

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Greetings, on this platform. The Great Simplification. We're trying to change the initial conditions of the future by putting together a quite complex, wide boundary overview of the human predicament and how humans in the biosphere, interrelate and what are the underpinnings and the scenarios and the interventions.

[00:00:25] It's complex, it's threatening. it is not for the faint of heart. so our audience isn't everyone. And I was thinking about it this week. If you think of all 8 billion humans, a subset of those are those with the internet. A subset of those are those that. Want to learn, about the world and are curious.

[00:00:49] A subset of those are those that, have a pro-social, pro future outlook and would like to engage, with the future and make not only their own lives better, but make society and the planet and the biosphere better than the default. and so that's quite already a small, number of, humans, but.

[00:01:13] Probably in the tens of millions anyways. but then there's another filter, which is the attention span. And a lot of people don't have the attention span, including me, for a 90 minute podcast. I just don't, I can interview someone for 90 minutes or three and a half hours in, Daniel Schmuck, Berger's case.

[00:01:37] but I am too busy and I just don't have the attention span. I'm sure there are a lot of people, increasingly, a lot of people that fall into that category, and so this message could be parsed into something. Shorter. so last week I was in, California, doing kind of a pre TED talk, sort of event called Ignite.

[00:01:59] And the challenge, offered was, would you give a five minute talk, Nate, 20 slides? I'm like, sure, I'd be happy to. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done. because the 20 slides are auto timed at 15 seconds each, so it's exactly five minutes. Exactly. 20 slides, exactly. 15 seconds each. And I did one on the Superorganism.

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[00:02:22] The animations didn't end up working. I. So I'm taking this opportunity on this, frankly, to redo the Superorganism in seven minutes. but I've, loosened the constraints on myself and I think I have 25 or 26 slides and some are longer than 15 seconds. so here goes the Superorganism in seven minutes.

[00:02:55] Modern civilization looks impressive and invincible markets grow. Planes fly. Artificial intelligence has arrived, but something doesn't feel right beneath the surface. More vital signs are flashing red. There are lots of people working on cures, but we are mostly prescribing fixes without first diagnosing the underlying condition.

[00:03:18] The patient is now the fully coupled system of the global human economy and earth's biosphere. The symptoms we're seeing and feeling do make sense once we zoom out and see how the whole system fits together. Most people narrowly believe money powers the world. But it's really energy animals were the first investors spending some calories to gain more this surplus energy built organisms, ecosystems, and eventually human cultures.

[00:03:52] And this civilization, I. Two centuries ago, we tapped the stored energy of ancient sunlight in the form of coal oil and gas. The oil in a single barrel combined with a machine, can do around five years of human labor for mere pennies, portable, concentrated. Incredibly cheap magic. This fossil jackpot underpins the phenomenon of the carbon pulse, a one-time release of energy stored over geologic time.

[00:04:23] In under 200 years, we've burned what took millions to form. This wasn't a paycheck, it was a trust fund with which we've been throwing a planet wide party. When paired with machines, this huge energy surplus did wonders. Population production and profits, all soared, powered by an invisible fossil army, a half a trillion.

[00:04:48] Human workers strong. But such power came with blind spots. Our culture confused the tiny cost of fossil energy with its enormous value and ignored the pollution impacts almost entirely. We built a global economy fully dependent on these two hidden subsidies without acknowledging them, without even seeing them.

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[00:05:11] We remain today energy blind, mistaking financial and technological growth for progress, and forgetting what enabled and empowered at all. In nature, complexity builds through flows of energy and materials. Forest, coral reefs, brains all emerge from this dynamic. Human systems are no exception. Cities, economies, technologies, all self-organized as emergent structures powered by energy, shaped by matter.

[00:05:43] The pursuit of energy and nature creates patterns A single Starling follows, three simple rules. Stay close to your neighbor, but not too close, and move towards the center from these simple animal behaviors. A breathtaking shape, a murmuration appears in the sky, fluid, unpredictable, and alive. This is emergence in nature.

[00:06:07] Emergence happens in the human world too. Billions of individuals, businesses, and nations each follow simple cultural rules. Seek profit, minimize cost, grow, all tethered to energy, materials and ecosystem impact the result. Global physical patterns. No one designed. No one intended, and few are planning around.

[00:06:31] Zoom out far enough, and human civilization itself starts to look and act like a giant organism with its own metabolism. Data flows, echo neural signals, highways and shipping lanes function like veins and arteries with gasoline and diesel as the blood fractal nodes in a global system each year requiring a higher baseline metabolic requirement.

[00:06:58] What has emerged is something new, something massive. A globally synchronized economic Superorganism built from energy machines and billions of human decisions driven both by biological and cultural incentives. A mindless un planning energy hungry Superorganism. This Superorganism isn't evil. It doesn't feel.

