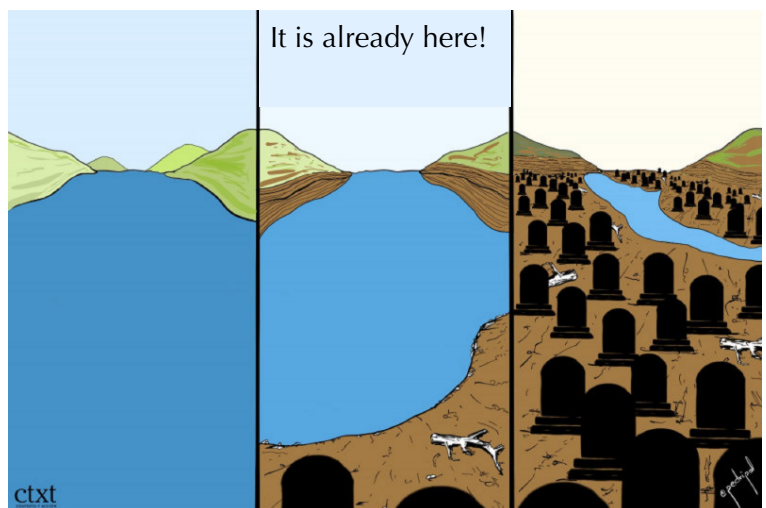


Ecological crisis or collapse? More than a terminological nuance

We are facing an irreversible situation in which numerous ecosystems are rapidly becoming unbalanced. But there is still room to mitigate the damage and readapt. There is hope for a more just and beautiful future.

Luis Lloredo Alix

There is a high probability that this year, we will reach the threshold of 1.5° of planetary warming concerning the average temperature before the industrial era. This is very serious, but it is going to get worse. In barely a century and a half, especially since 1950, we have unleashed a climatic cataclysm whose consequences we cannot yet fully gauge. To speak of global warming is a category error from which we may not be able to extricate ourselves, but whose inadequacies we must be aware of: it is not only that the planet is warming, but that everything is changing drastically.



Climate change, death, devastation. / Pedripol

The fact that the climate is warming means that the polar ice caps are melting, that sea levels are rising, that islands and archipelagos - some of them sovereign states - are in danger of disappearing underwater, that thousands of species are becoming extinct at a dizzying rate, that the food chains that were sustained by these species are becoming unbalanced at a faster rate than their capacity to adapt, that numerous ecosystems dependent on such chains are collapsing, that lands are becoming desertified, that the absence of water makes life impossible in such territories, that extreme climatic phenomena are becoming increasingly violent and unexpected, that the instability of the seasons is interfering with agriculture as we have known it for the last 20,000 years, that food prices are skyrocketing because harvests fail in the face of unpredictable weather phenomena...

I could mention many more dimensions of global change, but the above will suffice. To enumerate the cascade of consequences resulting from the violence of human intervention on the planet - through the emission of greenhouse gases, but also indiscriminate logging, the spread of monocultures that are only sustained by the use of fossil-based fertilisers, or the spread of an unconscionable meat-eating model - is impossible. Not only because it would never end but also because of the imponderable nature of what is happening and what may happen next. What is clear, beyond any doubt, is that we are in a critical situation. But what exactly does "critical" mean?

We are experiencing a collapse that can only be described as extremely serious. Of course, this does not imply an abrupt historical watershed.

In recent years, there has been a controversy in Spain about whether we are in a moment of ecological collapse. This debate is rich in arguments, and all positions have highlighted elements worthy of consideration. However, as a layman in this field, my body is asking me to say that, yes, we are experiencing a collapse that can only be described as extremely serious. Of course, this does not imply an abrupt historical watershed, a flashing apocalypse that looms over the earth amidst columns of sulfur, debris and underworld flares. It is instead a name to describe a complex historical conjuncture in which numerous ecosystems are rapidly thrown out of balance, producing concatenated reactions in adjacent environments, all of which in turn generate various forms of economic, political and social instability: food shortages, lack of materials for industry, company closures and correlative pockets of unemployment, energy shortages, increased diseases due to lack of electricity, water or food, impoverishment derived from all of the above, increased forced displacements, increased social conflict, wars, intensified xenophobia... A cocktail of consequences as difficult to weigh as the purely biophysical dimensions of global change.

The experience and intuition of more and more people coincide with the judgment that we are facing a situation of collapse. And this is something we must take into account. First, because it implies a politically fruitful awareness: "We slept, we woke up", it was said in the 15M. We slept in the dream of the Holocene, that geological stage in which our planet seemed a safe haven, a scenario where climate cycles followed one another with comforting regularity, and we are waking up in the Anthropocene, an era in which the human footprint has managed to alter a good part of the processes that kept us within a habitable space. It is possible to remain asleep, trusting that this is no more than a passing crisis, but this is a flight forward that, sooner or later, will take its toll because the planet has undergone biophysical changes that can no longer be reversed.

