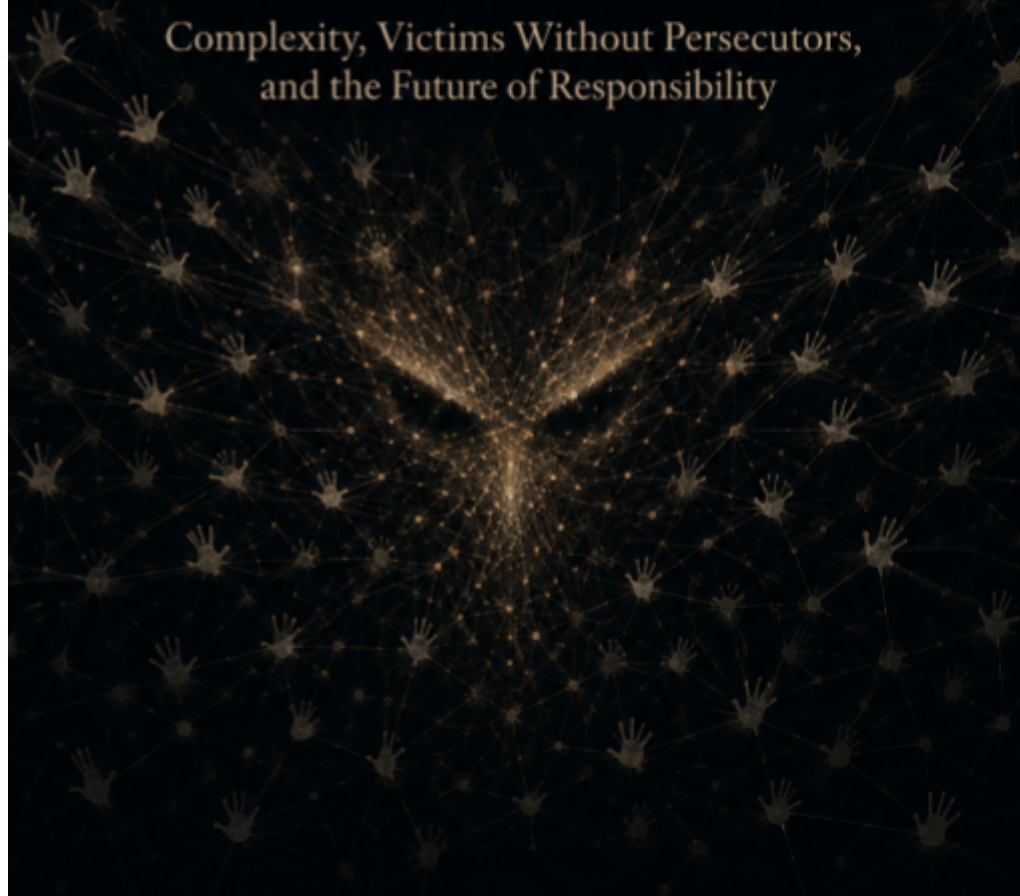


THE THOUSAND- HANDED DEVIL

Complexity, Victims Without Persecutors,
and the Future of Responsibility



THE THOUSAND-HANDED DEVIL

*Complexity, Victims Without Persecutors, and the
Future of Responsibility*

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A work of moral anthropology

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Author's Note

This work was created under the umbrella of Axiologic Research as part of two interconnected research programs, one dedicated to Artificial Intelligence and the other to Outfinitism, both led by Șinică Alboaie. To explore the details of how these two programs intersect and build upon each other, we invite readers to visit the Outfinity Venture Studio page at www.outfinity.ch.

While Artificial Intelligence language models were used to assist with text generation, the foundational philosophy, thematic structure, and analytical approach derive exclusively from the author's decades of dedicated study of social phenomena, social technologies, and genuine hard technologies resulting from various European and self funded research projects. Recently, within the Achilles research project, we have been deeply studying AI generated literature and its automated verification using neuro symbolic approaches; all the free books made available to the public are part of the suite of works we use to test our latest technologies.

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The book is an argumentative synthesis in moral anthropology. Its scenarios are analytical constructions; its factual foundations are documented in the references.

The Enemy We Cannot Hate

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Every civilization eventually invents an image of the evil it believes it has learned to recognize. The image is useful because it gives shape to fear. It tells a society what must be resisted, what must be punished, and what kind of person it must not become. Yet the image is also dangerous. Once evil has been given a familiar face, new forms of harm can move through the world unrecognized. They do not resemble the defeated monster. They arrive wearing the moral vocabulary of the civilization that produced them.

Modern societies have become extraordinarily skilled at identifying certain kinds of wrongdoing. We have developed legal languages for intention, negligence, complicity, discrimination, fraud, coercion, abuse, and crimes against humanity. We have learned, imperfectly and at terrible cost, to listen to the victim rather than only to the victorious crowd. We have constructed institutions whose declared purpose is to prevent power from hiding behind tradition, sacred status, or collective passion. These achievements are real. This book is not an argument against modernity, science, law, markets, states, specialization, or technology. It is an argument that their moral architecture has not kept pace with their operational architecture.

The systems on which we depend have become more complex than the forms of responsibility with which we govern them. A person can now be harmed by a chain of decisions distributed across organizations, jurisdictions, databases, models, incentives, and automated processes. Every participant may have acted within a narrow mandate. Every component may have passed its local test. Every institution may possess a document proving compliance. Yet the final result can still be intolerable. The victim exists. The suffering is not metaphorical. What disappears is the persecutor.

This disappearance changes the moral psychology of society. When causes cannot be followed, anger does not vanish; it searches for a body. When responsibility cannot be assigned, guilt does not disappear; it is either diluted into

helplessness or concentrated upon a symbolic enemy. When institutions answer concrete suffering with procedural abstractions, people begin to suspect that complexity itself is a deception. They become vulnerable to anyone who promises to compress the world into a single cause, a single traitor, a single doctrine, and a single will.

The title of this book calls complexity a thousand-handed devil. It is deliberately provocative and deliberately incomplete. Complexity is not evil in itself. Life is complex. A plural society is complex. Freedom creates complexity because free people do not move as one body. Science advances by discovering that apparently simple phenomena contain hidden structures. Medicine, infrastructure, global cooperation, and modern production would be impossible without specialization and coordination on a vast scale. The attempt to abolish complexity would abolish much of what makes contemporary life humane.

The enemy is therefore not complexity as such. It is complexity that has escaped moral control: complexity that exceeds the capacity of those affected to understand, contest, and repair it; complexity that permits every hand to be locally innocent while the whole machine remains globally cruel; complexity that turns responsibility into a ritual of documentation rather than a relationship to consequences. The thousand-handed devil is not a single entity. It is a configuration in which knowledge is fragmented, action is distributed, incentives are misaligned, and no one is charged with seeing the whole.

René Girard argued that human communities repeatedly escaped a mimetic crisis by converging upon a victim. The violence of all against all became the violence of all against one, and the resulting peace appeared to prove the victim's guilt. In Girard's reading, biblical revelation gradually exposed the innocence of the scapegoat and made the mechanism morally visible. Whether one accepts the full anthropological ambition of Girard's theory or treats it as a powerful interpretive lens, its central reversal remains decisive: civilization advances when it learns to see what the crowd cannot see about its victim.

The argument developed here proposes a second reversal. We must learn to see the victim whose persecutor has been dissolved into a system. The first moral revolution challenged the belief that collective accusation establishes guilt. The next must challenge the belief that distributed causation abolishes responsibility. We need institutions capable of saying not only that harm occurred, but how it emerged, who could have known, who could have interrupted it, who benefited from opacity, and who now owes repair.

This book will move from anthropology to organization, from theology to political psychology, from bureaucracy to artificial intelligence. It will examine why

complexity accumulates, why it often begins as a solution, why it becomes difficult to remove, and why its burdens fall asymmetrically. It will examine the Red Queen condition of people who improve their absolute capacities while losing relative security and influence. It will analyze the dark savior who converts causal complexity into moral simplicity. It will consider the rise of religions and political cults that promise relief from complexity by destroying pluralism. Finally, it will ask whether a culture of mature simplicity can be built: a culture that reveres limits without worshipping ignorance, that accepts uncertainty without surrendering judgment, and that makes complex power answerable at a human scale.

The objective is not to offer a total theory. A total theory of complexity would contradict its own subject. The objective is to provide a disciplined moral map. Maps simplify, but a good map declares what it leaves out and helps the traveler return to reality. The danger begins when the map demands that reality become as simple as the map.

The Victim No One Persecuted

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Imagine a woman whose access to a necessary medical treatment is denied. The denial is not issued by a doctor who believes she should suffer. It emerges from a sequence. A diagnostic code is entered imperfectly. A risk model interprets the code according to a population-level rule. An insurer applies a threshold. A hospital administrator follows a reimbursement protocol. A software vendor has implemented the requirements supplied by the institution. A regulator has approved the category of process rather than this individual outcome. When the woman appeals, each participant can explain why the decision did not belong entirely to them.

The doctor says that the authorization system controls payment. The insurer says that the model applies the contractual criteria. The vendor says that it does not determine policy. The administrator says that exceptions require documentation the patient does not possess. The regulator says that individual disputes must follow the established procedure. Every statement may be true. Together they form a world in which a person can suffer a preventable harm without encountering anyone authorized to take moral possession of the result.

This is not a story about one sector. The same structure appears when a family loses a benefit because it cannot navigate an application process; when an employee is dismissed by a performance system no manager fully trusts; when a neighborhood is destroyed by individually rational investment decisions; when a financial product disperses risk until no actor feels responsible for the eventual collapse; when a platform amplifies a falsehood because millions of small choices and one optimization objective reinforce one another; when a weapons system, supply chain, or environmental policy produces harm through an interaction no committee was assigned to understand as a whole.

In older moral narratives, evil often arrived with a will. A tyrant ordered, a thief stole, a murderer struck, a persecuting crowd chose its victim. Modern systems have not eliminated these agents. They have added another form of

causation: outcomes generated by interactions among actors whose intentions do not contain the outcome. Robert Merton described unintended consequences of purposive action long before digital networks made them ubiquitous. Charles Perrow later showed how interactive complexity and tight coupling can produce system accidents that cannot be reduced to a single defective component. Dennis Thompson named the moral version of the problem: when many hands contribute to a decision, the multiplication of causal participants can make personal responsibility difficult to assign (Merton, 1936; Perrow, 1984; Thompson, 1980).

The phrase “victim without persecutor” must be used carefully. It does not mean that nobody benefits, that no one was negligent, or that power disappears. Complex systems often conceal asymmetries rather than eliminate them. Some actors design the rules, others merely endure them. Some can hire experts, appeal decisions, move jurisdictions, or absorb delays. Others encounter complexity as a wall. Some institutions profit from arrangements whose full consequences they claim not to control. The absence of a visible persecutor can itself be politically produced.

Nor does the phrase mean that all unfortunate outcomes are injustices. No society can prevent every loss. Scarcity imposes decisions, policies create trade-offs, and even well-designed systems fail. The moral problem begins when the system's capacity to explain and correct harm is weaker than its capacity to produce and normalize it. It deepens when procedural compliance becomes a substitute for substantive judgment. It becomes dangerous when the victim is told that because no rule was violated, nothing morally significant happened.

