3. The Paradox of Global Development and the Necessary Collapse of Modern Industrial Civilization

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Collapse is recurrent in human history; it is global in its occurrence; and it affects the spectrum of societies from simple foragers to great empires.

—Joseph Tainter
The Collapse of Complex Societies

With the growth and expansion of a European market economy since the seventeenth century and the development of a global industrial economy in the twentieth century, science has recorded the rapidly accelerating human destruction of the earth (Turner et al. 1990). Since the 1950s, with the aid of modern science and technology, the human population has doubled, and scientists predict that the enormous transformations of the earth in the past three centuries will be doubled, trebled, or more in the centuries to come (Kates, Turner, and Clark 1990, 14). If we are to feed the projected 10 to 12 billion people by 2050, we will need to increase agricultural production three to four times and increase energy consumption six to eight times (Kates, Turner, and Clark 1990, 14). Can global, modern industrial civilization sustain this rapid rate of growth without destroying itself or really endangering the well-being of future generations? How can we support growing populations in the underdeveloped world and increasing affluence
in the developed world without destroying the earth and undermining modern industrial civilization? Tragically, the struggle to feed exploding populations and improve living standards throughout the world is only accelerating the global destruction of the environment.

Since its birth in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, the modern world, driven by the desire to accumulate wealth and control human and natural resources, has waged a brutal war against the earth. In *Extinction*, biologists Paul and Anne Ehrlich (1981, 8) note that "never in the 500 million years of terrestrial evolution has this mantle we call the biosphere been under such savage attack." In their 1993 World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity, signed by more than 1,680 scientists worldwide, concerned scientists warned that "human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources" (Union of Concerned Scientists 1993, 3). Tragically, the modern world’s relentless struggle to conquer and subdue the earth in the name of progress will bring its collapse and ruin. Its vain struggle to control and defeat the awesome power of nature will, in the end, destroy modern industrial civilization.

I will argue that we are witnessing the collapse of global industrial civilization. Driven by individualism, materialism, and the endless pursuit of wealth and power, the modern industrialized world’s efforts to modernize and integrate the world politically, economically, and culturally since World War II are only accelerating this global collapse. In the late-twentieth century, global development leaves 80 percent of the world’s population outside the industrialized nations’ progress and affluence (Wallimann 1994). When the modern industrialized world collapses, people in the underdeveloped world will continue their daily struggle for dignity and survival at the margins of a moribund global industrial civilization.

With the collapse of the modern world, smaller, autonomous, local and regional civilizations, cultures, and polities will emerge. We can reduce the threat of mass death and genocide that will surely accompany this collapse by encouraging the creation and growth of sustainable, self-sufficient regional polities. John Cobb has already made a case for how this may work in the United States and how it is working in Kerala, India. After the collapse of global civilization, modern peoples will not have the material resources, biological capital, and energy to reestablish global civilization. Forced by economic necessity to become dependent on local resources and ecosystems for their survival, peoples throughout the world will work to conserve and restore their
environments. For the societies that destroy their local environments and economies, as modern people so often do, will themselves face collapse and ruin.

Thus, the rapid expansion of modern industrial civilization since the 1600s, which modern peoples understand as progress, is destroying the earth and threatening the human future (Hauchler and Kennedy 1994). Since the birth of the modern world, we have witnessed accelerating global population growth, air and water pollution, destruction of forests, farmland, and fisheries, depletion of nonrenewable natural resources, loss of biodiversity, and increasing poverty and misery throughout the nonmodern world (Brown and Kane 1994). In *Worldwatch's State of the World* 1995, Hilary French (1995, 171) concludes: “The relentless pace of global ecological decline shows no signs of letting up. Carbon dioxide concentrations are mounting in the atmosphere, species loss continues to accelerate, fisheries are collapsing, land degradation frustrates efforts to feed hungry people, and the earth’s forest cover keeps shrinking.” And in his introduction to *State of the World* 1995, Lester Brown (1995) warns that eroding soils, shrinking forests, deteriorating rangelands, expanding deserts, acid rain, stratospheric ozone depletion, the buildup of greenhouse gases, air pollution, and the loss of biological diversity threatens global food production and future economic growth. How could this rapid growth in wealth, population, science and technology, and human control over the natural world have produced such catastrophic results?

