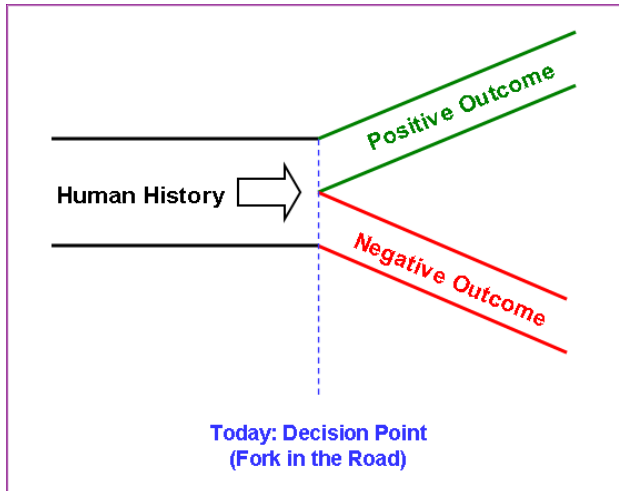


Humanity's Choice: A Series of Exits—Not a Fork in the Road

Conventional Wisdom: A Fork in the Road

A Fork in the Road



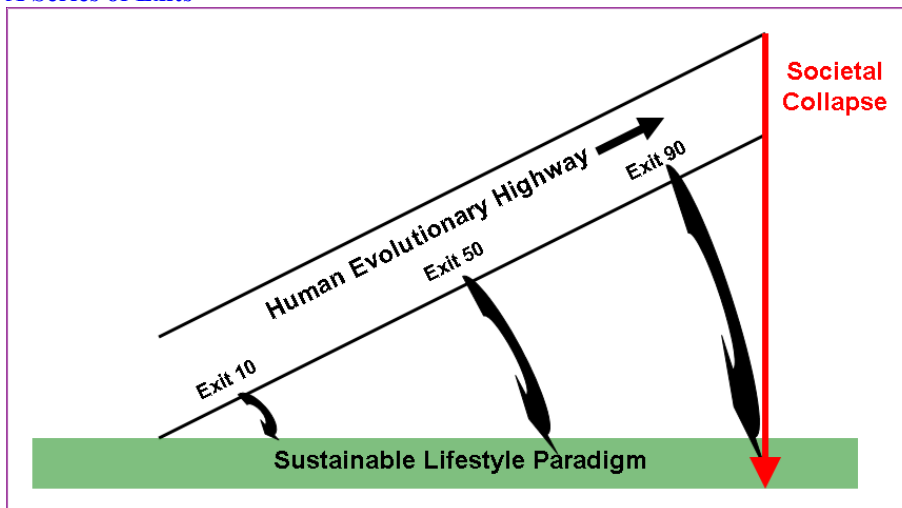
The ecological and economic prognosticators who warn of a potentially unpleasant future for the human enterprise typically portray humanity as being at a fork in the road on our evolutionary journey. They contend that we are at a pivotal decision point at which we must make an “either/or” choice between a positive future outcome and a negative future outcome.

Unfortunately, “doomer” prognosticators have been making such claims since before the time of Malthus. Yet despite the fact that humanity has always taken what doomers consider to be the negative fork, Homo sapiens are more numerous than ever, and enjoying, on average, better material living standards than ever. As a result of repeatedly sounding “false alarms”, doomers have lost all credibility, and have been essentially eliminated from “rational” discussions regarding the future of humankind.

Unfortunately for humanity, the doomer perspective is correct; it is the fork in the road metaphor that is flawed.

Reality: A Series of Exits

A Series of Exits



It would be more accurate to portray humanity's recent evolution as a journey on a highway that offers ever-increasing wellbeing along the way—as our population and material living standards diverge increasingly from sustainable levels—and that culminates in societal collapse at the

end—when Nature can no longer support the ever-increasing natural resource and natural habitat overexploitation that enable our ever-increasing wellbeing.

Along the highway are a series of exits—say 100 exits for the sake of argument—any of which will return us to a sustainable existence, but each of which involves increasingly severe lifestyle disruptions—population level and material living standard reductions—as we proceed on our evolutionary journey.