The victim of complexity often suffers twice. First comes the material harm: lost income, delayed treatment, exclusion, displacement, reputational damage, wasted years, or exposure to risk. Then comes an epistemic harm. The person cannot obtain a coherent account of what happened. Each office provides a fragment. Each explanation redirects attention elsewhere. The victim is required to become an investigator of a system that professionals themselves understand only partially. If the person becomes angry, the anger is treated as evidence of irrationality. If the person simplifies the story, experts correct the simplification without supplying an intelligible alternative. The system thus monopolizes complexity while condemning the victim for failing to master it.

Administrative burden research gives empirical form to this experience. Citizens encounter learning costs when they must discover what rules apply, compliance costs when they must satisfy procedures, and psychological costs when interactions with institutions produce stigma, stress, loss of autonomy, or repeated

uncertainty. These burdens are not evenly distributed. A form that is merely inconvenient to a professional with time, literacy, and legal assistance can be an effective denial of rights to someone who lacks them. Complexity therefore operates as a hidden price, paid in attention and endurance rather than money alone (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey, 2015; Herd and Moynihan, 2018).

The moral genius of a complex institution is often its capacity to convert suffering into a category. A category can be measured, compared, and assigned. It can also be distanced. The patient becomes a case. The dismissed worker becomes an adjustment. The polluted community becomes an externality. The civilian death becomes collateral damage. The child who cannot access a service becomes an incomplete application. Language does not merely describe reality; it distributes proximity to it.

The language of categories is indispensable. Without abstraction, institutions could not treat similar cases consistently. The alternative to rules is often favoritism, arbitrariness, or the domination of whoever happens to be present. But abstraction has a moral cost when the category becomes more real to the institution than the person from whom it was abstracted. The question is not whether we should use categories. It is who must bear the burden when the category fails.

Modern responsibility was designed largely around identifiable agents and bounded acts. Criminal law asks about intention, knowledge, capacity, causation, and control. Moral judgment asks what a person chose and what could reasonably have been foreseen. These questions remain indispensable. Yet in a distributed system, each actor may control too little for traditional responsibility to attach strongly, while the organization as a whole may be too abstract to experience guilt, learn morally, or make restitution without external pressure. The system possesses agency in the practical sense that it produces patterned outcomes, but lacks agency in the human sense that it can confess.

This gap creates a temptation. We can declare that only individuals are real and therefore search for one person to punish. That restores narrative clarity but often creates a new scapegoat. Or we can declare that the system is responsible and thereby absolve every individual. That acknowledges structure but can make responsibility weightless. The task is harder: to preserve individual moral agency while recognizing that roles, architectures, incentives, and institutions can create obligations that no isolated act reveals.

A mature theory of responsibility must ask not only, “Who caused this harm?” It must also ask, “Who designed the field of possible actions? Who selected the metric? Who had the duty to integrate fragmented knowledge? Who could

stop the process? Who made the contest expensive? Who continued to benefit after warning signs appeared? Who was responsible for ensuring that somebody could answer these questions?”

The thousand-handed devil does not require a conspiracy. It requires a system in which every hand can point to another. It thrives when local truth is permitted to defeat global responsibility. Its most persuasive sentence is not “I was only following orders.” It is more modern, more professional, and more difficult to condemn:

“I followed the process.”

The story of this book begins when that sentence ceases to be an alibi.

CHAPTER 1

After the Scapegoat

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Girard's theory begins from a refusal to treat desire as purely private. We imagine that the object attracts us directly, that value resides inside it, and that our preference originates in an autonomous self. Girard reverses the sequence. We learn what to desire by watching what others desire. The model who reveals the object also becomes a rival for it. Imitation, which makes culture possible, therefore carries within it the possibility of conflict. When differences collapse and rivals increasingly resemble one another, the community can enter a mimetic crisis in which accusations, reprisals, and reciprocal hostility spread faster than any stable distinction between guilt and innocence.

The scapegoat mechanism resolves the crisis by changing its geometry. The violence of all against all becomes the violence of all against one. A marginal, ambiguous, foreign, disabled, exceptional, or simply unfortunate person becomes the bearer of disorder. Once expelled or killed, the community experiences relief. The relief appears to confirm the accusation. Peace becomes evidence that the victim caused the crisis, and the victim may later be remembered as both monstrous and sacred: powerful enough to bring destruction, powerful enough to restore order through death. Girard's anthropology is disputed in its universal claims, but its moral insight is difficult to dismiss. Communities do not merely discover guilt. Under pressure, they can manufacture consensus by concentrating guilt.

The biblical narratives mattered to Girard because they progressively disrupted the persecutor's account. Abel's blood speaks from the ground. Joseph is betrayed by his brothers but survives to reveal the structure of their violence. Job refuses the moral arithmetic by which suffering proves guilt. The prophets identify the victims hidden beneath ritual and royal order. The Passion tells the story of collective accusation from the side of the condemned. Christianity, in this reading, does not invent compassion from nothing, nor does it instantly abolish

persecution. It makes the innocence of the victim increasingly difficult to conceal. Once the mechanism is exposed, sacrifice loses some of its power to unify without remainder.

This revelation produces a civilizational achievement and a civilizational instability. The achievement is that victims acquire moral standing. The instability is that societies can no longer obtain peace quite so easily by believing in the unanimous accusation. They continue to scapegoat, but must often do so in the language of protecting victims. Rival groups present themselves as the true injured party and the opponent as the concealed persecutor. The moral prestige of victimhood becomes another object of mimetic competition. Girard saw this paradox clearly: exposing the scapegoat mechanism does not automatically end rivalry. It can intensify the struggle to control the categories of innocence and guilt.

Modern institutions attempted to domesticate this struggle. Law separated accusation from conviction. Evidence, procedure, intent, competence, proportionality, appeal, and individual responsibility were developed to prevent the crowd from becoming judge and executioner. The principle that guilt should attach to a person's acts rather than to ancestry, caste, religion, or collective identity is one of the most consequential moral technologies in human history. It limits vengeance. It makes forgiveness conceptually possible because guilt can be acknowledged and repaired without defining the whole person or group as pollution.

Guilt itself is often treated only as suffering imposed by religion or authority. It can indeed be manipulated, exaggerated, inherited, commercialized, and weaponized. Yet guilt also performs a sophisticated social function. Unlike fear, it can operate in the absence of surveillance. Unlike shame, which threatens the identity of the whole self before the eyes of others, guilt can distinguish the wrong act from the person who performed it. At its healthiest, guilt says: you caused harm; you remain capable of recognizing it; repair is required; transformation is possible. A society unable to produce guilt must rely more heavily on exposure, punishment, exclusion, or domination.

The distinction between guilt and shame is never absolute, and anthropologists have rightly criticized crude divisions between "guilt cultures" and "shame cultures." Both emotions appear across societies, and each can support or destroy moral life. Still, the difference illuminates a central change. Shame asks what kind of being one has been revealed to be. Guilt asks what one has done and what one owes. The movement toward individualized responsibility, however incomplete, created a method for interrupting collective contagion. The son need not die for the father. The dissenter need not be punished for the alleged impurity

of the group. The accused can demand that the causal and intentional path from act to harm be shown.

But this moral technology was designed for a world in which the path could often be shown. A person signed the order, took the property, fired the weapon, concealed the evidence, or knowingly failed a duty. Modern complexity does not abolish such acts. It surrounds them with architectures in which causal and volitional criteria become harder to apply. Harm may be overdetermined, emerging from several sufficient causes. It may be underdetermined, with no single contribution sufficient. It may be delayed, statistical, cumulative, or probabilistic. It may arise from incentives that reward every participant for not asking about the whole.

Here the Girardian problem changes form. The archaic community hides the victim's innocence by attributing excessive agency to the victim: this person caused our disorder. The complex system can hide the victim's claim by attributing insufficient agency to everyone else: nobody caused this outcome. One system invents a guilty person where there may be none. The other produces an innocent system where there may be distributed responsibility.

The difference is not merely theoretical. When a bridge collapses, an algorithm discriminates, a financial structure fails, or a public program systematically excludes eligible people, public debate often oscillates between two inadequate stories. The first demands a villain. The second explains that the event resulted from a complex interaction and therefore resists simplistic blame. The first may persecute. The second may anesthetize. Complexity is invoked as if causal difficulty were moral exoneration.

Dennis Thompson's "problem of many hands" identifies the difficulty of ascribing responsibility when many officials contribute to policies and outcomes. Hierarchical responsibility can blame leaders for actions they neither knew nor could control. Collective responsibility can condemn everyone so diffusely that no one bears a concrete obligation. Purely causal responsibility may be too weak because many actors make small contributions. Purely intentional responsibility may fail because the final harm was not desired. Thompson defended personal responsibility based on causal and volitional criteria, but subsequent work has shown that the problem also requires attention to roles, capacities, organizational design, and the allocation of duties before harm occurs (Thompson, 1980; van de Poel et al., 2012).

The key is to distinguish blame from responsibility. Blame looks backward and asks who deserves condemnation. Responsibility has a wider temporal structure. It can be prospective: who must monitor, integrate, prevent, and

respond? It can be remedial: who is best positioned to repair, even if not personally guilty? It can be political: who benefits from and sustains a structure that predictably imposes costs on others? Iris Marion Young argued that structural injustice cannot be addressed only through a liability model that searches for discrete wrongful acts. People connected to unjust processes may share a forward-looking responsibility to transform them, differentiated by power, privilege, interest, and collective capacity (Young, 2011).

This does not mean replacing individual guilt with indiscriminate collective guilt. Collective guilt can motivate reparation when people identify with a group that committed harm, but it can also provoke denial, defensive victimhood, or inherited accusation detached from agency. A civilization that has learned the danger of collective blame should not casually restore it. The challenge is to construct responsibility without metaphysical contamination: not “you are guilty because you belong,” but “your role, benefit, power, or participation creates specific obligations within a structure.”

Complexity therefore requires a richer grammar. We need to distinguish the designer from the operator, the beneficiary from the bystander, the actor who could foresee from the actor who could not, the actor who could stop from the actor who could only warn, the institution that created opacity from the person trapped within it. Equal blame is usually false. Equal innocence may be equally false.

The moral failure of many contemporary organizations begins before any visible disaster. It begins when no one is assigned the duty to understand interactions. Specialization is necessary, but specialization without integration produces organized blindness. Each professional is evaluated for local competence. The lawyer checks legality, the engineer reliability, the accountant cost, the manager performance, the communications office reputation. If no role owns the coherence among these perspectives, the institution can become highly intelligent in every part and unintelligent as a whole.

This is why the thousand-handed devil should not be imagined as a hidden sovereign directing events. It is often the absence of sovereignty at the point where responsibility is needed. The system can coordinate action without coordinating conscience. It can aggregate data without aggregating meaning. It can optimize outputs without preserving the question of whether the outputs remain connected to the purpose that justified the system.

The old persecuting crowd experienced unity through accusation. The modern organization often experiences unity through procedure. Procedure tells each member what counts as adequate action and protects the organization against

arbitrary power. Yet procedure can acquire a sacred character. To question it becomes to threaten consistency, compliance, and institutional survival. The person who insists that the procedure is producing an unjust result is treated as asking for favoritism, even when the procedure's abstraction has ceased to serve its moral purpose.

