



Sartre is my whitewater rafting guide.

“Freedom,” according to Jean-Paul Sartre, “is what you do with what’s been done to you.” This is true at the individual level—say, someone climbing their way out of a traumatic childhood into full adulthood—as well as at the collective level—think, for example, of the generations-long liberation struggle of Black people in America.

What about us, as we slip into the darker waters of the 21st century?

Consider “what’s been done” to us,⁹ as Gopal might describe it: in spite of knowing for decades about the devastating consequences of climate change, our Lords of Carbon locked us further into a fossil fuel-addicted economy that has systematically plundered and traumatized billions of people, while concentrating the vast majority of wealth and power in the hands of an elite <1% and enmeshing us all into dependency on a system that is wrecking the planet.

What can we possibly “do with” that?!

It might feel like we’ve got no room to maneuver, here. That we’ve been put in a straightjacket by our past greed and folly, if not handed a death sentence.

No, says Gopal. We’re in for a very rough ride, but reality is always a tangled interplay of circumstances we can’t do anything about and circumstances we can do something about. As Karl Marx wrote over 150 years ago:

Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.¹⁰

The past weighed like a nightmare on the men and women of Marx’s time just as it weighs like a nightmare on us now. Unlike the nightmare of Marx’s time, however, our nightmare is currently wrecking the very foundations of life itself and will inevitably haunt us over not just historic, but geologic time. Even so, we can (and must) make our own history. Our history making might feel different than the history making of Marx’s time. Rather than, say, “storming the heavens,” it might be more like navigating down a treacherous river.

In 2019, a cross-sector team of scholars, activists, and system-designers met to explore strategies for “Navigating the Great Unraveling.”¹¹ They projected out best- and worst-case scenarios for the year 2040 across four key drivers: available energy, degree of climate change, level of economic activity, and amount of accessible freshwater. For climate, for example, their best case had warming staying under 1.5°C, with a worst case of runaway warming. For water, their best case was current per capita freshwater consumption, with a worst case of only 25% of current per capita consumption. Across this range of possible scenarios, they then gamed out what could be done—by communities, movements, and governments—to shape outcomes in a more sustainable, just, and democratic direction.

While acknowledging that there was “no single, magical leverage point,” they identified a host of points where organized efforts could make a significant difference. These included a prohibition on privatized water extraction; land redistribution and other policies to create pathways for “re-ruralization”; “more explicit and systemic disaster planning”; a Green New Deal that would also transform agricultural and water practices; as well as being ready in moments of crisis to move radical ideas from politically impossible to politically inevitable in a “Bottom-Up Shock Doctrine.”

Amongst all these proposals, they paid special attention to what they called “no regrets” strategies, efforts worth doing “no matter what specific scenario transpires.” (How comforting to know there’s a host of “next right things” to do regardless of how badly or not so badly it all turns out!)

Possibly more instructive than all this strategizing and scenario-planning, however, was the way they began to think about the freedom we can exercise in the 21st century:

The canoe of our civilization is caught in a treacherous rapids that’s carrying us downwards, the current is fierce and unpredictable, we can’t control it, but there are places we can get a paddle in, to pivot, to steer clear of the choppiest water, till the current grabs us again...

This perspective has much in common with the Shocks and Slides on Gopal’s map. Unlike Guy’s cliff of extinction, or Meg Wheatley’s go-with-the-flow prophecy, there’s a role for collective action here. There’s stuff we

can do that matters. Yes, we're looking at a catastrophe, but as fair economy campaigner Chuck Collins, one of the conveners of the gathering, put it, "We have some agency around the margins to make things less catastrophic." He elaborated: "Even if we can only make a 1% difference in the outcome, we must try. That marginal difference sounds small, but it's actually huge. It could be the difference between survival of the species and complete extinction."

We are riding down the dark rapids of Collapse. Earth chemistry and the whole historical complex of Sartre's "what's been done to us" have a vast say over our destiny, but we too have a say. The stories we choose, the choices we make, the fights we step up to, the solutions we put forward, matter. As Marx said, we make our own history, but not in circumstances of our own choosing. As Gopal said, "We're all going to travel the same shocks and slides; the question is who gets to decide how it lands." Some of our possible futures are pretty terrible, but even in those, we have a say. And even if the very worst happens, we are still free, existential psychologist Victor Frankel reminds us, to choose the attitude by which we face those most terrible of circumstances.¹² At every juncture, and at every moment, we don't just "get" a future, we "make" our future.

Paddles in!