Progress is proving to be a dangerous delusion, which modern peoples continue to support despite the overwhelming evidence that it has led to an escalating war against the earth. Ironically, the modern world’s relentless pursuit of victory in this centuries-old war against nature will be the principal cause of its defeat and collapse. In *The Vanishing White Man*, Stan Steiner (1976, 277) argued: The ruins of the Roman Empire, and the Mayan and Byzantine and Ottoman and Inca and Islamic and Egyptian and Ghanaian and Nigerian and Spanish and Aztec and English and Greecian and Persian, and the Mongolian civilization of the great Khans are visible for all to see. Is it heresy to say that the civilization of the white man of Western Europe, which has dominated much of the earth for four hundred years, is about to become one more magnificent ruin? Not because it has failed to accomplish its goals, but because it has succeeded so well, its time on earth may be done. The paradox of development is that the tremendous success of modern industrial civilization will be the cause of its
collapse and ruin. To understand this paradox, we need to understand how modern economic and political institutions are creating both the so-called developed and underdeveloped worlds, which I will refer to as the First and Third worlds (Escobar 1995).

By creating the specter of vast, untold wealth and freedom in the First World and massive, desperate poverty and despair in the Third World, global development is creating the contradictions that will undermine global industrial civilization. On the one hand, global economic integration is creating spectacular wealth and progress for the 20 percent who live in the developed world, but, on the other hand, it is creating massive poverty and social unrest for the 80 percent who live in the underdeveloped world (Barnet and Cavanagh 1994). Between 1960 and 1995, rather than shrinking, the income gap between the rich and the poor grew. In 1960 the richest 20 percent of the world earned thirty times as much income as the poorest 20 percent, while by 1991 the richest 20 percent was approaching sixty-one times as much wealth as the poorest (French 1995, 176). At the United Nations World Summit for Social Development in March 1995, James Speth, administrator of the United Nations Development Program, noting that the income gap between the rich and poor had doubled over the past thirty years, said: “This widening gulf breeds despair and instability. It imperils our world” (Crossette 1995, A6).

Despite this growing inequality between the developed and the developing worlds, aid to developing nations has been shrinking and will continue to do so. Industrial nations and the major international lending institutions are asking developing nations to invest more of their own money to meet basic needs (Crossette 1995, A6). But how can they afford to do this given the increasing burden of debt servicing? By 1993 the total external debt of developing countries was $1.7 trillion (French 1995, 178). To pay off that debt, developing countries paid $160 billion in debt-service payments in 1992—more than two and a half times total official development assistance (French 1995, 178). Instead of becoming developed, some Third World leaders charged that they were becoming even poorer, and even more dependent on shrinking foreign aid (Escobar 1995).

Most people in the world are living on the margins of development. Three-quarters of the world’s population lives in the 130 poorer countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, and most of the population do not have either steady jobs or secure income (Barnet and Cavanagh 1994, 179). In Global Dreams, Richard Barnet and John
Cavanagh (1995, 22) argue that there is a growing struggle between “the forces of globalization and the territorially based forces of local survival seeking to preserve and to redefine community.” Barnet and Cavanagh (1995, 429) conclude that “local citizens’ movements and alternative institutions are springing up all over the world to meet basic economic needs to preserve local traditions, religious life, cultural life, biological species, and other treasures of the natural world, and to struggle for human dignity.” This increasing conflict between the demands of global industrial civilization and diverse peoples and cultures to protect their way of life and local autonomy is further evidence that the modern world is collapsing.

