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The End of the Empire that Entrepreneurship Built: How Seven Sources of Rot will Undo the West

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ABSTRACT

The West is the empire that entrepreneurship built. All empires in the past have at some point collapsed. In recent years attention has been turning to concerns that the global economy is facing the polycrisis, and that collapse may be imminent. In this light, this monograph argues that there are at least seven sources of rot that affect entrepreneurship. These sources of rot follow from an analysis of the sources of rot which led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is argued that all of these sources of rot are relevant in the West. The West has an increasingly powerful military-industrial complex which thrives on a Warfare Economy, science and research are declining, innovation is being disincentivised, the West is becoming a stop-button society that is seeing technological conservatism just when new technological innovations may most be needed, and the flow of information is increasingly hampering the role of entrepreneurs as knowledge spillover conduits as well as the functioning of democracy. While these factors impacted the Soviet Union, the West is now also facing the end of the hydrocarbon age and has to face the consequences of the financialization of the economy. From the analyses of how these sources of rot

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undermine entrepreneurial growth, follows two implications. One is that, given that the underlying sources of rot are similar in outline in an empire that has been built by entrepreneurship, and in an empire that has not been, then entrepreneurship is not a solution to avert collapse. A second is that if collapse is not extinction, it may be a reset to a system that has become too costly and too exploitative to maintain. Collapse may be welcomed, and may even be a feature, and not a "bug" of the evolution of society. These implications suggest that the West should be getting busy with succession planning.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship; collapse; innovation; trade; business dynamics; development.

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Introduction

The West is the empire that entrepreneurship built. From around 1820, global world production (GWP) grew exponentially. Today, the average citizen on the planet has an income that is around 5600% higher than it was roughly 11,000 years ago, and uses around ten times as much energy as the average citizen back then (Syvitski *et al.*, 2020). This remarkable transformation of human society from largely neolithic type farmers and feudal serfs into the modern West featuring global businesses has been termed the Great Take-Off. It occurred due to a confluence of circumstances that triggered a veritable explosion in entrepreneurship, as documented by, amongst others, Landes et al. (2010) and Mokyr (2016). The Great Take-Off has generated a large literature explaining why and how it happened, and asking whether it can be sustained, and if not, when this empire will collapse. As Gordon (2012, p. 1) remarked, "there was virtually no economic growth before 1750, suggesting that the rapid progress made over the past 250 years could well be a unique episode in human history rather than a guarantee of endless future advance at the same rate."

In 1973, the Club of Rome's Limits to Growth (LtG) study's businessas-usual scenario warned of collapse setting in around the 2030s, give or

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take (Meadows *et al.*, 1972). A recent update of the LtG model found that the world is closely tracking the business-as-usual scenario (Turner, 2014). Various scholars have in recent years built on the pioneering work of Olson (1982) and Tainter (1988) on civilizational collapse or degrading, including Bardi (2020), Bostrom (2013), Diamond (2005), Gowdy (2020), Kotkin (2020), Odum and Odum (2001), Ord (2020), Turchin (2023), Naudé (2023b) and to an extent Varoufakis (2023). According to Varoufakis (2023), capitalism at least, if not the world, has been "killed."

This theme of imminent collapse has crystalized in the contemporary notion, advanced by the World Economic Forum and others, that the world is in *the* Polycrisis, which refers to "the causal entanglement of crises in multiple global systems in ways that significantly degrade humanity's prospects" (Lawrence *et al.*, 2024, p. 4). As if confirming something is amiss, narratives of collapse, and worse, extinction, have also been proliferating in the broader public consciousness. "What isn't ending nowadays? What isn't on the verge of extinction?" Livingstone (2024) exclaimed.

It is good to get the terminology right at the outset. *Collapse* of the West does not have to imply extinction of humanity. Tainter (1988) defined collapse as "a phase transition that leads to a state of reduced complexity, typically being rapid and abrupt." It does not require an existential risk (*x*-risk), nor does it imply one.¹ Reduced complexity may, however, make humanity more vulnerable to existential risks (Aschenbrenner, 2020). Distinguishing collapse from extinction leaves the possibility open for a successive empire to arise, just as the modern West eventually arose out of the ashes of the collapsed Roman Empire (Greer, 2005).

In this light, this monograph argues that concerns about collapse need to be taken seriously and that there are at least seven sources of rot that affect how entrepreneurship, the builder of the West, continues to play a role in shaping society, and not always in a positive way. By

¹Bostrom (2002) defines existential risk and provides a typology. An existential risk is one "where an adverse outcome would either annihilate Earth-originating intelligent life or permanently and drastically curtail its potential" (Bostrom, 2002, p. 2).

considering these sources of rot from the point of entrepreneurship, it extends the current literature on collapse. It also complements the literature on imminent threats and crises, such as Roubini (2023), which focuses on the imminent occurrence of disasters ("megathreats") which could trigger collapse. In contrast to imminent threats, this monograph discusses seven slow-burning issues that weaken an empire more subtly over a span of time, which is precisely why they are eventually more destructive.