A rule-based order faces a permanent paradox. It must generalize in order to be fair, but it must remain capable of recognizing when generalization becomes unfair. It must constrain discretion because discretion can be corrupt, but it must preserve enough discretion to respond to reality. The easiest way to avoid responsibility is to push this paradox downward. Leaders celebrate principles while frontline workers bear the risk of exceptions. The worker is told to use judgment but punished for deviations; or told to follow policy and blamed when policy produces scandal. The system keeps the authority to design while outsourcing moral exposure.

The next moral revolution cannot consist in discovering another class of universally guilty people. That would reproduce the scapegoat mechanism under the banner of systemic critique. It must instead make systems morally legible. It must build traceability before harm, not merely forensic reconstruction after catastrophe. It must define who has the duty to see across boundaries. It must preserve channels through which inconvenient local knowledge can reach decision-makers. It must make the capacity to interrupt a harmful process as important as the capacity to execute it efficiently.

Girard teaches that the victim becomes visible when the persecutor's unanimity is broken. The age of complexity requires a related discipline: the system becomes morally visible when its local alibis are no longer allowed to cancel the global outcome. The task is not to find one hand and cut it off. It is to understand how the hands were connected, what they could know, what they were rewarded to ignore, and why no hand was authorized to stop the whole body.

CHAPTER 2

The Great Bargain of Complexity

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Complexity is rarely created because a civilization decides to become obscure. It accumulates as a record of solved problems. A new rule follows an abuse. A new profession follows a discovery. A new reporting requirement follows a scandal. A new layer of coordination follows growth. A new institution follows a risk that informal trust can no longer contain. Every layer can tell a plausible story about its birth.

This is the first reason simplistic attacks on complexity fail. They begin from the burden visible now and forget the violence, arbitrariness, incompetence, or exclusion that the burden was designed to prevent. Contracts became longer because short agreements left essential contingencies unresolved. Medical protocols became detailed because intuition alone produced inconsistent and sometimes lethal treatment. Financial controls became elaborate because trust without verification was exploited. Environmental review became demanding because costs once imposed silently on future generations and distant communities had to be made visible. Administrative states became complex because equal treatment across large populations cannot be improvised at every encounter.

A small community can coordinate through shared memory, reputation, and custom. It can also conceal domination through the same mechanisms. The elder remembers the precedent, but the outsider cannot inspect it. The group knows who deserves trust, but the stigmatized person may never escape an inherited judgment. Informal simplicity is not necessarily freedom. It may mean that rules are embodied in people who cannot be appealed.

Modernity externalized memory into documents, rights, standards, and institutions. It made many forms of power legible and contestable. The price was an expanding symbolic environment that no individual could master. The citizen gained rights but also forms. The worker gained protections but also compliance

systems. The consumer gained safety standards but also chains of certification. The organization gained scale but lost the possibility that anyone could know everyone or understand every dependency.

Herbert Simon's theory of bounded rationality begins from a fact that grand systems often obscure: human decision-makers do not possess unlimited information, time, attention, or computational capacity. They do not optimize over every possible action. They search, use routines, simplify, and settle for solutions that are good enough under constraints. Organizations are not merely collections of individuals; they are devices for structuring attention. They tell people what to notice, what to ignore, what information to request, and when a decision is complete (Simon, 1955; Simon, 1969).

This makes institutions necessary and dangerous. A procedure can preserve knowledge that no individual remembers. It can also prevent perception of facts that the procedure has not learned to encode. A model can integrate more variables than a person. It can also transform uncertainty into a numerical confidence that users mistake for reality. A hierarchy can coordinate specialized action. It can also filter bad news at every level because each messenger is rewarded for reducing ambiguity before passing information upward.

The bargain of complexity is therefore not simply that we exchange simplicity for capability. We exchange direct understanding for mediated trust. We accept that the bridge, drug, payment system, aircraft, legal order, and communication network will be produced by strangers whose work we cannot personally verify. In return, we expect institutions to make that trust reasonable through standards, professional ethics, audit, redundancy, transparency, and accountability.

Civilization fails the bargain when it demands trust without preserving the means by which trust can be challenged. Complexity becomes domination when the person affected must accept the output because the causal chain is too difficult, proprietary, fragmented, or expensive to inspect. "Trust the experts" is sometimes prudent advice. It becomes politically toxic when expertise is presented as exemption from explanation.

W. Ross Ashby's law of requisite variety offers a useful cybernetic intuition: a regulator must possess enough variety in its responses to cope with the variety of disturbances it faces. A system cannot control a complex environment through a single rigid reaction. This insight undermines fantasies of universal simplification. The more diverse and dynamic the world, the more adaptive capacity governance requires. But it also exposes a problem. Institutions often increase internal complexity to match external variety, then impose the cognitive cost of that complexity upon individuals who possess far fewer resources.

A tax system contains exceptions because economic life is varied. A welfare system contains eligibility rules because needs and risks differ. A medical system differentiates cases because bodies are not identical. Yet the person at the interface is expected to translate a singular life into institutional categories. Those with money purchase translators: accountants, attorneys, consultants, patient advocates, compliance departments. Those without them meet the system directly. The formal rule is equal; the capacity to navigate it is not.

Complexity thus becomes a regressive tax on attention. It consumes hours, working memory, emotional stability, literacy, and confidence. Unlike a visible tax, it is rarely measured against income. The wealthy can outsource it. Large firms distribute it across departments. Small firms and ordinary citizens absorb it personally. A twenty-page procedure does not impose the same burden on everyone, even if every applicant receives the same pages.

This is why administrative burden is not a secondary inconvenience. It is a distributional mechanism. Learning costs determine who discovers a right. Compliance costs determine who can claim it. Psychological costs determine who can persist after rejection, ambiguity, or humiliation. Burden can be accidental, but it can also be politically convenient. A program can remain generous on paper while access is restricted through procedural friction. The institution preserves the moral prestige of the right while reducing the number of people capable of exercising it.

The private sector produces equivalent structures. Companies advertise simplicity at the surface while moving complexity into terms of service, subscription rules, dispute procedures, data practices, and algorithmic pricing. A one-click interface can conceal a thousand-page institutional relationship. Convenience is real, but it can function as a transfer of comprehension. The user is spared decisions in the moment and deprived of power over the architecture.

Complexity also accumulates through defensive behavior. After failure, organizations add checks because removing anything appears reckless. Every rule has a constituency and a remembered catastrophe. Few people are rewarded for deleting controls whose benefits are invisible precisely because nothing goes wrong. The result is asymmetrical institutional memory. The system remembers every reason to add a layer and forgets the cumulative cost of all layers together.

Joseph Tainter described societies as problem-solving organizations that invest in complexity. Early investments can produce substantial returns: administration coordinates resources, infrastructure expands production, and specialized knowledge solves threats. Over time, however, additional complexity may yield diminishing marginal returns while maintenance costs rise. Tainter's theory of

collapse is debated and should not be used as a mechanical prophecy, but its central question is unavoidable: what happens when a society solves each problem by adding structures whose combined cost becomes a new problem (Tainter, 1988)?

The answer is not necessarily dramatic collapse. More common is institutional exhaustion. A growing share of effort is devoted to coordination, reporting, permission, risk transfer, and demonstration of compliance. The organization remains active but becomes less capable of changing direction. Its outputs may continue to rise while the energy required for each improvement rises faster. People work harder to preserve position. Innovation becomes the capacity to navigate the institution rather than transform reality.

Metrics accelerate the process. Measurement is essential in large systems because leaders cannot see every case. Yet a measure is a compression of purpose. Once attached to rewards, sanctions, or reputational competition, it becomes an object of optimization. Goodhart's law captures the recurrent failure: when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure. The underlying phenomenon does not disappear; behavior reorganizes around the proxy. Schools teach the test, researchers optimize citations, hospitals select patients, platforms maximize engagement, and agencies produce evidence of activity. The organization becomes more legible to itself while its relationship to reality weakens.

This is another great bargain. Metrics reduce complex judgment to comparable signals. In return, the institution must preserve channels through which the signal can be challenged by substantive knowledge. When the metric is sovereign, local intelligence becomes noise. The experienced teacher, nurse, engineer, or social worker sees a reality the dashboard cannot encode, but the dashboard controls the decision. The institution has not become objective. It has hidden a political choice inside a technical representation.

James C. Scott showed how states make societies legible by standardizing names, land, populations, and production. Legibility permits taxation, planning, rights, and coordinated intervention. It also tempts the center to mistake the simplified representation for the world itself. High-modernist schemes fail when they erase the local, practical knowledge on which social systems depend. The danger is not only the authoritarian state. Markets and platforms also standardize. Any powerful center wants an environment that can be counted, compared, and acted upon (Scott, 1998).

A serious critique of complexity must therefore refuse a cheap opposition between state and market. Both can generate complexity; both can conceal it; both can simplify the world in ways that transfer cost downward. Regulation can

become incomprehensible, but deregulation can replace public complexity with private contracts, fragmented liability, and opaque market power. A centralized bureaucracy may ignore local knowledge; a global platform may do the same at greater speed. The relevant question is not which ideology promises less complexity. It is where complexity resides, who can understand it, who pays for it, and who can contest its effects.

The same applies to technology. Automation can eliminate repetitive burdens, translate rules, detect anomalies, and coordinate systems beyond human capacity. It can also accelerate rule production and embed decisions in infrastructures that become harder to challenge. Artificial intelligence can reduce complexity at the interface while increasing it underneath. A friendly answer may conceal an untraceable process. The user experiences simplicity; the institution acquires deeper opacity.

The moral objective cannot be maximum simplicity. A society simple enough for every person to understand completely would be incapable of many forms of freedom, diversity, and competence. Nor can the objective be maximum sophistication. Complexity is not evidence of intelligence when it no longer produces proportional value. The objective is a sustainable relation between system complexity and civic comprehension.

We can call this relation the civilizational complexity budget. The phrase does not imply a single numerical ceiling. It names a political discipline. Every additional layer consumes scarce capacities: attention, trust, expertise, time, auditability, and the ability to assign responsibility. A new layer may be justified, but its cost must be recognized. The system should be required to ask what complexity it removes, what risk it controls, who must learn it, who can exploit it, how it can be appealed, and under what conditions it will expire.

The great bargain remains worth making. Complex civilization has saved lives, enlarged choice, restrained arbitrary power, and permitted cooperation among strangers at a scale no village could achieve. But the bargain must be renegotiated. Institutions cannot continue to privatize the benefits of complexity while socializing its cognitive and moral costs. They cannot demand that the individual become simple enough for the system while refusing to make the system intelligible enough for the individual.

The decisive question is not whether complexity will grow. In many domains it will. The decisive question is whether moral and institutional capacity will grow with it. A civilization that expands its power without expanding its responsibility does not become more advanced. It merely builds a larger machine for producing consequences that no one is prepared to own.

CHAPTER 3

The Thousand Hands

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There is a primitive comfort in believing that every serious harm must have a proportionate author. The greater the suffering, the more powerful the villain must be. This intuition survives because it often contains truth. Power can organize damage, suppress evidence, and distribute impunity. Yet the intuition becomes misleading when it prevents us from seeing harms whose scale exceeds the intention of any participant. Modern systems can produce coherent outcomes without a coherent will.

The factory, hospital, ministry, platform, bank, army, university, or research consortium is not a single mind. It is an arrangement of roles, rules, permissions, information channels, incentives, and technologies. To say that “the organization decided” is a necessary shorthand. The shorthand becomes deceptive when it conceals the internal distribution of knowledge and control. A board may set a target without understanding implementation. Managers may interpret the target under competitive pressure. Software may translate it into automated thresholds. Frontline workers may encounter the consequences while lacking authority to alter them. Users may adapt in ways that change the environment. By the time harm appears, every level can identify another level as the true source.