The integration of the global economy after World War II caused the growth of neofeudalism in the Third World, and in parts of the First World. Outside the increasingly guarded and walled prosperity of the developed world lives an expanding global peasantry, struggling to survive the encroachment of the modern industrial world into their lives. Surrounded by impoverished masses, neofeudal city-regions are emerging as the new hubs of global economic activity (Gardels 1995). Today there are at least thirty city-regions that dominate international trade and commerce (Petrella 1995, 21). The wealthy in these city-regions (CR) share more economic and political interests in common than they do with the citizens of the nations they are located in (Petrella 1995, 21). Instead of the G-7 nations controlling the global economy, we are witnessing the rise of the CR 30. In an increasingly neofeudal world, these city-regions are islands of affluence, surrounded by a sea of global peasants, whose livelihoods have been undermined by global free trade, the mechanization of industry and agriculture, environmental degradation, and the growth of sprawling, deteriorating megacities in the Third and First Worlds (Petrella 1995).

This global peasantry faces increasing poverty, misery, and despair. According to the United Nations, “the world’s poorest, in fact, got poorer in the 1980s and there is a great correlation between mounting instability . . . widespread unrest, turmoil and violence which is now affecting an unprecedented number of countries in the developing worlds” (Ihonvbere 1992, 8). In 1992 the head of the World Bank, Barbar Conable said, “Living standards in Latin America have fallen below those of the 1970s. In sub-Saharan Africa, parts of the region have suffered a veritable collapse of living standards, institutions, and infrastructure” (Ihonvbere 1992, 7). In its 1990 report, the youth commission warns about the political and economic threats created by
"mass poverty, economic dislocation, deindustrialization, declining foreign aid, mass net transfer of resources of about $40 billion a year from the Third World to the developed world, decaying institutions, political tensions and instability and the general inability of poverty-stricken and debt-ridden countries to provide for the basic needs of the majority" (Ihonvbere 1992, 8). With the possible exception of some of the newly industrializing countries of east Asia, most of the rest of the Third World "is an economic, social, and ecological disaster zone" (O'Connor 1994, 171).

The increasing poverty and despair of the Third World was exacerbated in the 1990s by the First World's effort to rebuild Eastern Europe and help the countries of the former Soviet Union. Many Third World leaders complained that this diversion of resources and foreign aid has increased their suffering and desperate situation (Ihonvbere 1992, 10). In "The Continent That Lost Its Way," Victoria Brittain (1994, 150) describes Africa as a disintegrating continent: "Across Africa, nation-states are disintegrating under the pressures of economic, environmental, political, and social stress more acute than at any time since the slave trade. Hundreds of thousands of people are on the move." Amid this societal disintegration, AIDS is wreaking untold havoc on the African continent. What has caused the rapid growth of what political scientists refer to as failed or collapsed states in Africa?

Massive population growth, deforestation and soil erosion, air and water pollution, destruction of the environment, the growth of export agriculture, and mass migration to overpopulated, deteriorating cities is straining the ability of African nations to meet the needs of their people and increasing the spread of the AIDS virus. Besides the loss of vital foreign aid, African countries are facing increased economic competition, promoted by the World Bank, from Asia and Latin America, which has driven the prices of African exports lower and lower (Brittain 1994, 151). Faced with declining export earnings, increasing tariff barriers in the industrialized nations, and pressure from First World lending institutions to pay its foreign debt, Africa is sinking into poverty, starvation, and despair.

But this desperate situation faces not only Africa but increasingly the entire Third World. While many in the First World experience untold wealth and affluence, the Third World continues to sink into poverty and misery. According to the United Nations Development Program, between 1960 and 1989, the gap between the rich and the poor nations doubled (Chomsky 1994, 129). This growing economic
inequality is created by the developed nations feeding off the wealth of the underdeveloped nations. According to Susan George, resource transfers from the Third to the First World amounted to “a much understated $418 billion from 1982 to 1990, which is the equivalent in today’s dollars of some six Marshall Plans for the rich through debt service alone” (Chomsky 1994, 130). During these same years, besides the developed world’s looting their resources, predatory loans from First World banks increased the Third World debt burden by 61 percent, 110 percent for the least-developed countries (Chomsky 1994, 130). And, finally, according to the World Bank, tariffs and protectionist measures of the industrial countries reduced national income in the Third World by about twice the amount of official aid (Chomsky 1994, 129). Thus, First World development depends on the underdevelopment of the Third World and the growth of neofeudalism.