[00:07:24] It doesn't care about equity, ecology, or human wellbeing. It just optimizes for throughput, for scale, for more even when more becomes the problem, I. There is no mastermind at the wheel. Just billions of incentives aligned in the same direction toward extraction and consumption. We've inadvertently built a system that rewards material expansion, not wisdom, and we've outsourced our decision making to markets and algorithms.

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[00:07:55] As a result in the past 30 years, we have consumed more energy and materials than all humans before us combined. Our current culture feels like it will continue forever, but infinite growth on a finite planet is not possible. No energy surplus, no economy and technology on its own won't save us because it runs on the same fuel and has the same master.

[00:08:22] The Superorganism cannot see what's coming. It doesn't anticipate. It only reacts and the signals it reacts to profits. Prices ignore the deeper long-term risks. So far, our collective response to limits has been to go deeper into ecological and biophysical debt. Buy now, pay later at a planetary scale.

[00:08:46] The buy now pay later is now in full effect. When central banks print money, they are not printing oil, copper, or lithium. They're printing claims on them. We can double the money supply, but the fossil fuels the forest, the metals, the orangutans. They haven't changed. The financial system assumes endless growth, but the physical world, both the sources and the sink have limits.

[00:09:12] For over two centuries, growth has been our default, fueled by energy, abundance, and amplified by financial systems. But we are now hitting ecological, energetic, and social constraints. The cultural story of more is colliding with physical reality. What if more money doesn't help but just accelerates our transmutation of non-renewable wealth into temporary income?

[00:09:38] The up slope of the carbon pulse bought growth and complexity on the down slope, the inverse will happen. Less energy, less complexity, less. More. A great Simplification. Is not a maybe it's a when. The economic Superorganism is not something humans plan for nor wanted. It is an emergent phenomenon of large numbers of social primates interacting with large energy surplus without a map.

[00:10:11] Downstream of aggregate behavior as individuals, humans continue to seek the emotional states that served our ancestors, but we now live in a world of scale, speed, and stimulation they never faced. We are a species far out of context, but we are not just individuals. We're deeply social animals. Our values and behaviors adapt to our cultural environment.

[00:10:37] And culture can change sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly. It is in our wiring to shift once the story shifts too. Here's the hopeful twist. The things that

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truly bring us joy and meaning are not tied to material consumption once our basic human needs are met. What fulfills us is ancient connection, purpose, time and nature being in service.

[00:11:03] Humans don't need endless growth to live rich, meaningful lives. So what can we do as this? Superorganism reaches old age responses fall into four broad categories, policy, biophysical realism, planning for bending, not breaking in The Great Simplification cultural I. New stories, less hubris, more trust and social capital, community mutual aid, local and regional food and supply chains, ecosystem repair and personal skills.

[00:11:35] Mindset, connection, meaning we can't easily steer or stop the economic Superorganism, but we can seed what comes next. Each of us can be the mitochondria in the cells. Of a different social organism being born in the not too distant future in communities, in bio regions, in gatherings across the world.

[00:11:57] It's already happening. The stakes have never been higher for humans and for the biosphere. Power scales up, energy, money control, hierarchy, life scales, deep interconnection, regeneration, community. The future depends on which of these we feed. This isn't just a crisis, it is a rite of passage for homo sapiens.

[00:12:23] The Superorganism we are part of today is not our destiny as a species, but a fork in a long road. So start the conversation. Build local resilience. Consider being B plus in service of life. Join those, shifting the story, participate in the coming. Great Simplification. Thank you. Whoops. I went over seven minutes.

[00:12:48] Kel Supr, but this is the challenge. this was just a primer of the human predicament. My college course was a hundred hours. The reality 101 course that we're putting together, this summer is gonna be eight to 10 hours. there was a huge amount that was left unsaid. Every sentence in what I just did could have been unpacked for a half hour, horizontally and vertically with supporting points.

[00:13:17] the reality, the systemic reality, our culture is grappling with. Isn't conducive to the soundbites, and, stimulation and gotcha, that dominate our current internet. and that's part of our problem is our culture has come to favor short, simple explanations when the reality is nuanced, complex, and extremely serious.

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[00:13:46] And a bit dis distressing, and abstract with no easy answers, et cetera. so I am confident, which is why I'm doing this work, that over time the truth, which is the systems science. Integration, of our reality can help us meet the future halfway. And we're gonna continue to work on that, on this platform with, different length videos, probably longer, form content.

[00:14:19] And there are a lot of humans around the world that are hungry to understand what our situation is and how to engage to make the future better than the default more soon. Thank you.