An entrepreneurship lens on collapse has been somewhat neglected, but not wholly so. The work of Karl Marx, and more recently Mancur Olson and Thomas Piketty, have already, even if somewhat indirectly, implied that entrepreneurship may be a special feature during only a transient stage in history. Marx (1867) for instance argued that capitalism would evolve into communism, thus concluding the age of private entrepreneurship and property as it has been known. Olson (1982) put forward a theoretical model wherein a long period of social stability sees the rise of special interest groups (such as labor unions) and social rigidities (such as regulatory creep) that eventually stiffes innovative policies and entrepreneurship. Piketty (2014) provided a model that implies that productive entrepreneurship would be feasible only when the rate of economic growth (q) exceeds the rate of return on assets (r) – when it does not, when r > q-which he argues has been the case for most of $history^2$ – then the wealthy would live from the returns to savings, inequality would rise, new start-ups would face growing financing constraints, and entrepreneurship driven-growth would decline. In Marx and Piketty's analyses, the private pursuit of profits in a capitalist system undermines itself, leading to a dystopian outcome, in which high levels of inequality sets up untenable power relations in society. Similarly, in Olson's (1982) analysis, the pursuit of special interests give rise to "distributional coalitions" which, although it improves the position of the members of the coalitions, reduces overall prosperity, leading to "institutional sclerosis."

²Krugman (2014) summarises Piketty's (2014) core arguments, explaining that "historically, r has almost always exceeded g [...] the kind of society we consider normal, in which high incomes reflect personal achievement rather than inherited wealth, is in fact an aberration driven by this exceptional period."

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The seven sources of rot that affect entrepreneurship and vice versa that are discussed in this monograph, while not presented as a formal theory of social change as Marx, Olson and Piketty did, are however consistent with their overall narratives, and provide if you will, a set of case studies of how the empire of the West undermines itself.

The modern West is an empire built by entrepreneurship, of which its institutional and governance context has in turn facilitated, incentivized, and allocated entrepreneurship. This empire has achieved great economic and military power and remarkable scientific progress, but it has also placed an unsustainable burden on the planet's ecology and exacted a heavy imperialistic price from non-Western cultures (see e.g., Patnaik and Patnaik, 2021). Its forging in the 20th century unleashed the most terrible destruction on its own citizens through the two most brutal wars in history. Entrepreneurship is not an unambiguously and automatically virtuous activity. It can be inconsistent with human wellbeing (Naudé *et al.*, 2014). It has built an empire that is increasingly being questioned even from the inside. The fact that it is rotting may therefore not be unambiguously bad news for the world.

To identify and analyze the sources of this rot, this monograph takes a somewhat different approach than has been taken so far in the literature, by drawing parallels between the rot affecting the West, and the rot that caused the collapse of the Soviet Union.

From this follows two fascinating and important implications. One is that, if the underlying sources of rot are similar in outline (if not detail) in an empire that has been built by entrepreneurship, and in an empire that has not been, then one should not expect entrepreneurship to reverse the decline of the West. A second implication is that, if collapse is not extinction, then collapse may be a reset to a system that, as per Tainter's (1988) analysis, has become too costly to maintain, and per Marx's (1867), too exploitative to maintain. Collapse may be welcomed and even a feature, and not a "bug", of the evolution of society (Bardi, 2020).

Taken together this suggests that the West should be getting busy with succession planning. The who and how of such empire succession planning falls outside the scope of the present monograph. It can be noted though, that virtually no-one is concerned³ about such succession planning, most certainly not Western Elites, certainly partly because systemic rot is a subtle, relative slow process, unlike eminent threats, as mentioned already. "As empires collapse, elites are usually the last to know" (Fix, 2020a).

In drawing the parallels with the Soviet Union, I will follow Chan's (2015) categorisation of five sources of rot that ended the Soviet Union. To these I will add two further sources that are prominent in the West. According to Chan (2015) the Soviet Union collapsed as a result of

- (a) Increasing militarization.
- (b) The ideological undermining of science.
- (c) The disincentivizing of innovation.
- (d) "Technological conservatism"; and
- (e) A centralizing hierarchy that obstructed the horizontal flow of information.

All of these pathologies are currently present – and becoming more pronounced over time – in the West. I will also argue that there are two further pathologies – sources of rot – that affect the West that did not play a major role in the Soviet Union's collapse, namely

- (f) The end of the hydrocarbon age the energy transition out of cheap fossil fuels; and
- (g) The financialization of the economy the bankers' takeover.

These seven sources of rot are argued to be the main harbingers of the collapse of the West. Understanding these better may help inform the debate that is needed on succession planning so as to minimize the damages that can be caused by collapse, and moreover to manage post-collapse recovery.

The rest of the monograph is structured as follows. Section 2 explains why entrepreneurship has been the builder of the West's empire that

³There are a few exceptions, notably Nate Hagens, who campaigns for a "Great Simplification" (see: https://www.thegreatsimplification.com).

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arose roughly around the 1800s. Section 3 asks, does the fate of the Soviet Union await the West? It discusses seven sources of rot. Section 4 draws together the conclusions from the discussion of these sources of rot to explain how they represent scenario spoilers for the optimistic scenarios of an entrepreneurial economy. Section 5 concludes.

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