



Addressing Tipping Points for a Precarious Future

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Print publication date: 2013

Print ISBN-13: 9780197265536

Published to British Academy Scholarship Online: January 2014

DOI: 10.5871/bacad/9780197265536.001.0001

Commentary 3.2

Aligning Contrasting Perspectives of Tipping Points

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DOI:10.5871/bacad/9780197265536.003.0004

[-] Abstract and Keywords

Reactions to possible tipping points can be interpreted through cultural theory, where styles of individualism, hierarchy, egalitarianism, and fatalism offer various manners of reaction and preparation. In hierarchical political systems, tipping points can be seen as alarmist and mischievous, while in individualistic patterns, tipping points can be regarded as a case for dreaded state intervention. Thus, debates about tipping points can be as much about unveiling underlying ideologies and misperceptions as advancing fresh thinking and creative adaptation.

Keywords: tipping points, cultural theory, ideology, clumsy solutions, black swan events

It is illuminating to explore the ideas of tipping points through the prism of the theories of plural rationality. Of these perhaps the most developed is the unhelpfully named 'cultural theory', based broadly on the research of anthropologist Mary Douglas (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982) and often used as a way of thinking about risk.

Cultural theory argues that there are four basic and distinct ways of thinking about change – both descriptively and prescriptively. As the anthropologist and systems thinker Michael Thompson has described, each of these perspectives is associated with a different underlying model of nature as a system (Thompson *et al.* 1990). These models can be represented by four images in which a healthy natural system is portrayed as a ball, along the lines introduced by Tim Lenton in Chapter 2.1 (see Figure 2.4, page 37).

The *hierarchical* perspective sees nature as volatile but manageable. This perspective sees tipping points as real phenomena, but also as something that can be predicted and managed through the right combination of expertise and leadership.

The *individualistic* perspective sees nature as highly resilient and adaptive. This perspective leads either to scepticism about tipping points or a faith in nature and its human stewards to avoid catastrophe by adapting to change to achieve a new and better equilibrium. (In the words of Richard Sears, ‘the Stone Age didn’t end because we ran out of stones’.)

The *egalitarian* perspective sees nature in the modern world as fundamentally unstable and vulnerable. Our management of the environment needs to take account of the basic fragility of natural systems. From this perspective, tipping points have a powerful resonance both as descriptions of concrete reality but also as a kind of morality tale about the dire consequences of our cavalier treatment of natural systems.

(p.74) Finally, there is the *fatalistic* perspective that, in as much as it believes at all in tipping points, sees them as inevitable and malign. Nature in this view is capricious and liable to threaten human interests. Fatalists will tend to see tipping points either as a propaganda tool to justify interference by those with other perspectives, or simply another example of the unhappy vagaries of life.

Cultural theory therefore has a warning for those seeking to use the concept of tipping points as a way of enhancing public awareness of, and engagement in, issues relating to sustainability (broadly defined). The very idea of tipping points will tend to be seen in some quarters as a concept intimately bound up with a particular worldview (egalitarianism) and the political and ethical positions associated with it.

In the hierarchical position of being a Downing Street adviser some years ago, I noticed that it was almost taken for granted that interest groups lobbying government would offer apparently credible evidence that the sector or people they represented were about to face catastrophe without some form of intervention. Given how jaded we advisers became, there is a danger that the idea of a tipping point comes to be seen as simply a new pseudo-scientific form of special interest ‘shroud-waving’. Indeed, given Whitehall’s predisposition towards seeing the world as predictable and manageable, a weakly made argument for a tipping point could even be seen as an admission of an inability to make a case in terms of a more conventional incremental change process.

The current Coalition government has shown some interest in ideas of discontinuous change, particularly in their enthusiasm for the ‘Black Swan’ thesis of Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2010). Taleb touches on the argument of Giles Foden here in visualizing a ‘black swan event’ as an outlier, something which reconfigures thought, a process which allows reflective explanation in the wake of its occurrence. Black swan events are an outcome of selective blindness, influenced by patterns of outlook and uncontested thought.

As we observe in the United States, the free market (individualist) right tends to portray environmental ‘alarmism’ as simply the latest ruse deployed by apologists for state interference over enterprise. The point from cultural theory is that, in as much as other worldviews can accommodate the idea, there will be a profound difference between their interpretations of the significance of tipping points and what they imply, if anything, for policy. This perspective reflects the argument of Dan Kahan (2012: 255) who contends that views on highly polarized interpretations **(p.75)** tend to be channelled towards what one’s social and cultural reference group contends, and not to any objective weighing of the evidence.

So far, so pessimistic: but culture theory also provides some ideas about how to make debate more constructive and inclusive. In debates over risk – particularly risks associated with the environment – protagonists can expend a great deal of energy in the generally futile process of beating each other around the head with evidence. To start by recognizing that we each bring certain predispositions to the table can provide a more constructive context based on mutual recognition.

For example, in talking to school students I have found it useful to ask them to choose between four different responses to climate change, the paradigmatic example of threat regarding catastrophic tipping points. The four responses are these:

- Climate change should be addressed through global treaties drawn up by experts and leaders (hierarchical).
- The threat to nature and global justice require us in the West fundamentally to change our lifestyles (egalitarian).
- Technology and markets are most likely to solve the problem (individualist).
- Man-made climate change is either all made up or it is a real phenomenon that we cannot cope with, and therefore we are doomed (fatalist).

Managing to find agreement about what it is people disagree about can be a powerful way of opening up debate (see also Mike Hulme (2010) in this regard). I have found that when the young people with whom I have spoken feel their position is being fairly represented, they are less resistant to recognizing the virtues of other views – and even the frailties within their own.

While we may not find it easy to agree about the nature of tipping points, this doesn't mean we can't combine perspectives to produce what cultural theorists such as Thompson *et al.* (1990) call 'clumsy' solutions – approaches to policy that ensure that all the perspectives are brought to bear and that voices representing all of them are heard.

What tends to emerge from the conversations I have just described is agreement that we need a combination of leadership, social responsibility and invention to reduce carbon emissions. 'Clumsiness' in the design of deliberations can then turn the discussion from a loser-inducing argument over whether there is a problem at all to a positive debate about the **(p.76)** relative contributions that representatives of each perspective can make. Conversation can also explore the inherent strengths and weaknesses in each approach, marshalling the combined insights and techniques of hierarchy (while resisting its tendency to be controlling), egalitarianism (while resisting its tendency to be alarmist), and individualism (while resisting its tendency toward complacency) – always bearing in mind the allure of fatalism.

The concept of the tipping point is rich and valuable on many levels. It can help us understand the world, the way we think about the world and why, and also why social power as it is currently configured may be unable to respond to extreme and rapid change. But if our aim is for the tipping point idea to open up new debate and challenge deeply held assumptions, we should be aware that the very concept and how it is used can be perceived as betraying strong ideological preconceptions. Cultural theory provides tools and processes, the art of designing 'clumsy' solutions, to help overcome the barriers to dialogue that our values and predispositions can set up.

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