In the 1990s increasing violence and societal decay is widespread throughout the underdeveloped world. Made superfluous—surplus population—by the global economy, young people, especially young men, from Kinshasa to Munich to Los Angeles act out by becoming brutal, violent criminals, “striking out blindly in all directions” (Enzensberger 1993, 39). This condition is most evident in the failed or collapsed states in Africa. In 1995 most states in Africa have either failed or are collapsing (Gruhn 1995). Civil wars and sporadic violence in failing states have produced enormous refugee populations throughout Africa (Gruhn, 1995).

Instead of seeing these collapsed states as the result of the failure of development, and the increasing economic marginalization of entire populations, the American foreign-policy elite sees these problems as the result of “ethnic, nationalist, and separatist conflicts, which they refer to as ENS wars” (Schwarz 1995, 58). According to Leslie Gelb, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, these foreign civil wars are “the new core problem in post-Cold War politics” (Schwarz 1995, 67). Gelb concludes that “the main strategic challenge for the United States is to develop plans . . . to stem civil wars” (Schwarz 1995, 58). But Gelb and First World economic and political leaders fail to recognize the larger cause of these ENS wars, which is the economic, societal, and environmental ruin caused by development. These states fail because their citizens no longer believe they can solve the economic and political crises they face. Instead of looking to the state, they look to ethnic, religious, tribal, and social groups to end their poverty and restore social and political order. The increasing number of ethnic,
nationalist, and separatist conflicts (ENS wars) throughout the world further demonstrates that global industrial civilization is collapsing.

Failed states and chaotic and lawless cities in Africa illustrate the growing contradictions confronting the modern world. In Civil Wars, Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1993) examines what he calls "molecular civil wars" created by the breakdown of the state. In molecular civil wars, which are raging out of control in many parts of Africa, the young and the desperate prey on the helpless masses and themselves. This violence further undermines the ability of the failed state and society to restore economic, political, and social order. Reflecting on the vicious, brutal, nihilistic nature of escalating urban violence in Savages and Civilization, Jack Weatherford (1994, 282) argues that "civilization has produced a savagery far worse than that which we once imputed to primitive tribes... Civilization created and nourished [these urban savages], and the center of the city has become the new frontier." This savagery and the violence, disorder, and despair it generates is caused by global development and the underdevelopment it creates.

With the growth of a global industrial economy after World War II, First World political and economic elites found that to support continued economic growth and affluence of the developed world, they had to promote poverty, social disorder, and despair in the Third World. The irony, however, is that since the 1970s, these elites have been forced to create similar conditions in the First World. The economic and social crises created by this poverty, disorder, and despair in both the Third and increasingly the First World countries is causing the collapse of global industrial civilization.

In the early 1980s the so-called Third World debt crisis threatened to destabilize the global economy. Developing countries found that development and the creation of export industries paid for by First World loans could not solve the economic and social problems that development experts and global elites promised they would. Instead of ending poverty and improving the quality of life, development seemed to be creating more poverty, and even underdevelopment.

By the 1980s, because of the deterioration of terms of trade, falling commodity prices, tariff barriers, and extraction of economic surplus by transnational corporations and by the World Bank and First World banks, it was evident to many Third World peoples that their poverty and underdevelopment was caused by First World exploitation of their wealth, resources, and workers. In the 1980s, large parts of Asia, Af-
rica, and Latin America saw their worst economic crisis in this century (Escobar 1995, 90). For example, in the 1980s Latin American nations paid the First World an average of $30 billion more each year than they received in new lending (Escobar 1995, 83). In Latin America the 1980s are known as the lost decade.