The problem is deeper than buck-passing. In many systems, no participant possesses enough information to see the final outcome before it emerges. Knowledge is genuinely fragmented. The engineer knows the component, the operator the workflow, the executive the strategy, the regulator the formal obligations, and the affected community the lived consequences. Failure arises not because one of these forms of knowledge is false, but because they are not integrated at the moment when integration matters.

Charles Perrow's theory of normal accidents distinguishes systems with linear interactions from those with interactive complexity, and loosely coupled systems from tightly coupled ones. In interactively complex systems, events combine in

unexpected ways. In tightly coupled systems, processes unfold too quickly or rigidly for intervention. When both properties are present, accidents can arise from ordinary component failures interacting in ways no design model anticipated. Calling them “normal” does not make them acceptable. It means that the architecture itself generates a category of failure that cannot be eliminated by finding one careless operator (Perrow, 1984).

Organizations often respond to such failures by adding safeguards. Sometimes this works. Redundancy, monitoring, training, and better interfaces can increase reliability. But additional safeguards can also add new interactions and create false confidence. A backup system becomes another component that can fail or interfere. A reporting requirement creates more data than anyone can interpret. An approval layer slows response until local actors improvise outside the formal process. Complexity is treated with complexity, and the organization becomes less able to distinguish safety from the appearance of safety.

High-reliability organizations offer a more subtle response. Research associated with Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe emphasizes preoccupation with failure, reluctance to simplify, sensitivity to operations, commitment to resilience, and deference to expertise. The apparent paradox is crucial. Reliable organizations do not pretend that the world is simple. They preserve nuanced perception while making authority flexible enough to move toward the person with relevant knowledge. They resist the institutional desire to declare anomalies resolved too quickly (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007).

This distinction will matter throughout the book. Mature simplicity does not mean simplistic perception. It means simple moral commitments surrounding a complex epistemic process. The commitment that bad news must travel upward can be simple. The reality reported may be complicated. The rule that a person must be able to contest a consequential decision can be simple. The reasons for the decision may be technical. The principle that someone must own the integration of risks can be simple. The risks themselves may resist compression.

The thousand-handed devil thrives when organizations reverse this relation. Their moral language becomes complex, full of frameworks, values, committees, and assurances, while their operational objective becomes brutally simple: increase the number, protect the institution, avoid liability, preserve the schedule. The ethical surface expands as the decision core narrows. Complexity then functions as camouflage around a primitive command.

Consider a performance target imposed upon a public agency. The target may represent a legitimate social objective. It is converted into measurable indicators because resources and accountability require comparison. Local units learn that

funding or leadership evaluations depend on those indicators. Cases that improve the metric are prioritized. Difficult cases become administrative burdens. Staff reclassify ambiguous outcomes. Reports show progress while the people least compatible with the metric become invisible. No one explicitly ordered their exclusion. The system produced it by aligning many reasonable acts around a partial representation.

The same structure appears in corporations. Executives demand efficiency. Managers reduce slack. Procurement selects cheaper suppliers. Staffing models assume average demand. Software optimizes inventory. Each change produces savings. Together they eliminate resilience. When disruption occurs, the institution describes the event as unforeseeable. Yet what was unforeseeable was often only its exact form. The general vulnerability was visible: a system optimized against variance has little capacity to absorb it.

The language of efficiency deserves scrutiny because it often treats unused capacity as waste. A spare bed, redundant supplier, experienced employee with unallocated time, or local reserve appears inefficient under normal conditions. In crisis, it becomes survival. Complex systems require slack because no model captures all disturbances. A society that eliminates every margin may look productive until the day it discovers that its productivity was borrowed from its future resilience.

Moral systems also need slack. A frontline worker needs enough time to notice that the case does not fit. A manager needs authority to pause a process. A citizen needs a route of appeal that is not merely another automated filter. An organization needs spaces in which people can speak without immediately converting every concern into a defensible document. When every minute and decision is optimized, conscience becomes an unauthorized delay.

The diffusion of responsibility is strengthened by what we might call role morality. Roles permit coordinated action because they narrow obligation. A surgeon cannot simultaneously manage the hospital's finances, inspect the supply chain, and negotiate national policy. The role says: attend to this domain with special care. Yet roles can also become moral shelters. The employee says, "My responsibility ends at the specification." The executive says, "Implementation belongs to management." The regulator says, "We assess compliance, not business judgment." The investor says, "Our duty is return." Each statement isolates a legitimate obligation from the system of obligations that gives it moral meaning.

No organization can demand that every person take responsibility for everything. That would produce paralysis and arbitrary interference. The answer is not universal moral vigilance. It is explicit integrative responsibility. Someone must

be charged with connecting the domains, and that role must possess authority, information access, independence, and protection against retaliation. Integration cannot be a ceremonial committee that meets after decisions have hardened. It must be part of the architecture of action.

The design of responsibility should begin by mapping control rather than merely titles. Who can alter the objective? Who can change the data? Who can override the model? Who can delay deployment? Who can authorize an exception? Who receives warnings? Who chooses not to receive them? Who can compensate the victim? Formal hierarchy may answer some of these questions, but complex organizations often distribute real power through budgets, expertise, access, and infrastructure.

Responsibility must also follow benefit. An institution that captures gains from a system cannot entirely disclaim responsibility for harms by pointing to contractors or users. Outsourcing execution should not outsource moral ownership. The same principle applies to platforms that structure interaction while describing themselves as neutral hosts, to investors who shape incentives while claiming distance from operations, and to governments that procure automated systems while treating vendor opacity as a technical fact.

This is not an argument for unlimited liability. Unlimited liability can prevent useful experimentation and encourage defensive bureaucracy. The objective is proportional responsibility linked to control, knowledge, benefit, and capacity for repair. But proportionality requires visibility. The system must preserve evidence of how decisions were made, what alternatives were considered, what warnings appeared, and why they were dismissed. Traceability is not merely a forensic tool. It changes behavior before the event because actors know that local decisions will be interpreted within the global chain.

Yet traceability can become another source of complexity. Organizations can generate enormous audit trails that no human can meaningfully examine. Documentation can protect accountability or bury it. The important distinction is between record accumulation and causal reconstruction. A useful system does not only show that steps occurred. It helps answer why an outcome emerged and where intervention was possible.

Artificial intelligence may become decisive here. It can worsen the problem by multiplying decisions and making their internal logic difficult to inspect. But it can also function as an instrument of reverse legibility: tracing dependencies, summarizing relevant evidence, identifying contradictions among local justifications, and reconstructing counterfactuals. The question is whether AI serves the institution's need to defend itself or the affected person's need to

understand and contest. The same technical capacity can become a priest that declares the oracle or a translator that exposes the chain.

A thousand hands require more than a thousand logs. They require a constitution of interruption. People must know when they are not merely permitted but obligated to stop the process. Aviation, medicine, and other high-risk fields have learned versions of this principle, though never perfectly. A junior participant may need authority to halt an operation when a safety condition is violated. Extending this logic to algorithmic, financial, administrative, and organizational systems would mean treating moral anomalies as operational signals, not public-relations problems.

The culture of many institutions punishes interruption because interruption makes uncertainty visible. Leaders prefer a clean escalation path, but the employee who reports an ambiguous risk often delivers neither a solvable problem nor reassuring data. The message creates work and threatens schedules. The system therefore trains people to wait until evidence is conclusive. By then, the damage may be irreversible.

Moral courage matters, but institutions that rely on exceptional courage are badly designed. Whistleblowers are celebrated retrospectively because ordinary channels failed prospectively. A civilized organization should not require martyrdom to convey truth. It should lower the personal cost of dissent, separate risk reporting from loyalty judgments, and reward those who identify structural contradictions before they become scandals.

The deepest reform is conceptual. We must stop treating responsibility as a quantity that is divided until nothing remains. When several people contribute, each does not necessarily receive a smaller fraction of an unchanged moral sum. Different forms of responsibility can coexist. One actor may be responsible for design, another for oversight, another for execution, another for repair. The presence of many hands can multiply duties rather than dilute them.

The thousand-handed devil becomes powerful when the organization defines every duty narrowly and no duty relationally. It weakens when the links themselves become governed: when interfaces have owners, when warnings have destinations, when exceptions have pathways, when victims have standing, and when somebody must answer for the coherence of the whole.

CHAPTER 4

Local Truths, Global Lies

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A lie usually evokes an image of intention. Someone knows the truth and says the opposite. This remains one of the most important forms of moral failure because it attacks the shared reality on which cooperation depends. But complex societies generate another phenomenon: a false global picture assembled from statements that may each be defensible within a limited frame.

The quarterly report says the organization met its targets. The customer service dashboard says response times improved. The compliance unit says procedures were followed. The risk team says exposure remained within the approved model. The human resources survey says engagement is stable. The community says the service has become inaccessible, employees say they are exhausted, and failures are appearing outside the categories used by the dashboards. Which statement is the lie?

Possibly none at the level at which it was produced. The lie emerges from selection, aggregation, and exclusion. Every measurement system defines a field of visibility. What falls outside that field is not necessarily denied; it is simply not represented when decisions are made. If the omitted realities are systematically inconvenient, the institution can deceive itself without requiring a central deceiver.

This is the structure of the global lie. It is not merely misinformation. It is an architecture in which partial truths are aligned so that no participant must articulate the false whole. The institution reports what it can prove, optimizes what it can measure, and treats what remains as anecdotal. The gap between the model and the world becomes morally consequential, but responsibility for the gap is distributed across technical choices that appear neutral.

Statistics and models are not enemies of truth. They are among humanity's most powerful instruments for escaping anecdote, prejudice, and intuition. The danger appears when abstraction forgets its status as abstraction. A model does not simply reveal reality. It creates a disciplined ignorance by excluding variables,

compressing differences, and stabilizing definitions. This ignorance is necessary. Without it, no generalization is possible. But the model becomes ideological when its exclusions cannot be questioned by those who bear their cost.

The same pattern governs public narratives. Large societies cannot know themselves directly. They rely on journalism, science, statistics, institutions, and increasingly platforms that select and rank information. Trust becomes recursive. A citizen believes a report because a news organization trusts a source, the source trusts a dataset, the dataset depends on institutions, and those institutions rely on procedures that the citizen cannot inspect. Modern knowledge is not an individual possession. It is a network of warranted dependence.

This dependence is not weakness. No person could independently reproduce the evidence for modern medicine, climate science, macroeconomics, cybersecurity, or engineering. Epistemic autonomy cannot mean personally verifying everything. It must mean having reasonable grounds to trust, knowing how claims can be challenged, and living within institutions that respond to correction.

When these institutions fail visibly, the damage exceeds the local error. A corrected statistic, retracted paper, hidden conflict of interest, or misleading official statement can be interpreted as proof that the entire network is fraudulent. The citizen lacks a calibrated way to revise trust because the chain was opaque from the beginning. Trust therefore swings between credulity and total suspicion.

Conspiracy theories occupy this vacuum. They are often wrong in their identification of agents, coordination, and intent. Yet they can respond to a real cognitive and political experience: consequential outcomes appear coordinated, official explanations arrive in fragments, and no one offers an integrated account. The conspiracy narrative restores agency. It replaces a distributed causal field with a small group that knows what it is doing.

