

I've been asked by a colleague to share my reading list on societal issues. The value of this list is that you don't have to read these books to get the main messages - they are summarized below. I found these books important, and they have shaped my life. As (I hope) you are a concerned and voting citizen, please consider some of these books in lieu of your next TV sports/show.

*I've annotated each listing with my perspective on what it offers, including notes on what other books may be better if time is limited. The year in parentheses is the year of the edition I read— newer editions are often available. Click the title to order cheap used copies on Amazon.*

**The Crash Course: The Unsustainable Future Of Our Economy, Energy, And Environment** by Chris Martenson (2011)

Probably the most readable summation of the scope of problems humanity faces and their causes. This book introduces a financial dimension to the discussion which was lacking in others. There is much overlap with other books below, but if you can only read one, I suggest this one. He includes some future scenarios, but without the rigor of Limits To Growth. On a worldwide level, he does not have all the solutions, however in his conclusion, Martenson takes things to a personal level in terms of what you should do in the face of the impending crash. There is also a [web site](#) where you can view a chapter at a time in videos.

**The Great Warming: Climate Change and the Rise and Fall of Civilizations** by Brian M. Fagan (2009)

*In light of tropical storm Sandy and recent hurricanes, I've moved this book up in the list.* The Medieval Warming Period has been used by climate change deniers to undermine the case for man-made climate change. I was surprised by the conclusion of this book. Also surprising is the amount of climatological education presented on the planet's systems of ocean currents, winds and storms. My takeaways were:  
1) Solely due to natural factors, there were climate shifts lasting a couple of hundred years. These shifts caused the mild warming in Europe which allowed Vikings to colonize Greenland, and also caused shifts which exterminated entire civilizations in North & South America, where some droughts lasted 65 years. All continents were impacted by this natural, long-lasting shift.  
2) The climate is warmer now than it was then, and with seven times the population, we're much closer to the carrying capacity of our ecology than those societies were.  
3) There is no simple term to describe what will happen to human society the next time climate variation causes similar droughts, and the future droughts, floods and storms will be worse given the effects of global warming.

**Know My Name** by Chanel Miller (2019)

This book speaks to the issue of sexual assault, an issue that may affect 50% of Americans directly or indirectly, through family members. Written by a victim, whose words reached tens of millions of readers even before she was an author, this book should allow you to understand the depth of damage done by that crime. It is powerful and very well written. It may not speak to the large scale issues of other books on this list, but it speaks to one felt more deeply and more immediately by way too many people.

**Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update** by Donella H. Meadows, Jorgen Randers and Dennis L. Meadows (2004)

The seminal work in the field, often falsely attacked and misrepresented. Meadows' MIT team has updated the book 3 times since 1972. At the core of his analysis is an explicit, easily viewable model of our species and the planet. I have yet to see a competing model arrive at different conclusions (*by "competing" I mean "well-documented, explicit, and subject to rigorous longstanding peer review"*). He is careful NOT to call his scenarios "predictions", because our future depends on the actions we decide to take. There are three disturbing indications of our future, however:

- 1) There aren't any scenarios which reflect our current situation and a good outcome. Most scenarios assume we started corrective action in 2002 and, depending on the scope and aggressiveness of our corrective policy changes, population rises to a maximum of 8 billion by mid-century and falls to between 3 and 6 billion by 2100. The scenario I view as most representative ends with 4.5 billion people in 2100.
- 2) In order to avoid collapse, we would have had to start policy changes in 1982. If we had, things wouldn't look so bad for our grandchildren.
- 3) I asked Dennis when the 40-year update was coming out. He wrote back that there wasn't going to be one – all the scenarios had negative outcomes. He spoke at the Smithsonian in Feb. and essentially talked about “managing the collapse”.

As a key point, Meadows clearly demonstrates why technology cannot solve all our problems. This should be viewed as a technical read, even though the authors have attempted to make it digestible by a broader audience.

**Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change** by William R. Catton (1982)

Extremely readable and probably the foundation work for the concepts of ‘carrying capacity’ and ‘overshoot’ as applied to humanity. My recollection is Catton felt we had exceeded the Earth's carrying capacity for humans in 1980, at about 3 billion. How did we do it? We used non-renewable resources in which was stored hundreds of millions of years of solar energy. This book seems to be the essential glossary for terms now commonly used today and lays out in simple logic the interaction between ecology and our history and future.

**The End of Growth: Adapting to Our New Economic Reality** by Richard Heinberg (2011)

This book covers essentially the same material as the Crash Course, with two important differences. First, Heinberg makes the point that we cannot fix the problems facing us without first fixing the economic and political systems – because we need them working better in order to focus resources on the problems. The economic sections of this book are more detailed. This book changed my immediate concerns from environmental to financial/political. Second, the book is not as engagingly written as Crash Course. Heinberg also offers some additional Life After Growth thoughts which parallel Speth and Martenson.

**Fixing the Game: Bubbles, Crashes, and What Capitalism Can Learn from the NFL** by Roger L. Martin (2011)

A book that begins by drawing parallels with the NFL may not seem a serious treatment of our broken financial system, but this is. Martin clearly describes the flaws in corporate governance and incentives, and recommends solutions thereto, and to the problems caused by hedge funds. A key concept is how the stock market has moved from a Real Market to an Expectations Market, and the flaws that engenders. While clear on the problems and solutions, what he leaves unclear is who is going to fix what when and how.

**Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity** by James C. Hansen (2010)

Hansen was the first government scientist to publicly warn of climate change, and he got in trouble for it. His book presents understandable science regarding the factors causing climate change, and some really serious warnings of bad outcomes. He makes a solid case for a carbon tax, as opposed to cap and trade. He calls the former “fee and dividend” because polluters pay the fees and then everyone gets equal monies back. If you want to understand why the planet is at risk from climate change, this is your book. If you want motivation to do something, read about the Venus Syndrome.

**What's the Worst That Could Happen?: A Rational Response to the Climate Change Debate** by Greg Craven (2009)

Craven's major contribution is to describe how we should decide what is true, and what is not, in a world where we are not all scientists. His personal conclusion is in the next to last chapter, but he provides forms and instructions for you to do your own research and reach your own conclusion. Millions of people have seen his videos on Global Warming, and you will find this book both humorous and serious. Surprisingly, his decision methodology is endorsed by military generals.

**The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism - 2007**

Whether you're conservative or progressive, this book is going to make you angry. If you wonder what happened to the middle class, why poverty is on the rise, and what the economies in a democracy, dictatorship and communism have in common, you'll find lots of food for thought here. Very readable, but supported by 1,000 evidentiary footnotes, this book describes how Milton Friedman's Chicago School of Economics "free market capitalism" neoliberal economic programs have repeatedly been implemented without the consent of the governed by creating and/or taking advantage of various forms of national shocks. The results are exacerbated inequality in every country cited in the book. From China and Russia to Chile and South Africa, those policies were able to be imposed only when countries were reeling from a major shock, and the IMF and World Bank capitalized on the disasters to tie aid to "economic reforms" which enriched foreign companies at the expense of the local populations. The unfavorable contrasts between the Marshall Plan and the IMF & World Bank are most revealing. She draws uncomfortable parallels with the use of shock therapy in 1950's psychotherapy, torture, and war. While those parallels may seem unfair, the weight of the evidence shows they are not. This book will cause you to re-examine the definitions of democracy, capitalism, & meritocracy and reconsider the proper nature of society.

The Shock Doctrine was a national best seller and has been called "The only book of the last few years in American publishing that I would describe as a mandatory must-read. Literally the only one."

**Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming** by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. M. Conway (2011)

This book goes far beyond the Carbon **Sarto** describe how corporate interests and a handful of scientists were able to delay and dilute action on a wide variety of harmful actions, ranging from cigarettes, through acid rain and chlorofluorocarbons (think: ozone depletion), to global warming. Several fascinating facts:

- 1) some of the same scientists passed themselves off as experts on topics as disparate as lung cancer and climatology over a period of 30+ years.
- 2) the motivation for all the deceivers was not pure greed. Several prominent scientists escaped from totalitarian regimes and are strongly adverse to government regulation because of the evils they witnessed under Hitler and Stalin.
- 3) The proof behind this book's findings is overwhelming. The chapters average 100 footnotes, largely because of lawsuits which have brought into the public record the internal memos and dealings of the deniers.

This is an entertaining read, if you want to be outraged. It won't teach you anything new about science or the probable future of our society, but it will leave you fully aware of how the government is controlled by vested interests (*remember Bush administration lawyers editing scientific documents?*)— and hopefully arm you to look for the reality under competing claims.

**Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right** by Jane Mayer, (2016)

**Dark Money** describes how a couple of MIT graduates did a great job taking over the United States' political system by analyzing it systematically and finding the leverage points which they influenced by funding: universities, think tanks, lobbying firms, legislative & policy authoring firms, state & local

elections, media outlets, and of course federal elections - all without running for office. The majority of those funds were channeled through tax-deductible contributions to private 'charitable' foundations, in \$ billions. Of course they were not alone, and continued and expanded upon a tradition of self-interested giving begun by billionaires before them, but the impact of the Koch brothers and similar rich donors on our society has been enormous, and continues to this day.

The book is well sourced and footnoted, so there's no doubt about the facts. The impact of this "dark money" on issues like climate change policy is likely the most relevant for readers of this list. **Merchants of Doubt** goes back further (to cigarette smoking and other issues) in examining the messaging tactics. Dark Money focuses on the funding, ideological and political actions. If you accept this summary, then there's no reason to read the book, but if you want proof, or a good dose of outrage, or an understanding of the steps required in a campaign to undo their influence, it's well written and will hold your interest.

**The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability** by James Gustave Speth (2009)

Revisits the limits we face in resources, population, and the environment, but extends the discussion into the flaws in our economic and political systems. Speth argues for an improved form of capitalism and different measures of our well-being than economic measures such as GDP, one that represents "Real Growth". Discusses what has to change in politics in order to take effective action on these problems.

**Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed** by Jared Diamond (2005)

In a series of bite-size chapters, Diamond reviews how several historical societies failed or collapsed, with an emphasis on environmental damage, climate change, globalization, rapid population growth, and unwise political choices. Several modern societies are reviewed and the implications for us are drawn. A readable book, without a lot of theory and footnotes.

**Carbon War: Global Warming and the End of the Oil Era** by Jeremy K. Leggett (2001)

This book is mostly a history lesson on how the fossil fuel industry and oil-producing countries were able to delay and dilute action on Climate Change, a problem apparent from the early 1980's. The book has elements of a thriller in it, and may raise your level of anger at the vested interests who have put us all at risk. The focus ends with the Kyoto Summit in 1997.

**Energy & Society (Revised): The Relation Between Energy, Social Change, and Economic Development** by Fred Cottrell (2009)

This book is probably as significant as *Origin of the Species*. However, you do not read it, you study it. It was originally written in 1955, and largely unread. In 2006, Cottrell's son found a book update his father had been working on prior to his death in 1979. The second edition is a bad editing job of a book that was already hard to read. There are a lot of assertions and typos – more than there are footnotes – but the brilliance of his insight shines through if you focus your mind. It is the first publication I read to raise these two concepts:

- 1) Energy Returned Over Energy Invested
- 2) Energy Defines Society

Others consider this book a masterpiece. If you want to understand how energy has shaped the course of history and continues to shape the structure of human societies, read this book. I will read it again, and take better notes - so I don't have to read it a third time.

**The Long Emergency: Surviving the End of Oil, Climate Change, and Other Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century** by James Howard Kunstler (2006)

This is a passionate, not to say strident, book. Kunstler makes the case for our “converging catastrophes” more forcefully than other authors, and the book is the more readable because of it. However, the book is full of assertions and devoid of footnotes. I prefer to see the facts behind an argument, and most of the books in this list have 50-100 footnotes per chapter – there’s no doubt they have their facts in order. This book is more of an opinion piece, like a Wall Street Journal editorial/op-ed. His conclusions largely agree with those of other authors, and he tells a good story, in the tone of an Old Testament Prophet.

