PART I: OUR CONVERGING CRISES

Systems of Political and Economic Management

Every society has institutions for making decisions and allocating resources. Some anthropologists call this the ***structure*** of society. Every society also has an ***infrastructure***, which is its means of obtaining food, energy, and materials; and a ***superstructure***, which consists of the beliefs and rituals that supply the society with a sense of meaning. Looking at many societies through history, it's clear that social structures and superstructures tend to adapt to changes in infrastructure. In this video we will see how our current systems of political and economic management--our social structure--evolved to fit with our fossil-fueled infrastructure, and we'll very briefly explore what a shift to different energy sources might mean for the politics and economics of future societies.

Hunting and gathering wild foods was our original form of infrastructure. Because people moved around in search of game animals, they couldn't carry much with them, so they had little personal property and there was little accumulation of wealth. People tended to share whatever food they had. Political power rested on situational authority—members of the community with relevant knowledge and experience were listened to when a decision had to be made.

The agrarian mode of food production, a later form of infrastructure, led to entirely different social structures. Agriculture produced seasonal food surpluses and allowed for permanent settlements and full-time division of labor. These factors in turn led to a gradual growth in the size of communities, and to administrative bureaucracies.

The Roman Empire, the largest agrarian society of the ancient world, had hierarchically organized teams of people to deal with tasks like coinage and

lending, war, negotiations with foreign nations, the making and enforcement of laws, and on and on.

In the late 1800s, the fossil-fueled Industrial Revolution led to still another kind of societal infrastructure. Abundant, concentrated, and portable energy sources stimulated the invention of technologies to aid in agriculture, transportation, and manufacturing. Previously, in agrarian society, three-quarters or more of the population worked the fields to produce enough food surplus to maintain specialists living in cities—everything from butchers and bakers to shoemakers and bankers. But now, in this new ***industrial*** period, fuel-fed machinery could replace most farm laborers. The result was the rapid growth of cities and the urban middle class.

What were some other, less obvious economic, social, and political impacts of fossil fuels and industrialization?

Well, powered machinery for resource extraction and manufacturing led to a flood of products and goods, resulting eventually in a crisis of overproduction and the Great Depression of the 1930s. The solution to overproduction was the creation of a ***consumer economy***, tied to expectations of continual growth in both production and consumption.

Consumerism required both the psychological incentives supplied by advertising and the financial enablement of consumer credit. Debt became a pillar of the financial economy, with interest flowing to owners of capital.

Industry generated unprecedented amounts of wealth, which tended to become increasingly concentrated. So, partly to prevent wealth concentration from interfering with middle-class consumption, government began redistributing money through progressive taxation, unemployment insurance, and retirement benefits.

As global transportation modernized and expanded, immigration increased greatly, and the democratic multi-ethnic nation-state became the 20th century's emblematic political institution. Imports and exports were

encouraged through international trade agreements. And, as in Roman times, a single national currency--first the British pound but later the U.S. dollar--became the semi-official international standard for settling accounts.

During the industrial period, the global system has been dominated by just a few nations. At first, the British Empire held sway over vast regions of the planet. After a couple of World Wars, two other nations—the United States and the Soviet Union—became centers of control; and since around 1990, the U.S. has persisted as the sole global superpower, its supremacy maintained by awesome weapons, universally accepted currency, and a trade system that favors big multinational banks and corporations mostly headquartered in America.

While the industrial period has seen the flourishing of several types of political-economic systems—including socialism, communism, and capitalism, administered either through democracy or dictatorships of various kinds—all have taken advantage (in varying degrees) of mass communications and opinion-shaping techniques originally developed for the mass marketing of consumer products. Known as propaganda, this tool is used to support the interests of those who are in position to deploy and control it, namely the governing elites.

Over time, political systems have always tended toward corruption and resistance to change. In the world today, entrenched, wealthy groups—such as the fossil fuel industry, banks, and weapons manufacturers—have special influence over foreign policy, trade, regulation, and public investment.

As a result of trends that ultimately trace back to our societal infrastructure of fossil-fueled industrial production, today's complex global economic and political system reliably generates high per capita incomes, especially for elites in wealthy nations, but also high economic inequality—checked somewhat by taxation and government services. It also depletes resources and produces more and more pollution as the cost of doing business.

At the same time, as a result of mass communications and transportation networks, our systems of political and economic management have evolved to support: First, a high level of access to information; second, a continual sampling of public opinion through polls; and third, a large number of citizen rights.

We live in very urbanized societies characterized by great ethnic and religious diversity. High levels of education and health care are widely available, and both scientific knowledge and technical expertise have been honed to astonishing degrees. These are certainly not bad things; in fact, they're advantages most of us would want to preserve and promote.

Again, however, this is a system that evolved to fit the infrastructure of the fossil-fueled industrial period. As energy systems change during the 21st century and beyond, our current social, economic, and political systems will be deeply challenged and may ultimately have to give way to systems better adapted to whatever infrastructure—or energy regime—replaces our current one.

As we saw in previous videos, our future societal regime is likely to be one with less energy and less transport--and one that's therefore more localized. It'll be one where climate is changing and weather conditions are extreme and unpredictable; one where we need ways to sequester carbon rather than releasing more into the atmosphere.

Millions of idealists, reformers, and activists have worked for decades to make our political and economic management systems more fair and inclusive. Now infrastructural pressures from deep within the system itself are forcing unprecedented levels and rates of change. The work of activists and reformers is arguably more needed than ever. As always, those who work for social change will be motivated by their core values—whether it's fairness, peace, stability, beauty, resilience, sustainability, whatever. But it will be imperative for them to figure out what ideas, projects, proposals, or policies

further those values, *while also fitting with the infrastructure that's almost certainly headed our way*.

There's plenty to do, and lots at stake. We'll need all the creativity and passion we can muster.