Humanity's Evolutionary Journey

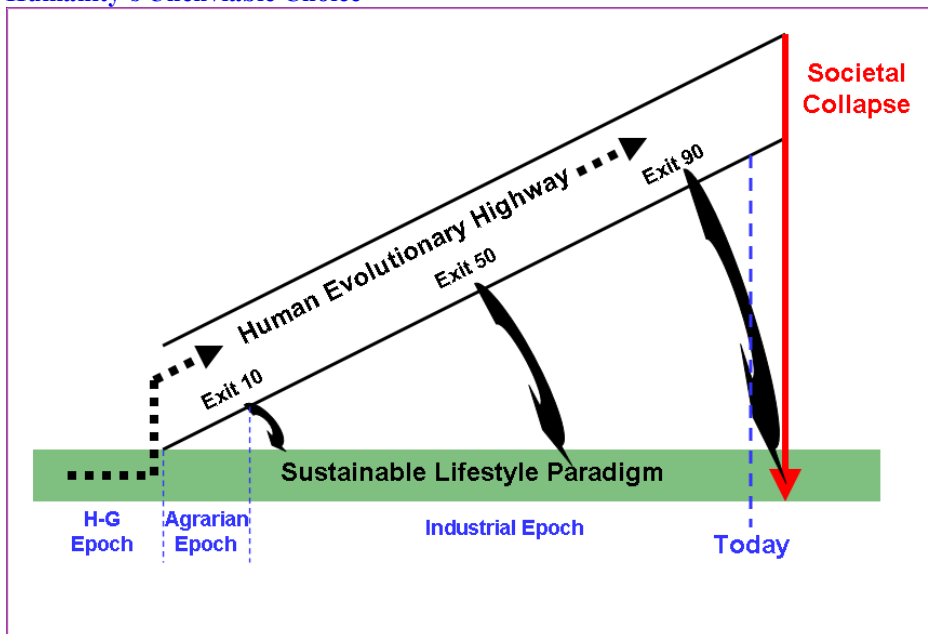
Homo sapiens entered the highway approximately 10,000 years ago, when our ancestors began to abandon their essentially sustainable hunter-gatherer lifestyle paradigm in favor of an “improved” but unsustainable agrarian lifestyle paradigm. During the 10,000 years of our increasingly agrarian existence, as our population level increased and our average material living standards improved, we passed approximately the first ten exits.

Had we chosen to exit the highway during our agrarian epoch, we would have experienced relatively minor population level and living standard reductions as we transitioned back to a sustainable hunter-gatherer existence. We chose instead to remain on the highway and to continuously increase our population level and improve our material living standards.

During the 18th century AD, the first of today's “developed” societies embarked upon its industrial revolution—from that point forward both our population level and our average material living standards exploded at historically unprecedented rates to historically unprecedented levels, as we blew past exits at an ever increasing rate!

Humanity's Unenviable Choice

Humanity's Unenviable Choice



Today we find ourselves passing exits numbered in the 90s, as we rapidly approach the end of the highway. The historically abundant and cheap natural resources that have enabled our industrialized way of life are becoming increasingly scarce and expensive—a trend that will continue going forward until available resource supplies become insufficient to support our hopelessly overextended population level and living standards.

We can still choose to exit the highway, thereby partially mitigating the apocalyptic lifestyle disruptions that await us if we choose instead to experience societal collapse at the end of the road. But we can no longer exit at Exit 10, or Exit 50, or even Exit 90—we passed those exits in our unceasing quest to improve the material living standards associated with our ever-increasing population.

The choice facing humanity today: do we get off at Exit 95, or Exit 96, or Exit 97 and mitigate to some extent the lifestyle disruptions that lie ahead if we remain on the highway until the end; or do we simply drive on for possibly another 5, 15, or 25 years until we reach the end of the road, and let Nature take its course?

Author Bio (Chris Clugston): For the past three years I have conducted extensive independent research into the area of sustainability, the goals of which are to quantify from a combined ecological and economic perspective the extent to which our American society is currently overextended—living unsustainably beyond our means—and to understand the causes, implications, and possible solutions associated with our predicament.

Prior to that I spent thirty years working with information technology sector companies in marketing, sales, finance, M&A, and general management—the last twenty as a corporate chief executive and management consultant. I received an AB/Political Science, Magna Cum Laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Penn State University, and an MBA/Finance with High Distinction from Temple University in Philadelphia, PA. I can be reached at coclugston “at” comcast “dot” net.