**[Bottleneck : Humanity's Impending Impasse](#)** by [William R. Jr. Catton](#) (2009)

Catton’s most recent book revisits the ecological concepts of **Overshoot**, and extends them into a consideration of our probable future, why we have not corrected our behavior to date, and the implications for improving public policy to deal with our predicament. Like Meadows, Catton foresees a die-off. Catton parallels one of Meadows’ arguments - pointing out that we are now a new species: *homo colossus*, because we each use 20 times more energy than our ancestors. Also relevant is his definition of Anthropogenic Fate, which occurs when unintended circumstances result from the innumerable small decisions about other matters made by innumerable people (think: driving your car causes Climate Change). There is much more in here, including how our social evolution contributed to our Overshoot. It seems his hope is to educate the survivors, so they can sustain a future civilization.

**[The Origin of Financial Crises: Central Banks, Credit Bubbles, and the Efficient Market Fallacy](#)** by [George Cooper](#) (2008)

Greenspan admitted the failure of free market ideology in testimony. In a series of disarmingly simple arguments former central banker George Cooper challenges the core principles of today’s economic orthodoxy and explains how we have created an economy that is inherently unstable and crisis prone. The key insight of this book is his depiction of the feedback loops at work in our financial system. As noted above, we have to fix our markets before we can fix our problems.

**[1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus](#)** by Charles C. Mann (2011)

Why is a book about Western Hemisphere civilizations on this list? Because it contains hope for a sustainable future in its reporting of how “Indians” created their environments and managed them successfully. In particular the farms and soils they created are things we should emulate as our intensive, fossil-fueled agriculture depletes our soils. Their role in fostering our democracies is also surprising. If you haven’t followed Mesoamerican research for the last 20 years, this book will shock you. In case you don’t believe, there are 413 footnotes and approximately 1,200 books in the bibliography. Mann presents even the controversies in a balanced fashion. A comfortable read, with tedium saved for appendices & footnotes. The companion book: [1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created](#) (2012) is also an extremely educational and readable explanation of how we got where we are today.

**[The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable](#)** by [Nassim Nicholas Taleb](#) (2007)

This book’s insight is no longer a secret among professional traders. The ‘normal distribution’ used so predominantly to assess financial risk is wrong. The correct distribution is fractal, and it has a much larger tail of outlying results. The evidence of this has been shown in the number of 5 sigma shocks to our investment markets in the past couple of decades – any one of which should only have occurred every couple of thousand years. Taleb also points out the flaws in our cognitive processes against which we must defend: confirmation bias, narrative fallacy, etc. The book contributes to an understanding of the flaws in our financial system, and by the way, how to make some money off of them.

**[The Value of Nothing: How to Reshape Market Society and Redefine Democracy](#)** by [Raj Patel](#) (2010)

In the spirit of fixing our society so we can fix our planet, Patel shows how our faith in prices as a way of valuing the world is misplaced. He reveals the hidden ecological and social costs of a hamburger (as much as \$200), and asks how and why we developed markets. Both the corporate capture of government and our current financial crisis, Patel argues, are a result of our democratically bankrupt political system.

He argues in a brief, readable style that our current crisis is not simply the result of too much of the wrong kind of economics. While we need to rethink our economic model, Patel argues that the larger failure beneath the food, climate and economic crises is a political one. If economics is about choices, Patel writes, it isn't often said who gets to make them. The *Value of Nothing* offers a fresh and accessible way to think about economics and the choices we will all need to make in order to create a sustainable economy and society.