By the 1990s it was all too evident that the First World’s prosperity was dependent on the continued underdevelopment of the Third World. While the 130-plus developing countries of the South (referred to as the Group of 77) already account for four-fifths of the world’s people and one-sixth of its economic output, the industrialized countries (known as the G-7 industrial nations), with 26 percent of the population, account for 78 percent of world production of goods and services, 81 percent of energy consumption, 70 percent of chemical fertilizers, and 87 percent of world armaments (Escobar 1995, 212). In the 1990s the average per capita income in the developing countries is only about 6 percent of that of the developed countries (Speth 1992). While the First World celebrated the return of economic prosperity in the 1980s, more than fifty developing countries experienced a decline in per capita food production (Speth 1992). Moreover, since 1982, the food available to poor people in the Third World has fallen by about 30 percent. It has fallen because of the success of development and the growth of export markets. Without the wealth and affluence of the First World, Third World peoples found they could not afford to buy the food that development helped them produce. As a result, according to the United Nations, the number of people in absolute poverty is 1.3 billion (Crossette 1995). The debt crisis and increasing poverty and suffering in the 1980s led many Third World peoples to conclude that development, far from being a miracle cure for their growing problems, was just another form of neocolonialism.

By the early 1990s development experts were predicting that within the next fifty years, the human population would exceed 9 billion and global economic output may quintuple (Homer-Dixon, Boutwell, and Rathjens 1993). If the use of energy increased sevenfold between 1950 and 1990 to create our present development, what increase in energy would it take to develop the entire globe (Wallimann 1994, 47)? In addition, we must ask whether the global environment can support another sevenfold increase in energy use between 1990 and 2030. Could development, even sustainable development, provide the natural resources, ecosystem services, affluence, and freedom to support this growth without undermining the ability of the earth to meet the
demands of modern industrial civilization? This was the central question participants at the 1992 United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, which pretentious organizers called the Earth Summit, were confronted with (Sitarz 1994).

But despite the 1992 Earth Summit and international discussions about sustainable development by First World political and economic elites in the 1980s and 1990s, the relentless pursuit of wealth and profits and unsustainable development continues. The great modern myth supporting this development is the promise that global economic growth will eventually bring to all peoples the wealth and abundance enjoyed by a minority in the First World. But this myth is increasingly being questioned by the majority in the Third World, who have yet to see the cornucopia created by development.

In fact, First World claims about the emergence of a democratic, fully integrated, global industrial economy are clearly specious. Despite this so-called globalization, most people are outside the global industrial economy (Barnet and Cavanagh 1994). The transnational corporations (TNCs), which are the primary links in this global economy, are concentrated in the industrial world and in scattered enclaves throughout the underdeveloped world. Thus, globalization has created islands of affluence in a vast sea of underdevelopment in the Third World (Redclift 1987). In this emerging global industrial economy, development enables the First World to live off the resources and degraded environments of the Third World.

In Sustainable Development: Exploring the Contradictions, Michael Redclift (1987, 112) defines development as "the process through which the environment is transformed from a local cultural and ecological system . . . into a functioning element in the international system." Precisely because of this development, Redclift (1987, 45) concludes, "the ecological breakdown, forecast in the 1960s and 1970s, has already occurred in parts of the South." Billions of people in Latin America, Africa, and Asia are discovering that poverty, collapsing social institutions, and environmental degradation are the price of development.

The growth of failed states in sub-Saharan Africa is a measure of the true costs of development. Having borrowed billions of dollars to pay for this development, much of sub-Saharan Africa is now starving while debt interest is being paid (Redclift 1987, 69). In "The Coming Anarchy," Robert Kaplan (1994, 46) argues that "West Africa is becoming the symbol of worldwide demographic, environmental stress, in which criminal anarchy emerges as the real 'strategic' danger. Disease,
overpopulation, unprovoked crime, scarcity of resources, refugee migrations, the increasing erosion of nation-states and international borders, and the empowerment of private armies, security firms, and international drug cartels are not the most tellingly demonstrated through a West African prism.” Connelly and Kennedy (1994, 72) warn that West Africa “increasingly looks like strife-torn, plague-ridden medieval Europe.” And Kaplan (1994, 58) concludes that in West Africa we are witnessing “the political and strategic impact of surging populations, spreading disease, deforestation and soil erosion, water depletion, air pollution….” With its failed states and deteriorating environment, sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates the tragic impact of development in the Third World.