Psychological research associates conspiracy belief with multiple motives and conditions, including uncertainty, perceived lack of control, threats to identity, distrust, and the desire for coherent explanations. These factors do not imply that believers are unintelligent or that all suspicions of power are pathological. Real conspiracies exist. Institutions sometimes deceive. The difficulty is that the psychological satisfactions of a conspiracy narrative are largely independent of its truth. It explains why the world feels arranged, and it gives anger an address (Douglas et al., 2019).

The official response often intensifies the problem. Experts refute factual claims but ignore the institutional experience that made the narrative attractive. They say the system is too complex for the public's explanation, while offering no

morally intelligible account of their own. The citizen is asked to abandon a simple false story in favor of a complex story that has no responsible subject. Epistemically, this may be correct. Politically, it is unstable.

False information also enjoys structural advantages in attention markets. Research on Twitter found that false news in the studied dataset diffused farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than true news, with novelty and human sharing behavior playing important roles (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, 2018). This should not be converted into a universal law of communication, but it illustrates the asymmetry. Truth is constrained by reality. Falsehood can be optimized for surprise, identity, fear, and narrative closure.

Platforms do not need to intend deception to amplify it. If the metric is engagement, emotionally intense material can outperform careful qualification. The platform optimizes the proxy. Creators adapt. Political actors learn. Users receive information within communities where social reward reinforces interpretation. A global epistemic distortion emerges from local acts of clicking, ranking, sharing, and monetizing.

The phrase “algorithm did it” again hides the chain. Designers selected objectives. Companies selected business models. Users responded to incentives. Political entrepreneurs produced content. Regulators defined boundaries. Advertisers financed attention. No single cause is sufficient. Yet it would be absurd to conclude that because causation is distributed, responsibility is absent.

The global lie can also arise inside organizations through strategic ambiguity. Leaders use language broad enough to support incompatible interpretations. Each unit hears what allows it to proceed. When conflict appears, leadership claims that implementation misunderstood the intention. Ambiguity preserves coalition while transferring contradiction downward. The organization remains united rhetorically and fragmented operationally.

Moral language is particularly vulnerable. Institutions adopt principles such as fairness, sustainability, inclusion, safety, or human-centeredness. These principles can guide real action. They can also function as semantic assets whose ambiguity permits every practice to be redescribed as compliant. The more abstract the value, the easier it is to affirm without changing incentives.

This is why ethical frameworks proliferate in environments where ethical ownership remains weak. A framework can become a substitute for a decision. It demonstrates awareness, distributes vocabulary, and creates committees. But if no one can state what the institution will refuse to do, what profit it will sacrifice, what process it will stop, or what remedy it owes, the framework increases moral complexity without increasing moral constraint.

The global lie is sustained by a division between those who produce representations and those who inhabit consequences. The modeler sees population performance; the affected person experiences the error. The executive sees averages; the frontline sees cases. The investor sees a portfolio; the community sees closure. Neither perspective is complete. The injustice begins when one perspective possesses authority and the other must beg for recognition.

A healthier epistemic order would institutionalize reciprocal legibility. The center must be able to understand local conditions, but the local actor must also be able to understand how the center acts. Data must travel upward, and reasons must travel downward. Exceptions must not disappear as noise. Decisions must be explainable not only in technical terms but in the language of the purpose the institution claims to serve.

Reciprocal legibility is different from radical transparency. Total transparency can create surveillance, strategic behavior, information overload, and new forms of domination. Not everyone should see everything. The relevant principle is that power should be visible to those entitled to evaluate and contest it, while vulnerable people retain protection from unnecessary exposure. Transparency without structure can overwhelm citizens with documents while hiding the decisive fact. Disclosure is not explanation.

The antidote to the global lie is therefore not simply more information. It is the preservation of causal narrative. Who decided what, based on which representation, under what incentives, with which alternatives, producing which effects? A causal narrative can acknowledge uncertainty without dissolving agency. It can say that no one intended the outcome while still identifying preventable choices. It can distinguish unavoidable trade-offs from harms normalized by convenience.

Truth in a complex society requires institutions to expose the limits of their maps, experts to admit uncertainty without abandoning responsibility, citizens to tolerate ambiguity without inventing enemies, and politics not to reward total explanations. The deepest global lie is an arrangement everyone can defend locally because the whole never answers to reality.

CHAPTER 5

The People Who Run and Still Lose

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One of the most destabilizing experiences of modern life is to become objectively more capable while feeling subjectively less secure. A person learns more, works faster, adopts new tools, manages more information, and produces at a level that would have appeared extraordinary a generation earlier. Yet housing becomes less attainable, employment less stable, attention more colonized, and status more fragile. The person is told that society has progressed and may agree. The same person also experiences a private verdict: I am running harder and losing ground.

The Red Queen hypothesis originated in evolutionary biology. Leigh Van Valen proposed that species must continually adapt because the other species in their environment are also adapting. Improvement does not necessarily produce lasting relative advantage. It may merely prevent decline within a changing ecological network. The phrase drawn from Lewis Carroll captures the intuition: it takes all the running one can do to remain in the same place (Van Valen, 1973).

Applied carelessly, biological metaphors can naturalize social arrangements that are politically created. Markets, credentials, technologies, and status hierarchies are not ecosystems beyond human choice. Yet the Red Queen image reveals a structure increasingly common in social life. When everyone gains a capability, the capability may cease to distinguish. When communication accelerates, response expectations accelerate. When education expands, the credential required for a position rises. When productivity tools improve, workload is recalibrated. The benefit is real, but much of it is captured as a new baseline.

This is not simply envy. Relative position has material consequences. It affects bargaining power, access to scarce goods, political voice, residential stability, exposure to risk, and the ability to refuse degrading conditions. A society can become wealthier in aggregate while groups within it lose control over the terms of

their lives. The claim that their absolute standard has improved does not answer the experience of relative dispossession.

Research on relative deprivation defines it not as deprivation alone but as a comparison judged unjust and accompanied by anger or resentment. Its effects depend on the comparison group, the perceived legitimacy of the difference, and whether change appears possible. Relative deprivation has been linked, with varying strength, to collective action, intergroup hostility, health, and political behavior. The important point is not that perception replaces reality. Perception is one of the mechanisms through which social position becomes politically meaningful (Smith et al., 2012).

Complexity intensifies the Red Queen experience in several ways. First, it multiplies the domains in which competence must be maintained. A worker no longer masters only a craft; the worker must navigate platforms, certifications, compliance, self-presentation, continuous learning, and organizational politics. A citizen must manage financial products, privacy settings, health systems, tax rules, and digital identities. Parents must understand educational competition, risk discourse, and changing norms of responsible care. Each domain may be manageable. Together they create permanent cognitive mobilization.

Second, complexity obscures the source of decline. A factory closure had a visible event. A career slowly degraded by outsourcing, platformization, financialization, automation, regulatory shifts, global competition, and housing costs has no single cause. The person feels injured but cannot identify the institution to petition. Political anger therefore becomes available for narrative capture.

Third, complexity individualizes adaptation while socializing the race. People are told to reskill, network, optimize, relocate, brand themselves, invest wisely, and become resilient. These practices may be rational. But if everyone follows them, the competitive baseline rises. The individual solution becomes a collective treadmill. Society treats the inability to keep pace as personal failure even when the pace is systemically generated.

The ideology of adaptation has a moral advantage for institutions. It converts structural volatility into a test of character. The person who cannot continuously reinvent becomes inflexible. The worker who wants predictable time becomes resistant to innovation. The community that resists disruption becomes nostalgic. The citizen who cannot master administrative complexity becomes irresponsible. Flexibility, once a capacity, becomes an obligation with no reciprocal duty imposed on the system.

This is where the moral victim of complexity appears most clearly. The person may not be absolutely poor, legally excluded, or intentionally persecuted. Yet real suffering is produced by the continual withdrawal of stable expectations. Plans become temporary. Skills depreciate. Relationships are subordinated to mobility. Attention is divided by permanent alerts. The person remains functional but cannot convert effort into durable security.

Such suffering is difficult to articulate within political categories built around visible deprivation. Those who have gained some material comfort may be told they have no legitimate grievance. Those whose status declines may express the grievance through cultural or ethnic hostility because status language is morally suspect. A society that cannot speak honestly about relative power will receive distorted forms of resentment.

The distortion can move in several directions. One is nostalgia for an imagined period when effort received stable recognition and social roles were clear. Another is hatred of groups perceived as advancing faster or receiving unfair assistance. Another is contempt for institutions whose experts describe aggregate progress while dismissing local decline. Another is withdrawal into communities that offer a simpler status hierarchy and immediate recognition.

None of these reactions proves that the underlying interpretation is correct. The past may have been stable only for privileged groups. The alleged beneficiary may be another vulnerable population. The expert may be reporting real gains. But error at the level of explanation does not erase the experience demanding explanation. Political systems become fragile when they require people to deny what they live in order to affirm what statistics say.

The Red Queen condition also affects elites. Professionals, firms, universities, and states compete in environments where every innovation becomes a requirement. Organizations adopt technologies because competitors might. Universities expand administration because rankings, compliance, funding, and reputational risk demand it. States construct new security capacities because others do. No actor may prefer the resulting world. Everyone contributes to it defensively.

This is an arms race without a declared war. The entrepreneur must scale because the market rewards scale. The academic must publish because others publish. The political movement must communicate continuously because silence is interpreted as disappearance. The platform must increase engagement because another platform will capture attention. The individual must be visible because invisibility means exclusion from opportunity. Complexity grows as the residue of mutual anticipation.

Girard's mimetic theory and the Red Queen dynamic meet here. We do not merely desire what others desire; we adapt to the adaptations of rivals whose goals increasingly resemble our own. Competition erodes differences, and the struggle shifts from possessing a distinct good to preserving position within a common ranking. The more similar the competitors become, the more intensely small differences matter.

This helps explain why societies with high levels of abundance can produce acute status anxiety. Scarcity is no longer only the scarcity of goods. It is the scarcity of recognized distinction, trusted authority, secure belonging, and exemption from the race. Social media makes the comparison field nearly continuous. The person no longer compares with a village or profession but with a curated global display. Complexity enlarges the field of possible aspiration faster than the capacity to inhabit it.

The standard response is to recommend psychological detachment. Individuals should compare less, define personal values, and resist external validation. This advice is often wise. It is not a political solution. A society cannot organize housing, work, education, and healthcare as competitive positional goods and then treat status anxiety as an individual cognitive error.

A constructive response must separate useful progress from compulsory acceleration. Some domains benefit from rapid competition. Others require stability, maintenance, and care. A civilization should not force every institution to adopt the tempo of venture capital or digital media. The school, hospital, family, court, infrastructure network, and scientific community need forms of time in which quality can mature without constant performative novelty.

We also need social floors that move with complexity. When participation in ordinary life requires new technologies, credentials, or administrative skills, access to those capabilities becomes part of justice. But the answer cannot be merely to train everyone for a more demanding race. Systems must also reduce the complexity required to claim basic rights and preserve spaces where a person can live with dignity without permanent optimization.

This requires a politics of sufficient stability. Stability is not the freezing of hierarchy. It is the assurance that people can form plans, maintain relationships, and convert contribution into security. It may include portable rights, simpler benefits, accessible housing, predictable schedules, public digital infrastructure, and limits on forms of risk transfer that place volatility upon those least able to absorb it.