**THE FRAUD TRIANGLE: Fraudulent Executives, Complicit Auditors, and Intolerable Public Injury**  
by [Allan N Littman](#) (2010)

Written by a nationally prominent litigator who handled cases like Enron and Lincoln Financial, this book describes how corporations, our government, and auditing firms passively(?) conspire to defraud the investing public. Unfortunately, he wrote the book like a lawyer, with 270 pages of logic followed by 200 pages of evidence in appendices. In brief, he is clearly correct in his findings, and the investment markets are not to be trusted (which I think has dawned on people in light of the mortgage & banking scandals).

His insight is completely valid, and his suggestions for remedy are excellent. Fixing these conflict of interest problems is one essential for restoring our economy. However, you "study" this book, more than you read it. The importance of the content overrides the readability - until someone else provides a better vehicle.

**The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power** by [Daniel Yergin](#) (1991)

This book won the 1992 Pulitzer Prize. It covers the history of petroleum oil and its impact on our society up through 1990. In the 20 years since, his demonstrated conclusion remains true: "Oil remains an essential element in national power, a major factor in world economies, a critical focus for war and conflict, and a decisive force in international affairs." The Prize makes the case that our progress as an industrial society derived from the efficiency of fossil fuels, and our greatest conflicts were decided in large part by the access thereto (the chapters on WWI and II are riveting).

The book is easy to read, almost a thriller. Mention of environmental and depletion issues surrounding oil is only in passing, until the 1991 Epilogue, which foreshadows our current situation: "...the United States political system was paralyzed ... Anger, finger-pointing, scapegoating - all became a substitute for the development of a rational reaction to a very serious problem. ... the spectacle of that fragmented, contentious response, characterized by the pursuit of a galaxy of conflicting special interests, provides reason to ponder how... the United States will respond over the long haul to future energy needs and crises".

**The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power** by [Joel Bakan](#) (2005)

This book highlights the conflict between the Corporation and the well-being of society. The corporation has become the world's dominant economic institution, but its flaws make it harmful. This book explains the evolution of the corporation, and makes the 3 observations below, and then offers legal and democratic reforms to remedy the damages caused.

- ⌚ The corporation's legally defined mandate is to pursue relentlessly and without exception its own economic self-interest, regardless of the harmful consequences it might cause to others.
- ⌚ The corporation's unbridled self-interest victimizes individuals, society, and, when it goes awry, even shareholders and can cause corporations to self-destruct, as recent Wall Street scandals reveal.

🕒 Governments have freed the corporation, despite its flawed character, from legal constraints through deregulation and granted it ever greater authority over society through privatization - and now, with Citizens United, they almost vote...

If you'd rather, there is an excellent documentary film of the same title based on this book, for those who prefer video media.

**[The Ends of the World: Volcanic Apocalypses, Lethal Oceans, and Our Quest to Understand Earth's Past Mass Extinctions](#)** by Peter Brannen (2017)

This is the more readable, but less footnoted, book on Mass Extinctions and what they can teach us. [the other is [The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History](#) (2015)]. I recommend this one for its storytelling, almost a mystery novel. Without giving any spoilers, you'll be surprised to learn of the role trees have played in our climate and extinctions.

**[Warning to Humanity, 1992 \(and then 2017\)](#)**

This is not a book, just a two page statement issued by about 1,700 scientists including 102 Nobel laureates. I must have been asleep when it was issued. In case you think I'm off base in my concerns, read the list of signatories - and that was 1992. This has been followed by [other such letters](#) in the following decades, most recently [Sept, 2016](#).

<http://www-formal.stanford.edu/jmc/progress/ucs-statement.txt>

And then... it was issued again in Dec. 2017, [signed by 16,000 scientists](#), and has [since been signed by 4,500 more](#), and the paper is currently the sixth most discussed research paper in the world, according to [The Altmetric](#)

**Oh, and now in 2019**, it's over 11,000 scientists and announcing a Climate Emergency:

<https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/advance-article/doi/10.1093/biosci/biz088/5610806?searchresult=1>

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As always, I welcome your additions to this list, and corrections to my presentation thereof. What I'm really looking for is an evidence-based book with peer-reviewed solid logic that says "Don't worry, everything will be fine".

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