The 1992 Earth Summit and the promise of sustainable development promoted in Agenda 21, the United Nations’ 1992 plan for creating a global sustainable society, were attempts to resolve the increasing doubts Third World peoples and politicians have about the promise of development (Chatterjee and Finger 1994). If Third World countries withdraw from the global economy to solve their increasing economic and societal problems, First World economic and political elites fear that this will deprive them of their source of cheap raw materials, export markets, and cheap labor required to maintain their profits in an increasingly competitive global economy. In the 1980s political and economic elites in the developed countries created the ideology of sustainable development in a desperate attempt to convince underdeveloped countries that only further global development and economic growth can solve the economic and political crises created by development (Chatterjee and Finger 1994).

But, ironically, just as First World countries compete to achieve increasing control over the global economy, they are discovering that they have less and less control over their own economies and resources. With the growth of a global economy since the 1960s, TNCs are limiting the ability of even the most powerful First World nations such as the United States, Germany, and Japan to control their own national economies. The only currently functioning global agents are TNCs, not First World national governments. TNCs conduct 70 percent of international trade and 80 percent of foreign investment (Chatterjee and Finger 1994, 112). According to the United Nations, the TNCs control 80 percent of cultivated land for export crops worldwide and a mere twenty of them control 90 percent of pesticide sales (Chatterjee and Finger 1993, 106).
If sustainable development and the further integration of the global economy are not the answers to the increasing problems confronting both the First and the Third Worlds, then what is the solution? The answer, as John Cobb has already argued, lies in the remarkable ability of peoples and cultures to adapt to constantly changing local and regional environments. Thus, if Third World peoples find that development and their dependence on the global economy is creating poverty, suffering, and political turmoil, it would, in fact, be very adaptive for them to withdraw from the global economy and refuse to accept First World efforts to develop them. This would further undermine the myth of development, the myth that human progress can be achieved only through modernization.

Whether we call it civilizing, progress, modernization, development, or now sustainable development, modern peoples have imagined that it is the developed world's "manifest destiny" to teach the rest of the world that modernity is the only course open to them. But this is simply not true. There are just too many diverse cultures, religions, and ways of life for modernization and global development to finally triumph. By refusing to disappear into history, despite innumerable attempts to civilize and teach them to be modern, nonmodern peoples demonstrate the resilience and strength of their cultures and societies to survive and adapt in a complex and chaotic world.

The First World's failure to modernize and civilize the world should not be seen as a tragedy, but as an opportunity. With the increasing recognition of the inability of development to resolve the economic and political contradictions it creates, whether you call it sustainable or not, peoples and communities will be once again forced to draw on their own cultures, histories, religions, and intimate knowledge of their local environments to improve their lives and ensure a "reasonable life" for their children. For most of history, successfully adapting to changing local and regional environments was the fundamental challenge facing human societies.

But how will First World political and economic elites react to these efforts by Third World peoples and others to withdraw from the global economy and to create a society and future not based on modernization and development? Third World peoples' refusal to pay their debts, to sell their resources to the developed world, and their refusal to allow the First World and TNCs to dominate their economies, societies, and politics will not come without global conflict and struggle.
There will be neocolonial wars, political and economic subversion, widespread suffering and turmoil, and social and political chaos. We witnessed some of this during the cold war, when the United States and Europe found more often than not that they had to force Third World people to accept development and the neocolonialism and tremendous poverty, suffering, and political unrest it created. The Somalis and Balkan nations’ ability to use force to prevent continued First World domination are models for this future conflict. The process will not be easy. It will be like the wars and conflicts that brought the fall of the Mayan and Roman empires (Ponting 1991).

