, *The Mind Gymnasium: Emotional Competence – A Luxury or a Professional Obligation?*, <https://tinyurl.com/22pe8r3p>, 2003.

About the contributor



Denis Postle: Eight years of art school, concluded with the Royal College of Art. Twenty years of directing broadcast documentary films morphed into Humanistic Psychology, initially via co-counselling and co-operative enquiry, deeply influenced by Anne Dickson and John Heron, and later co-running four years of Institute for the Development of Human Potential (IDHP) facilitator training at the University of Surrey. Resistance to the occlusion of this self-directed experiential learning tradition by professionalised therapy trainings led to co-founding of the Independent Practitioners Network. Latterly I became a European, with a home and a wife in Brussels, a practice settled as ‘human condition work’ and a return to media production.

SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

“The human race is challenged more than ever before to demonstrate our mastery, not over nature but of ourselves.”

Rachel Carson, 1907–1964