The deepest answer is cultural. We must stop treating every unoptimized capacity as failure. Rest, maintenance, redundancy, loyalty, and local knowledge

are not residues of an inefficient past. They are sources of resilience. A person who refuses one race may preserve a form of life the whole society later needs.

The people who hate the Red Queen are not necessarily enemies of progress. Often they are enemies of a progress that continually invalidates its own gains. They do not ask to stand still in an absolute sense. They ask for movement to lead somewhere, for effort to become durable, and for society to distinguish advancement from the compulsory prevention of decline.

If democratic institutions cannot answer this demand, the dark savior will. He will offer to stop the race by expelling competitors, closing borders, purging institutions, subordinating markets, or destroying expertise. He will convert the legitimate desire for stability into a politics of domination. The next chapter concerns the person who promises to make the world stop moving by forcing everyone to move in his direction.

CHAPTER 6

The Dark Savior

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The dark savior enters when complexity has become both materially painful and narratively humiliating. People experience consequences they cannot influence, depend on institutions they cannot understand, and receive explanations that do not restore agency. The savior offers something before he offers policy: compression.

Many causes become one cause. Many failures become one betrayal. Many institutions become one elite. Many trade-offs become cowardice. Many differences become disorder. The world acquires a center, and the center acquires a face.

Compression is not always false. Political judgment requires selecting what matters. Leadership requires making action possible under uncertainty. A person who refuses every simplification cannot decide. The danger is not simplicity but totalization: the claim that one narrative explains the whole and that dissent from the narrative proves complicity in the problem.

The dark savior understands that epistemic relief can be more powerful than material promise. He tells people that their confusion is not a limitation but evidence. If the system appears incoherent, it is because someone has made it so. If explanations are complicated, complication is camouflage. If experts disagree, disagreement proves corruption. If facts resist the story, the facts belong to the enemy's system.

This rhetorical structure is attractive under conditions of low trust because it is difficult to falsify. Every contradiction becomes further evidence of concealment. The savior does not need to explain the complex world. He needs to explain why ordinary explanations cannot be trusted. Once that meta-explanation is accepted, he becomes the authorized interpreter of all ambiguity.

Social psychology offers several partial lenses. The need for cognitive closure describes a desire for firm answers and an aversion to ambiguity, heightened in some people and situations by uncertainty, time pressure, threat, and fatigue. Research has linked this need, in context-dependent ways, to authoritarian attitudes, rigid categorization, and acceptance of conspiracy narratives. The relationships are not deterministic and should not be used to pathologize political disagreement. Yet the mechanism is plausible: when uncertainty becomes costly, decisive narratives gain value independent of their accuracy (Kruglanski, 2004).

Threat also alters leadership preferences. Studies of authoritarianism and dominant leadership suggest that perceived danger, social disorder, and intergroup conflict can increase support for leaders who project strength and certainty. Again, the effect varies across contexts. People do not simply become authoritarian because life is complex. But complexity can create the background helplessness against which domination appears as agency.

The dark savior's personality matters, but the environment matters more than diagnosis. Public debate often uses labels such as narcissist, psychopath, or Machiavellian as insults that replace analysis. The Dark Triad literature identifies partially overlapping traits involving grandiosity, manipulation, low empathy, callousness, and self-serving behavior. Meta-analytic and organizational research associates these traits with counterproductive behavior and destructive leadership under certain conditions, though effects differ by trait, measure, and context (Paulhus and Williams, 2002; O'Boyle et al., 2012).

The useful concept is the toxic triangle: destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments. A manipulative person alone does not create a regime. Institutions must reward performance without integrity, followers must experience unmet needs or threatened identities, and checks must become weak or discredited. Complexity can make the environment conducive because accountability is fragmented and symbolic confidence is easier to evaluate than substantive competence (Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser, 2007).

Dark personalities possess several competitive advantages in such environments. They can claim certainty without suffering the internal cost that conscientious people experience when evidence is incomplete. They can personalize institutional achievements and externalize failures. They can treat norms as instruments rather than constraints. They can promise incompatible goods to different groups because consistency matters less than control of attention. They can use the language of victim protection while selecting new victims.

Complex systems also permit a peculiar alliance between the charismatic leader and the bureaucracy he condemns. He attacks procedure publicly while exploiting opacity privately. Rules are simplified for loyalists and multiplied for opponents. Exceptions become favors. Institutions do not disappear; they become personalized. The savior's promise to cut red tape can therefore end in a system that is formally simpler and morally more arbitrary.

There is a recurrent political error in assuming that authoritarian simplification reduces complexity. It usually redistributes it. Public deliberation is reduced, but private court politics becomes more complex. Formal law is weakened, but informal networks of loyalty become essential. Independent institutions are subordinated, but citizens must interpret unstable signals from the center. The system becomes easier to command and harder to predict.

A related error appears in revolutionary movements. They identify a real structural problem, compress it into a total antagonism, and promise that removing one class, institution, identity, or technology will restore natural order. After victory, reality remains complex. Because doctrine promised simplicity, residual complexity must be attributed to sabotage. The revolution therefore generates enemies to explain why the purified world has not appeared.

Girard's scapegoat returns at the end of failed compression. The savior first unifies by identifying those who caused complexity. Later, when simplification fails, a new scapegoat is required. Purges are not accidental deviations from the promise. They preserve the explanatory monopoly of the promise.

The targets vary. They may be immigrants, bureaucrats, billionaires, intellectuals, minorities, financiers, welfare recipients, foreign powers, technologists, or "the corrupt system" imagined as a coherent agent. Any of these categories can contain powerful actors deserving criticism. The scapegoat mechanism begins when internal differences disappear and the category becomes causally omnipotent. Every problem is traced to it, and every member becomes interchangeable.

Technocratic politics can produce a mirror image. Instead of one charismatic person compressing complexity into will, technical administration compresses political conflict into optimization. Value disagreements are redescribed as information problems. Citizens become variables. Opposition becomes misinformation or irrationality. The technocrat may reject populist simplification while practicing a less visible simplification: the belief that a model can determine what a plural society should want.

The dark savior and the total technocrat appear as enemies, but they can reinforce one another. Technocracy depoliticizes decisions until citizens feel

excluded. Populism returns politics by personalizing power. The resulting instability justifies further technocratic control. Each side points to the excesses of the other while preserving the conditions that reproduce it.

A democratic response must offer compression without deception. Citizens need narratives, priorities, and accountable leadership. “Everything is complicated” is not a program. But democratic compression must remain revisable. It must identify causes without claiming total causation, make decisions without criminalizing uncertainty, and preserve institutions capable of proving the leader wrong.

This requires leaders who can say three difficult sentences: the problem is real; no single group caused all of it; the solution will impose costs and may fail. Such language appears weak in a media environment that rewards certainty. Yet it is the foundation of non-destructive authority. The alternative is strength performed through the denial of reality.

Institutions must also reduce the market for dark salvation. People who can understand how decisions affect them, appeal errors, participate locally, and obtain meaningful repair have less need for a sovereign interpreter. Material security does not eliminate authoritarian desire, but chronic humiliation and helplessness enlarge it. Complexity governance is therefore democratic defense.

The dark savior offers a world in which responsibility is easy because guilt is concentrated. A mature society offers a harder promise: responsibility will be made specific even when causation is distributed; uncertainty will not become impunity; no leader will be permitted to embody the whole; and no category of people will be required to carry the moral weight of a system.

The savior’s deepest claim is that freedom has become too complicated. The democratic answer cannot be to deny the burden. It must prove that freedom can build institutions intelligible enough to deserve loyalty and limited enough not to require worship.

Religions of Simplification

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When institutions can no longer explain the world they administer, religion returns even in societies that call themselves secular. It may not return as belief in supernatural beings. It returns as a structure of total meaning. A doctrine names the source of corruption, defines the innocent community, explains suffering, establishes rituals of purification, and promises an order in which contradiction will disappear.

Human beings do not live by information alone. They need orientation, belonging, moral language, and practices that transform private fear into shared significance. Modern complexity often supplies information while dissolving orientation. The individual receives endless updates but no stable account of what deserves loyalty. Technical systems answer how while leaving why to markets of identity and outrage.

The resulting cults can take many forms. A nationalist movement may promise a return to an imagined organic people. A revolutionary movement may promise the abolition of exploitation through one decisive rupture. A market creed may treat every social problem as a distortion of exchange. A technocratic creed may expect sufficient data and computation to eliminate political judgment. A spiritual movement may withdraw from institutional life into purity, discipline, or charismatic obedience. An anti-technological movement may imagine that removing machines will remove domination. A techno-religion may imagine that more powerful machines will remove human conflict.

These doctrines differ morally and empirically. They should not be collapsed into one equivalence. Yet they share a temptation: to convert limits of knowledge into defects of loyalty. If the solution fails, someone did not believe strongly enough, implement purely enough, deregulate fully enough, centralize decisively enough, localize radically enough, or accelerate quickly enough. Reality is not

permitted to falsify the doctrine because the doctrine has become the condition of moral membership.

The attraction of such systems is not stupidity. Total narratives economize attention. They tell adherents which sources to trust, which events matter, which compromises are betrayal, and which emotions are virtuous. In a world of impossible cognitive demand, a doctrine is an operating system for consciousness. It reduces the number of decisions a person must make alone.

Traditional religions have long performed similar functions, but they also contain internal resources against totalization. Ritual can limit politics. Transcendence can relativize rulers. Confession can expose the believer's own guilt. Textual traditions preserve contradictions that no current leader fully controls. Institutions, theology, and communal memory can restrain charisma. These protections often fail, and religion has repeatedly sanctified violence. But the historical thickness of a tradition can sometimes resist the demand that one generation's political interpretation become absolute.

New cults of simplification may lack this thickness. They can be assembled rapidly around a leader, platform, theory, or crisis. Their sacred texts are clips, slogans, leaked documents, dashboards, manifestos, and algorithmically reinforced narratives. They can change doctrine without acknowledging change because the community is held together less by coherent belief than by shared enemies and synchronized emotion.

The word "cult" should not be used merely to stigmatize unpopular groups. A useful definition concerns structure: concentrated interpretive authority, costly exit, isolation from corrective information, moral polarization, and the subordination of persons to the preservation of the system. Large institutions can display cultic features, including corporations, political parties, activist networks, and professional communities. The essential question is whether the group permits reality and conscience to overrule belonging.

A society burdened by complexity will produce demand for communities that simplify. The practical task is therefore not to condemn the demand but to civilize it. We need cultures of simplicity that do not become cultures of simplism.

The difference begins with the status of the limit. Simplism says the world is simple and those who complicate it are corrupt. Mature simplicity says the world exceeds us, therefore we must choose limits consciously. Simplism denies uncertainty. Mature simplicity institutionalizes humility. Simplism seeks one scale for all problems. Mature simplicity asks which scale preserves knowledge, responsibility, and human agency.

This book uses the provocative phrase “cult of mature simplicity” to name a possible civic and spiritual formation. It would not be a cult in the coercive sense. It would be a metaculture organized around the refusal of total power. Its sacred object would not be a leader or doctrine but the boundary that no leader or doctrine may cross.