Indeed, when it is said that we still have room to act, we are not talking about rewinding but about mitigating and readapting: 1) we can slow down the debacle, trying to contain warming within "tolerable" limits (exceeding 3 or 4 degrees would be unmanageable); 2) and we can adjust to the new situation, changing our way of life to withstand droughts, floods or extreme heat better. We can do so in a way that makes our existence richer, healthier and less stressful. The current system is based on unbridled consumption, exhausting and precarious jobs, lack of quality time, and permanent economic distress... And that is precisely what is fueling the ecological catastrophe. In other words, we live badly, and this destructive way of life feeds a beast that will make us live even worse. Let's change it! To say collapse does not mean giving up or sinking our heads into the pit of despair, but just the opposite: becoming fully aware of this destructive loop and transforming our practices to live better.

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This brings me to my second point: if we don't call it collapse, what do we call it then? Probably the most handy alternative is "ecosocial crisis". However, the idea of crisis entails the notion of provisionality and overcoming: crises are moments of rupture that open the doors to a new normality. In the course of our lives, we go through several of them: breastfeeding, two years of age, adolescence, forties, retirement... These are milestones that we pass through amidst tensions, sometimes with suffering, sometimes even with trauma, but which end and launch us into new stages. It is the same in social life: how many economic crises have we experienced since the 1980s? Capitalism is an expert system in absorbing these kinds of moments and reemerging stronger. Indeed, we have internalised the idea of crisis as a kind of sacrificial ritual through which we must be forced to pass: an inevitable cyclical advent which demands its victims - unemployment, inflation, privatisation, expansion of the extractive frontier, neocolonialism - but which inaugurates new cycles of "growth". The point, however, is that the ecological crisis is not like the others. There are many reasons why this is so, but I will dwell on two of them.

To begin with, the ecological crisis has already happened. It is not something that is yet to come; we have been feeling its effects for some time. In other words, we have already passed the tipping point and entered a new normal. What happens is that this "new normal" is not stable, as one would presume for such a period. And it is not stable because we are far from moving on a human historical plane; we are moving on a geological, historical perspective. Humanity has suffered countless crises throughout its history. Some of them have been terrible. Several of them, moreover, have been caused by extreme environmental phenomena: famines that have led to wars and droughts that have led to the disappearance of civilisations... However, none of these ravages have undermined the planetary cycles. It is not by chance that a large part of the scientific community considers that we have left the Holocene era. In this sense, the idea of crisis falls short of describing what is happening. We are experiencing a crisis, of course, not only of the human communities that populate the face of the earth but of the planet itself and all the species that inhabit it. This duplicity of the phenomenon, both human and biogeophysical, makes the new normal uncertain and does not guarantee us the relatively stable period that any "normal" phase should ensure. Let us think of it this way: a normality which is not normal but which can bring about unexpected climatic calamities at any moment; a normality which, therefore, consists of a permanent potential crisis... Would it not be better to call this collapse?

Moreover, the idea of crisis is a poor way of describing the processes' complexity. We face very different alarms: climate, biodiversity, energy, refugees, the economic system... Again, the descriptor "ecosocial crisis" may be helpful, but it lacks the symbolic force of the notion of "collapse". Crises, in general, are usually predicated on a single order of things: debt, inflation, government, industry, and technology... It is true that these historical processes usually involve mutations at various levels, but, at least until now, they have not included the biosphere as a whole, nor have they encompassed such a large number of variables. In this sense, it seems to me that, for the

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sake of conceptual precision, it is worth using another word: such a systemic transformation, which is causing the sixth mass extinction in the history of the planet and which has even altered the very climatic cycles, is not like previous ones. It is a crisis of crises. That is why it is better to see it as a collapse because it agglutinates, as in a vortex, numerous processes that feedback on each other and run the risk of provoking a great conflagration.

In this, the collapse also differs from previous historical upheavals, which have always contained, even in their darkest moments, a hidden, albeit sometimes weak, conviction that the storm will eventually clear up. Conversely, the ecosocial collapse does not make it easy to glimpse that light on the horizon. And understandably so, the

feeling that we have irreversibly altered the biosphere has already been internalised. Even among those who are unaware and think that ecologism is extreme, I sometimes hear people say: "What a planet we have left you," or similar phrases. It is this perception of irreversibility that makes us describe the situation in terms of collapse. We cannot conjure up the fact that there is a sense of failure or defeat by giving up the word. No matter how much we avoid it, the damaged planet will still be there, and the need to repair it, even if we cannot return it to an earlier stage, will not go anywhere. Or would we stop healing the wounds of someone who has lost an arm or a leg just because they could no longer use those limbs?

On the contrary, strategically speaking, it seems to me more effective to be clear and firm in the diagnosis while simultaneously hopeful that there may be fairer and more beautiful futures. They will be warmer futures, certainly drier and perhaps somewhat unpredictable, but possibly happier, more communitarian, more idle, less frantic, and less toxic. Collapse comes from "collapsus", derived from "collabor", which means to fall, to slip. So, to collapse is to fall, to lose one's footing. So that's it: we have slipped, and we are plunging. Although this is unavoidable, it is in our hands to avoid falling flat on our faces. Let's put our hands in front of us and then get up. I don't know if we deserve it, but our children surely do. It seems hard to see it, but there can be peace after the storm.

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