The successful collapse of global industrial civilization is, in part, dependent on the 80 percent not fully integrated with the global economy breaking free from their ties to modern industrial civilization. Faced with growing threats of economic and ecological collapse, many underdeveloped nations and regions should declare their independence from the global economy, recognizing that this economy is the larger cause of their poverty. After breaking free from the First World’s economic and political hegemony, underdeveloped countries can then use their resources and people to feed themselves and improve their quality of life. Of course, we have been witnessing such attempts for the past fifty years after World War II as colonial and neocolonial struggles for independence. The wars in Vietnam, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Angola, Mozambique, Somalia, and in the nations of the former Soviet Union were all struggles to win independence from foreign domination. The cold war was, in large part, a struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union over who would dominate the modern world and the so-called nonaligned nations of the Third World. With the global instability created by the end of the cold war, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the decline of American hegemony, underdeveloped countries may find that they have the strategic opportunity to demand their independence from First World domination. They can refuse to pay their debts, withdraw from the global industrial economy, nationalize foreign corporations that are exploiting their wealth, and create local and regional economies to support their own people. But Third World independence from the First World-dominated global economy will not come without a heavy economic, political, and military price.

With the withdrawal of underdeveloped countries from the global economy within the next thirty to fifty years, the developed countries will face continual material, ecological, and energy shortages that will
force them to downscale their economies. The First World will, ironic­
ically, be forced to follow the lead of the Third World and create local
and regional economies that are sustainable and self-sufficient. In many
instances, nations will break up, forming smaller polities tied together
by ethnic, religious, or social bonds. If these polities and nations take
responsibility for helping their peoples survive the hardship and suf­
fering imposed by the devolution of the global industrial civilization
and economy, they will be better able to reduce the real threat of mass
death and genocide that will arise from the collapse of modern indus­
trial civilization.

Most critics would argue, probably correctly, that instead of allow­
ing underdeveloped countries to withdraw from the global economy
and undermine the economies of the developed world, the United
States, Europe, and Japan and others will fight neocolonial wars to
force these countries to remain within this collapsing global economy.
These neocolonial wars will result in mass death, suffering, and even
regional nuclear wars. If First World countries choose military con­
frontation and political repression to maintain the global economy,
then we may see mass death and genocide on a global scale that will
make the deaths of World War II pale in comparison. However, these
neocolonial wars, fought to maintain the developed nations' economic
and political hegemony, will cause the final collapse of our global
industrial civilization. These wars will so damage the complex eco­

No matter how it collapses, through economic collapse and the
development of local and regional economies or through a global
military struggle by the First World to maintain its access to Third
World resources, or both modern industrial civilization will collapse
because its demands for energy, natural resources, and ecosystem services are not sustainable.

The current collapse of economies and states in Africa, Latin America, and the former Soviet Union demonstrate that this global collapse is already occurring. The inability of the United States and the United Nations in the 1990s to solve the economic and political problems that exacerbate conflicts in Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union demonstrate that the developed countries might be under such economic and political stress that they cannot afford to use the political or military capital necessary to force recalcitrant nations and peoples to remain within the global industrial economy. Although many would argue that the massive death and suffering caused by these conflicts must be stopped, it could be that this death will be less than if the First World intervened and tried to force Third World countries to remain within global civilization. Attempts to intervene in these growing regional conflicts, on the basis of liberal internationalism and global civilization, will backfire and cause only more suffering. In fact, these interventions will further accelerate the collapse of global civilization.

The fundamental dilemma facing First World political and economic elites is that their efforts to create a global industrial economy by further integrating Third World countries into the global trade and economic system dangerously stresses the material, biological, and energy resources of the earth (Union of Concerned Scientists 1993). And this economic integration, based on past economic history, will create only more poverty in the underdeveloped world. The only way to sustain the standard of living of the 20 percent of the world’s population in the First World is to continue to drain resources from the Third World, which even now supports 80 percent of the world’s population.