Such a culture would treat exit as morally important. A community that cannot be left without social death or material destruction has acquired excessive power. It would treat reversibility as a virtue. Decisions whose consequences are uncertain should, where possible, be designed so they can be corrected. It would treat explanation as a duty of power, not a favor. It would treat the multiplication of rules as a moral cost requiring justification. It would distinguish commitments that should be stable from hypotheses that should remain revisable.

Most importantly, it would practice self-limitation. Modern politics usually asks what institutions are capable of doing and whether the expected benefit exceeds the cost. A culture of limits would add a prior question: what forms of capability should remain unused because they create dependency, opacity, or irreversible concentration of power? Not every technically possible form of coordination deserves existence.

This principle will sound naive in a competitive world. If one organization refuses a capability, another may use it. If one state limits surveillance, an adversary may not. If one company slows automation, competitors may accelerate. The Red Queen reappears. Voluntary limits become vulnerable to defection.

This is why mature simplicity cannot survive as private lifestyle alone. It requires compacts, standards, mutual restraints, and institutions that prevent the least constrained actor from setting the terms for everyone. Arms control is an obvious analogy: restraint becomes viable when verification and reciprocity reduce the advantage of violation. Similar structures may be needed for attention extraction, algorithmic manipulation, workplace surveillance, autonomous systems, financial complexity, and the production of rules.

A cult of limits would also resist the romanticism of the small. Local communities can preserve knowledge, trust, and accountability. They can also be oppressive, exclusionary, and incapable of solving large-scale problems. Climate, pandemics, financial contagion, digital infrastructure, and geopolitical security require coordination beyond the local. The correct principle is not localism but subsidiarity: decisions should remain as close as possible to those affected, except where scale genuinely requires wider coordination.

Elinor Ostrom’s work on polycentric governance provides a disciplined alternative to both centralized command and naive decentralization. Complex

problems can be governed through multiple overlapping centers of authority, with rules adapted to context, mechanisms for monitoring and conflict resolution, and institutions nested across scales. Polycentricity does not abolish coordination. It prevents one center from claiming exclusive knowledge and permits learning through variation (Ostrom, 2010).

A mature simplicity movement would therefore seek modularity rather than isolation. Units should be understandable and partially autonomous, but capable of interoperating. Failures should be contained rather than propagated. People should know which institution is responsible for which function. Interfaces should be standardized where this reduces burden, while internal diversity remains possible.

The movement would also need rituals. Rational principles rarely survive without practices that make them emotionally real. Organizations could hold periodic complexity reviews in which teams must justify every recurring report, approval, metric, and meeting. Communities could establish public ceremonies of repeal, celebrating the removal of obsolete rules as seriously as the creation of new ones. Institutions could require leaders to explain one significant failure without attributing it to a subordinate or external enemy. Digital systems could include periods in which engagement optimization is suspended and users recover chronological, unmanipulated access.

These examples may sound administrative rather than sacred. But civilization has always embodied values in repeated forms. A ritual is a technology for making memory durable. If self-limitation remains an abstract recommendation, it will lose against the immediate rewards of expansion. Limits need prestige.

The culture must also rehabilitate enoughness. Consumer and professional life are organized around indefinite improvement. More capacity, visibility, speed, and scale appear self-justifying. Enoughness is not forced poverty or hostility to excellence. It is the ability to identify a point at which additional optimization damages the purpose it was meant to serve. A school can become too measured to educate. A hospital can become too efficient to care. A democracy can become too managed to remain democratic. A person can become too adapted to remain a self.

The danger is that enoughness becomes a morality imposed downward. Elites praise simplicity while retaining private access to complexity, mobility, and expert assistance. Workers are told to want less while asset owners accumulate. Citizens are told to accept limits while institutions expand surveillance. Any credible culture of simplicity must begin with limits on concentrated power and complexity privilege.

Complexity privilege is the capacity to benefit from systems whose burdens one can outsource. The wealthy person hires an advisor, the corporation employs compliance teams, the political actor receives briefings, and the platform controls the interface. The ordinary person receives terms and conditions. A just simplicity project must reduce complexity at the bottom and increase accountability at the top.

The mature cult of limits would therefore be suspicious of purity. Purity is the emotional shortcut by which complexity is converted into contamination. It seeks clean people, clean doctrine, clean language, clean food, clean politics, or clean technology. Some boundaries are necessary, but purity easily becomes persecution because living systems survive through mixture, compromise, and adaptation.

The alternative virtue is integrity. Integrity does not mean remaining uncontaminated. It means preserving coherence while interacting with a complex world. A person or institution of integrity can admit compromise, error, and dependence without losing every principle. This is the moral form required by plural societies.

Religions of simplification will arise because the need they answer is real. The question is whether they will promise innocence through enemies or responsibility through limits. One path leads back to sacrifice. The other could produce a civilization capable of remaining complex without becoming incomprehensible to itself.

Four Futures Under the Pressure of Complexity

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The future will not be selected from a menu, and no society will inhabit one pure scenario. Different sectors and regions may combine elements of several. Still, scenarios make forces visible. They allow us to ask what kind of order emerges when complexity continues to grow while trust, responsibility, and human attention do not.

The first future is the empire of compression. Democratic institutions lose legitimacy because they appear slow, fragmented, and incapable of delivering coherent action. A leader or movement promises to cut through procedure, unify authority, and restore the primacy of political will. Some simplifications are initially popular and perhaps useful. Duplicated agencies are merged. Rules are repealed. Projects accelerate. Citizens experience relief.

The deeper transformation appears gradually. Independent institutions are redescribed as obstacles created by enemies. Expertise becomes valuable only when it confirms the center. Local autonomy survives as delegation, revocable at will. The legal system becomes simpler in public principle and more complex in political application. Everyone knows the declared rule; no one knows when exceptions will be granted or punishment selectively imposed.

The empire of compression does not abolish complexity. It hides it within loyalty networks. Formal procedures shrink, but informal interpretation expands. Access depends on proximity. Businesses invest in political relationships. Officials infer the leader's wishes. Citizens learn to read symbolic signals. The state becomes legible from above and illegible from below.

The regime requires enemies because its central promise is that unity can overcome complexity. Every persistent problem threatens that promise.

Bureaucrats, foreigners, minorities, financiers, dissidents, or previous elites are blamed for obstruction. Sacrifice substitutes for explanation. The political system achieves emotional simplicity through moral violence.

The second future is cognitive feudalism. Here no charismatic sovereign abolishes complexity. Instead, large technical organizations become indispensable interpreters of it. Artificial intelligence manages healthcare, finance, education, employment, security, law, and information. Interfaces become extraordinarily convenient. Most people experience less friction. Decisions arrive quickly, services adapt, and prediction reduces waste.

The price is dependence. The models, data, infrastructure, and expertise necessary to understand society are controlled by a small number of public-private institutions. Citizens are formally free but cognitively subordinate. They cannot meaningfully evaluate the systems that allocate opportunity. Appeals are processed by another layer of the same infrastructure. Human representatives possess less knowledge than the system and therefore hesitate to override it.

Feudalism is an analogy, not an exact historical repetition. The new lords do not necessarily own land; they control interpretation, computation, identity, and access. The new dependency is contractual and personalized. Individuals receive benefits in exchange for continuous data and behavioral legibility. Exit is theoretically possible but practically costly because social and economic life has been integrated into the dominant systems.

This future may be gentle. It may reduce many errors and material burdens. Its danger lies precisely in competence. A brutal system invites resistance. A convenient system can absorb autonomy without dramatic coercion. People cease to practice judgment because judgment is inefficient compared with delegation. Society retains human values as parameters but loses humans capable of defending them outside the system.

The third future is bureaucratic decomposition. Institutions remain plural and formally accountable, but their complexity outgrows their capacity for coordination. Each crisis produces new rules, offices, audits, and digital systems. Reform is announced continually. Implementation becomes the permanent horizon.

Citizens experience the state and large organizations as a landscape of portals, helplines, credentials, and contradictory instructions. Employees spend growing portions of work demonstrating that work occurred. Managers manage dependencies. Consultants translate between units created to solve translation failures. Artificial intelligence accelerates document production, creating an arms race between generated complexity and automated summarization.

The system does not collapse dramatically. It loses efficacy unevenly. Wealthy actors construct private pathways around public friction. Essential workers improvise. Local communities compensate where they can. Official indicators remain acceptable because they measure the processes the institutions still perform. The gap between formal capacity and lived capacity widens.

Political conflict becomes a battle over whether to add or remove layers. One side interprets every failure as insufficient regulation; the other as excessive regulation. Both are sometimes correct locally and wrong globally. Rules are repealed without redesigning dependencies, producing new failures. New safeguards are added without deleting obsolete structures. Institutional memory becomes a pile rather than a learning process.

This future creates moral exhaustion. People stop expecting responsibility because they assume every problem will be referred elsewhere. Corruption need not dominate; indifference is enough. Talented individuals leave public systems or learn to survive by lowering ambition. The society remains civilized in language but increasingly incapable of converting principle into action.

The fourth future is a polycentric civilization of limits. It is the least spectacular and the most difficult because it offers no final solution. It begins by accepting that complexity cannot be mastered from one center and cannot be abandoned without losing essential capabilities. The objective becomes containment, intelligibility, and distributed adaptation.

Institutions are reorganized into modules with clear responsibilities and interoperable interfaces. Decisions remain local where local knowledge is decisive, but larger systems provide shared standards, rights, infrastructure, and coordination for problems that cross boundaries. Multiple centers can experiment, compare, and correct one another. Failure in one unit does not automatically propagate through the whole.

Rights are redesigned for complex environments. A right is not considered real merely because it exists in law; its administrative cost is measured. Individuals receive access to independent navigators and machine-assisted explanation. Consequential automated decisions must preserve traceability, grounds for appeal, and a human authority capable of taking responsibility for override.

Public and private institutions operate under complexity budgets. New rules and systems include sunset conditions, review obligations, and explicit estimates of cognitive burden. Major programs identify who owns cross-system effects. Metrics are paired with qualitative channels that can challenge them. Local anomalies are treated as potential information about model failure rather than inconvenience.

Artificial intelligence serves as a translator and monitor rather than sovereign. It maps regulatory dependencies, reconstructs decision chains, tests scenarios, detects contradictions, and helps citizens understand institutions. Critical models and datasets are subject to independent evaluation. No single provider controls all layers from identity to decision to appeal.

Education changes accordingly. Instead of trying to make every citizen an expert in every system, it teaches institutional literacy: how to identify decision rights, demand reasons, evaluate sources, understand uncertainty, and participate in collective correction. Expertise remains respected, but experts are trained to communicate limits and to treat public contestation as part of reliability rather than as interference.

The culture also changes its prestige system. Maintenance, simplification, and successful prevention receive recognition. Leaders gain status for removing obsolete structures, not only for launching new programs. Organizations celebrate near misses that revealed weakness. Redundancy is justified where failure would be catastrophic. Efficiency is evaluated against resilience and human comprehensibility.

This fourth future will not eliminate domination, error, or resentment. Polycentric systems can fragment rights, permit local capture, and create coordination failures. Modular systems can hide harms at interfaces. AI translators can manipulate. Complexity budgets can become another bureaucracy. Every solution can reproduce the problem at a higher level.

Its advantage is not purity but correctability. A civilization of limits is designed around the assumption that it will be wrong. It distributes power not because local actors are always wise but because errors should meet competing perspectives. It preserves exit and appeal not because every complaint is valid but because no institution should be final judge of its own complexity.

