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Atlas Shrugged – and Fell Down

By Charlie Grantham and Jim Ware

Atlas not only shrugged; he fell down on his butt. Basic confidence in the ability of public institutions to manage our industrial economic systems has all but disappeared. We are convinced that major re-ordering of our economic governance systems is needed – and right now! The combination of more connections and more limited resources will drive the future of work toward more effectiveness, placing a premium on developing increased capability (read: productivity – doing more with less).

Our own efforts going forward will increasingly be focused on building assessment and planning tools that promote transparency in strategic decision-making because you can't improve governance without basing your decisions on reliable data – data that captures not only financial impacts, but social and environmental ones as well. As you'll see, we believe hard data and transparency have been sorely missing from the national scene for far too long.

Unless you have been living under a rock and have been totally disconnected with reality, you **now** understand what we have been preaching for a very long time - since December 2005 to be exact (see "[In Our Humble Opinion: Did You Hear the Ice Crack](#)" and "[Field Notes: Something's Happening Here](#)," both from [Future of Work Agenda, December 2005](#)). The ice has cracked; the social underpinnings of Western industrial society have crumbled.

The confidence of people across the industrialized world that their respective governments actually know what they are doing has evaporated as quickly as the value of a credit default swap. Even Alan Greenspan admits an error in judgment and says he was Shocked! Shocked!

"Greenspan said he was 'partially wrong' in opposing regulation of derivatives and acknowledged that financial institutions didn't protect shareholders and investments as well as he expected."

([DailyKos](#), "[RIP John Galt](#)," by [Devilstower](#), Sunday, October 26, 2008)

Quick, get thee to a bookstore. We highly recommend taking a look at Thomas Frank's [The Wrecking Crew](#), and James Galbraith's [The Predator State](#), (links for your convenience are to [Amazon.com](#); we have no financial interest). In super-condensed format, the message in both books is that the events of the past few months are the predictable, natural outcome of policies intended to concentrate wealth in an ever-shrinking pool of people – and a dominant psychology of greed and fear. (We won't even mention the movie "W" unless you want to really punish yourself)

We are now facing the outcome of a commercial world's changing from an industrial production base to a services and information economy *without corresponding changes in its governance structures*.

Okay, so now that we know how we got here, what should we (all of us together) do? We (the two of us) think two things are crucial: first, a return to common sense, prudence, and compassion as guiding principles of behavior; and, second, a restoration of confidence and trust in our leaders.

The meaningful glue of social intercourse has been leached out of the brickwork of our communities. Coping with this reality will require a structural solution that mandates *genuine collaboration* among all developed nations. To get started we'd like to see a 21st-century equivalent of Bretton Woods where all the basic rules of commerce are re-written.

It's very hard to think out of the box when someone is slamming the lid down on you. Put less metaphorically, when things get really bad, we all hunker down and stick with what we know.

However, there are some things ("trends," as we futurists call them), that are essentially undeniable right now. First is an increasing tendency toward more connectivity of the elements in societies, both within individual nation-states and across the globe as a whole. Second is a growing understanding that our resources (energy and otherwise) are not unlimited.

We believe these two forces will drive businesses (and the work they do) towards the goal of *effectiveness*, which really means *doing the right thing in the interest of a larger whole*. We also believe we're going to see increased spending in areas that build more and more global capability such as conservation, education, and the distribution of wealth over a wider array of audiences (yes, that might just mean a bit more redistribution and sharing of wealth to create a greater common good, or common *wealth*, that we can't achieve as individuals).

The scary thing is that this shift in priorities means a rather significant re-ordering of society (or *societies*). The way things used to work doesn't work anymore. This change certainly won't happen overnight, but it *will* happen. Don't worry though: there's plenty of profit to be made in helping the process along. And, frankly, doom awaits those who get in the way.

We believe the energy sector of the economy offers the highest leverage for starting the re-ordering process. And not just the kind of energy that powers a car, lights our houses, or grows our food. Energy is going to be **the** Issue – and **the** opportunity – for three decades. As others have pointed out, energy done right can be a win-win-win: good for the environment; good for the economy; and good for national security.

But we're also talking about *mental* energy – the kind that focuses our efforts, removes the clutter in our thinking, and allows us to see reality for what it truly is. For more on this check out what our friend Gil Gordon has to say in his new book, [Turn It Off: How to Unplug from the Anytime-Anywhere Office Without Disconnecting Your Career](#) (the personal advice in that book may be even more important than the two political and economic tomes we mentioned earlier).

But let's get much more specific. We invite you to do a personal energy audit and figure out just what your own "carbon footprint" is. We challenge you to come up with a strategy to reduce that impact by at least 30% within a year. Now there's a measurable goal. How many cars do you have? How big is your house? How much "stuff" do you buy? Start asking the questions; your answers might surprise you (one place to start your research is at [Terrapass.com](#), where you can find out how much bad stuff you and all those "things" of yours are putting into the atmosphere).

By now at least one of you out there is asking "So what are those two smart aleck bozos going to do themselves?"

In truth, we don't have all the details worked out yet, but one thing we've learned is that if we (again, all of us) can't talk in rational terms about these kinds of changes and their consequences for the planet, no one will listen to all the well-intended preaching and pleading we (the two of us) engage in.

That insight points the Work Design Collaborative (that's us) towards more effort in applied research that will produce analytical processes (and, eventually, benchmark data) to inform business decisions by making their economic, environmental, and social consequences a whole lot more visible.

Simply put, we're committed to designing management tools that make the invisible visible, allow for a formal accounting of indirect environmental and social effects, and can be understood by "everyday" leaders. If you are interested in contributing to these efforts as a sponsor or knowledge resource, by all means give us a shout.

We've seen what opaque methods of value calculation (can you say "derivatives"?) can do to warp decisions and create economic chaos (see "[Explaining the Credit Crisis](#)," a slide presentation by Johannes Bhakfi, for a whimsical but deadly serious look at what we've all been through lately). We've seen how unfettered self-interest can twist the intentions of otherwise honorable people and cause incredible harm to millions of others. We may be sadder but wiser, but too many of us are also sadder and poorer.

It's this hindsight that has strengthened our personal resolve to ensure that decisions about the future of work are made thoughtfully, with hard data and plenty of transparency. To paraphrase a whole bunch of smart people, "If you can't measure it, how the heck can you manage it?" We think that philosophy applies as much to the future as it does to the past.

Now, if you go back to the beginning of this article and reread our call for a new kind of governance structure, you may be wondering what we want to see. In all candor, we haven't figured that out yet, but we're working on some ideas that only half-formed at this point (our newly-elected public officials, and all of us as citizens, have a very big job ahead). The one thing we do know is that however we make decisions in the future, they'd better be based on reality – and that reality had better be available to one and all. That's where our commitment to developing tools to make the invisible visible comes in.

In closing, we'll just echo a statement from about a year ago; "It starts right here, right now!"

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About the Work Design Collaborative and *Future of Work Agenda*

Future of Work is a global network of resources – practitioners, thought leaders, researchers, and senior consultants – who are committed to building and implementing physical, social, and technology-based work environments that are cost-effective, socially and environmentally responsible, and personally satisfying.

We are focused on defining the future of work and helping our members and clients achieve new levels of workforce and workplace productivity. *Future of Work* produces and distributes management tools, surveys, benchmark databases, white papers and technical reports, conferences and workshops, newsletters, books and articles, and public presentations on the changing nature of work. The Work Design Collaborative, LLC, provides leadership and infrastructure services for the *Future of Work* community.

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