However, there are those who would challenge my conclusions, arguing that Agenda 21 (Sitarz 1994) and United Nations’ plans for a global sustainable society could resolve the growing economic and political contradictions that threaten the future of global industrial civilization. Agenda 21 calls for reducing the standard of living of developed countries and then raising the standard of living of the underdeveloped countries up to that sustainable level. Such a global sustainable society, however, is impossible because the earth cannot support 6 billion people at or anywhere near a modern, First World standard of living (Union of Concerned Scientists 1993). Second, the
brutal destruction of global ecosystems, material resources, and energy stocks in the past four hundred years has so damaged the earth that there simply aren't the resources and ecosystem services to support a sustainable, modern global society. The irony and tragedy is that our very efforts to create a global economy based on high standards of living and progress in the last 400 years has so damaged the earth and torn apart the fabric of modern civilization that a global sustainable society is no longer possible. The fact is that our efforts to sustain an increasing standard of living for the 20 percent of the world's people in the developed world has created increasing poverty, despair, and political and economic chaos for the 80 percent of the global population that lives in the underdeveloped world.

I am not arguing, however, that human overpopulation and the resulting destruction of global resources will be the primary factor causing the collapse of global civilization. The global environmental crisis is the result of the expansion of modern industrial civilization and the development of the First World and the underdevelopment of the Third World since the 1600s. In Sustaining the Earth, John Young (1990, 107) argues that "people constitute an environmental problem, not because of their existence, but because of what they do, and the parts of the environment they use up or damage." The culture of the modern world—its individualism, materialism, scientism, and faith in progress—and the global expansion of that culture is the central cause of the collapse of modern industrial civilization (Ehrenfeld 1978). And surviving polities and nations must keep this firmly in mind if they are to avoid future collapses themselves.

The only alternative we now have is to recognize the very real imminent collapse of global industrial civilization. Instead of seeing this collapse as a tragedy, and trying to put Humpty Dumpty back together again, we must see it as a real opportunity to solve some of the basic economic, political, and social problems created and exacerbated by the development of modern industrial civilization. Instead of insisting on coordinated global actions, we should encourage self-sufficiency through the creation of local and regional economies and trading networks (Norgaard 1994). We must help political and economic leaders understand that the more their countries are tied to the global economic system, the more risk there is of serious economic and political collapse.

In the case of the collapse of Mayan civilization, the city-states and regions in Central America that were not as dependent on the central
Mayan civilization, economy, and trade were more likely to survive its collapse. The city-states that were heavily dependent on Mayan hegemony destroyed themselves by fighting bitter wars with other powerful city-states to maintain their declining economic and political dominance (Weatherford 1994). Like the collapse of Mayan and Roman civilization, the collapse of global civilization will cause mass death and suffering as a result of the turmoil created by economic and political collapse. The more dependent nations are on the global economy, the more economic, political, and social chaos they will experience when it breaks down.

Once global civilization collapses, humanity will not have the material, biological, and energy resources to rebuild it. This must be the real lesson that nations and polities learn from this global collapse. If they try to rebuild unsustainable regional or even international economies, it will only cause more suffering and mass death.

In conclusion, the only solution to the growing political and economic chaos caused by the collapse of global industrial civilization is to encourage the uncoupling of nations and regions from the global economy. Efforts to integrate the underdeveloped countries with this global economy through sustainable development programs such as Agenda 21 will only further undermine the global economy and industrial civilization.

Unfortunately, millions will die in the wars and economic and political conflicts created by the accelerating collapse of global civilization. But we can be assured, on the basis of the past history of the collapse of regional civilizations such as the Mayan and the Roman empires, that, barring global nuclear war, human societies and civilizations will continue to exist and develop on a smaller, regional scale. Yes, such civilizations will be violent, corrupt, and often cruel, but, in the end, less so than our current global industrial civilization, which is abusing the entire planet and threatening the mass death and suffering of all its peoples and the living, biological fabric of life on earth.

The paradox of global economic development is that although it creates massive wealth and power for modern elites, it also creates massive poverty and suffering for underdeveloped peoples and societies. The failure of global development to end this suffering and destruction will bring about its collapse. This collapse will cause millions of people to suffer and die throughout the world, but it should, paradoxically, ensure the survival of future human societies. The collapse of global civilization is necessary for the future, long-term survival of human
beings. Although this future seems hopeless and heartless, it is not. We can learn much from our present global crisis. What we learn will shape our future and the future of the complex, interconnected web of life on earth.