The four futures are already present. Authoritarian compression appears wherever leaders claim exclusive interpretive authority. Cognitive feudalism grows through platform dependence and opaque automated decision-making. Bureaucratic decomposition appears where process accumulation outruns purpose. Polycentric repair appears in institutions that distribute knowledge, preserve local autonomy, and create credible mechanisms of correction.

The future will depend less on which ideology wins than on which architecture becomes normal. A liberal democracy can drift into cognitive feudalism. A market economy can become administratively decomposed. A decentralized movement can generate cultic domination. An effective state can support polycentric autonomy. Names do not guarantee structures.

The most dangerous transition occurs when the first three futures reinforce one another. Bureaucratic decomposition creates demand for authoritarian compression. Authoritarian arbitrariness increases dependence on technical intermediaries. Cognitive feudalism weakens civic competence, making democratic correction harder. Each promises relief from the others while deepening the common cause: the distance between consequence and responsible human judgment.

The fourth future interrupts this cycle by restoring scale. It does not shrink every system. It makes each level answerable to the level below and limited by the levels beside it. It treats complexity as something to be governed, not admired, denied, or surrendered to.

The Constitution of Mature Simplicity

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A civilization cannot solve the moral problem of complexity through goodwill. Individuals may try to act responsibly, but incentives, architectures, and information flows shape what responsibility can accomplish. The answer must be constitutional in the broad sense: a set of durable constraints defining who may decide, what must remain visible, how errors can be challenged, and where power must stop.

Constitutions simplify at the level of principle so that political life can remain plural at the level of practice. They do not specify every outcome. They establish boundaries and procedures. A constitution of complexity would do the same for systems whose operational detail exceeds ordinary understanding. Its task would not be to make every mechanism transparent to every person. It would guarantee that no consequential mechanism becomes unaccountable because understanding it requires specialization.

The first constitutional principle is that complexity must have an owner without having a sovereign. Every significant system needs identifiable responsibility for its overall effects. This does not mean one person controls everything or absorbs all blame. It means someone or some body has a non-transferable duty to integrate knowledge across components, report unresolved contradictions, and ensure that harm can be investigated and repaired. The integrator must be independent enough to resist local incentives and powerful enough to interrupt action.

The second principle is reciprocal legibility. Institutions may require information from citizens, workers, users, and communities, but they incur a reciprocal duty to explain how that information is used and how decisions can be

contested. The burden of translation should fall primarily on the more powerful and better-resourced actor. A right that can be exercised only by hiring an expert is not equally accessible.

The third principle is proportional intelligibility. Not every person needs source code, mathematical proofs, or complete legal histories. Different audiences require different explanations. A technical auditor needs detailed evidence. A decision-maker needs causal dependencies and uncertainty. An affected person needs the reasons relevant to the outcome, available alternatives, and a practical route of appeal. Explainability fails when it supplies information without enabling action.

The fourth principle is reversibility. Systems operating under uncertainty should preserve options to stop, roll back, compensate, or redesign. Irreversible decisions require a higher burden of justification. This principle applies to technology, infrastructure, institutional mergers, data collection, and legal changes. Speed may be valuable, but speed combined with irreversibility transfers risk to those who did not choose it.

The fifth principle is modularity with governed interfaces. Large systems should be decomposed where possible so that components can be understood, replaced, and contained. Yet interfaces are where responsibility often disappears. The constitution must assign ownership of cross-module effects, define shared evidence, and prevent each unit from externalizing risk to another.

The sixth principle is a right of interruption. People inside and outside the institution must have protected channels to pause processes when credible evidence of serious harm appears. The threshold should be proportionate to risk, and interruption must not become an instrument of sabotage. But a system that can act faster than it can stop is morally defective.

The seventh principle is burden accounting. Institutions routinely account for financial cost and sometimes for environmental impact. They should also account for cognitive and administrative burden. How much time must a person spend? What literacy is assumed? How many institutions must be coordinated? What happens after an error? Which groups bear disproportionate costs? A rule that creates minor aggregate benefit while imposing severe burden on the vulnerable may be formally efficient and substantively unjust.

The eighth principle is expiration. Complexity persists because adding is easier than deleting. Rules, reports, committees, permissions, and data collections should not live indefinitely by default. Sunset clauses, periodic justification, and public repeal processes create institutional metabolism. Deletion is not deregulation as ideology. It is the removal of structures whose purpose no longer exceeds their cost.

The ninth principle is distributed correction. No institution should be the sole evaluator of its own performance. Independent audit, adversarial review, local experimentation, professional dissent, citizen participation, and judicial appeal create overlapping forms of error detection. Elinor Ostrom's polycentricity and high-reliability theory converge here: resilience requires multiple perspectives and authority that can move toward relevant knowledge.

The tenth principle is that benefit and responsibility must remain connected. Organizations that profit from complexity cannot externalize all duties to contractors, users, or regulators. States cannot procure opaque systems and disclaim understanding. Platforms cannot structure behavior and invoke neutrality only when harms appear. Investors cannot shape incentives while treating consequences as operational detail. Responsibility should follow control, benefit, knowledge, and capacity for repair.

These principles will generate new procedures. That is the irony. Governing complexity adds complexity. The answer is not to deny the recursion but to design against it. Constitutional rules should be few, stable, and generative. They should constrain how operational rules are produced rather than prescribe every operational choice. The objective is not an ethics office for every ethics office. It is a clear architecture in which complexity must justify itself to simple commitments.

Artificial intelligence can support this architecture if it is designed as public cognitive infrastructure. Imagine systems able to translate a regulation into personalized obligations without changing its legal meaning; map how a decision traveled through agencies and vendors; identify which evidence influenced an automated outcome; compare stated principles with observed patterns; simulate the burden imposed on different groups; and help a citizen formulate an appeal. Such tools could democratize capacities currently available mainly to wealthy organizations.

The same tools could create cognitive feudalism if controlled by actors with incentives to shape the explanation. Therefore the AI layer must itself be plural, auditable, and contestable. Independent models should be able to inspect claims made by institutional models. Provenance should distinguish source evidence from generated interpretation. Human authorities must remain responsible for consequential decisions. International frameworks from NIST, OECD, UNESCO, and the European Union increasingly emphasize traceability, transparency, human oversight, risk management, and accountability, but principles become real only when they create enforceable standing for affected people (NIST, 2023; OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2021).

The constitution must also protect spaces not optimized by systems. Human beings need relationships and institutions in which not every action is captured, scored, and converted into future prediction. Privacy is not merely secrecy. It is the room in which identity can develop without permanent consequence. A society that makes everything legible to power may become efficient and psychologically uninhabitable.

Mature simplicity also requires a different theory of expertise. Experts are indispensable because complexity is real. But expertise should be organized as service, not priesthood. The expert's authority grows when methods can be scrutinized, limits are disclosed, and disagreement is preserved. Public trust is not produced by demanding confidence. It is produced by visible correction.

Citizens, in turn, need a discipline of epistemic modesty. Democratic control does not mean every opinion is equivalent to specialized knowledge. The right to contest is not the right to have every claim accepted. Mature simplicity refuses both technocratic contempt and populist omniscience. It asks institutions to explain and citizens to engage with the possibility that reality will not confirm their preferred story.

At the organizational level, the constitution should change what leadership means. The leader is not the person who knows the whole. No one does. The leader is responsible for creating conditions under which relevant knowledge can meet before action becomes irreversible. Leadership is less the possession of answers than the governance of attention, dissent, and integration.

At the economic level, firms should treat complexity as a liability on the balance sheet of trust. Products whose benefits depend on consumers not understanding terms are ethically unstable. Business models that privatize convenience while externalizing systemic risk should face stronger obligations. Simpler contracts, interoperable standards, data portability, and accessible dispute resolution are not merely consumer protections. They preserve market legitimacy.

At the state level, policy should be tested not only for legal coherence and expected outcomes but for navigability. Governments should build one-stop interfaces without creating one-stop surveillance. Local institutions should retain capacity to respond to context, but national rights should prevent local exclusion. Digitalization should remove repeated demands for information rather than automate the repetition.

At the cultural level, we must change the aesthetics of power. Complexity often impresses. Long documents, elaborate frameworks, dense terminology, and technical dashboards signal competence. Sometimes they contain it. Sometimes they defend emptiness. A mature culture would admire the person who can

preserve truth while reducing unnecessary complication, and distrust the person who makes a simple reality inaccessible in order to become indispensable.

But simplification must be earned. The person who understands little often speaks most simply. The person who understands deeply may also speak simply, but the simplicity has passed through complexity and retained its scars. Mature simplicity can say what matters without pretending nothing else exists.

This is why the constitution of mature simplicity is ultimately a moral discipline of limits. It limits the right of institutions to transfer comprehension costs downward. It limits the right of leaders to convert uncertainty into enemies. It limits the right of experts to confuse specialization with sovereignty. It limits the right of citizens to demand comforting falsehoods. It limits the right of technology to expand simply because it can.

The constitution does not promise innocence. Every complex society will produce unintended harm. The moral test is whether it can recognize, trace, and repair that harm without requiring a scandal, a martyr, or a sacrificial victim. A system becomes legitimate not because it never fails, but because its failures remain answerable to those who suffer them.

No Complexity Without Responsibility

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The modern world has not become evil because it became complex. It became capable of goods that simple societies could not produce: vast cooperation among strangers, specialized medicine, reliable infrastructure, universal rights, scientific knowledge, and forms of individual freedom protected from local domination. Complexity is part of the price of civilization.

But every price creates a politics of payment. Some people enjoy the benefits while others pay in attention, uncertainty, exposure, and dependence. Some institutions own the systems while others must navigate them. Some actors can remain strategically ignorant because someone else absorbs the consequence. The moral crisis begins when this distribution is treated as natural.

Girard taught us to suspect the peace purchased by accusation. The crowd's unity does not prove the victim's guilt. Our age requires another suspicion: the absence of a clear villain does not prove the absence of responsibility. A thousand locally defensible actions can produce one globally indefensible world.

The temptation is to personify the system, name an enemy, and sacrifice. This temptation will grow. The Red Queen will exhaust more people. Artificial intelligence will make institutions both more capable and more opaque. Climate, security, migration, finance, and public health will demand coordination across scales. Every failure will create markets for dark saviors who promise to compress the world.

We will not defeat them by praising complexity. "The world is complicated" is often true and morally insufficient. We must show that complexity can be bounded, made contestable, decomposed, translated, and connected to responsibility. We must build systems that preserve expertise without creating priesthoods, coordination without total centers, and simplicity without enemies.

The guiding formula is severe because the problem is severe: no power without legibility; no complexity without responsibility; no victim reduced to a side effect.

This formula does not demand that every harm find a person to hate. Hatred is one of the cheapest forms of moral clarity. It demands something harder: that institutions identify duties before disaster, preserve evidence through action, create genuine routes of interruption and appeal, and accept obligations of repair proportional to their power and benefit.

The devil with a thousand hands is defeated neither by cutting off every hand nor by declaring the body innocent. It is defeated when the connections among the hands become visible, when each hand knows the limits of its role, when some hands are authorized to stop the movement, and when the whole can be called to answer before the person it has harmed.

The last refuge of modern evil may not be an order shouted in a square. It may be a sentence spoken quietly across offices, models, committees, and screens:

“I followed the process.”

A humane civilization will answer:

“Then the process must answer too.”

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