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Grumpy Old Man

“If your time to you
Is worth savin’
Then you better start swimmin’
Or you’ll sink like a stone”¹

When I went to get a second Bachelor’s degree, I had to take a new set of general education classes. This seemed a bit of a waste of time, but I did get to read William Ophuls book, [Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity](#). In this 1977 book, he provides “a discussion of problems that offer no definite solutions – much less ones that could be called ‘feasible’ or ‘realistic’”. In 1977 he said he hopes “eventually to be able to alleviate some of this distress in a future work”². His future work takes approximately 20 years where he again punts the ball. His 1997, [Requiem for Modern Politics](#) “is a critique of the old order, rather than a vision of the new...I leave that to the future”³. His latest book in 2018 is simply titled: [Apologies to the Grandchildren](#)⁴.

Mr. Ophuls, at least in his books, is not a cheery optimist – “I count myself among the pessimists”⁵. He attempts to rally towards the end to provide some direction – there is “a grand opportunity to share in the creation of a new and potentially higher, more humane form of post-industrial civilization”⁶, but if he was a betting man, he does not appear ready to bet large on our ability to pull ourselves together. His primary argument is that our political structure and governance processes only react to burning platforms, the fire has started, and the ability to put it out is unlikely to be adopted. The story from 1977 to 2018 is not much different. It is not like it is a slow burn over those 40 years, just that it gets worse each year and we remove ourselves from more options.

As I mentioned in an earlier piece⁷, “criticality” is a key component to our ability to pull ourselves together in the electric utility industry. Criticality should drive our investment decisions and our response in the here and now. But what happens so often in the industry is that the criticality changes as we are often overwhelmed by events. This often leads to short-term responses that miss long-term opportunities. A common outcome in all spheres of existence. Some of the responses to the wildfires in California show how short-term climate change mitigation/adaptation (\$150B in raking⁸ - \$150B is unlikely the correct number and while there would be results – the good intentions of vegetation management may lead to unforeseen consequences) concepts overwhelm long-term climate change solutions (reduce/eliminate emissions – that hurt the fossil fuel industry, but would be a plus for many as well as the ecology of the world). Budget dollars often are invested in these immediate mitigation

¹ Bob Dylan, [The Times They Are a-Changing](#), “The Times They Are a-Changing”, 1964.

² William Ophuls, [Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity](#), 1977, p. ix.

³ Ophuls, [Requiem for Modern Politics](#), 1997, p. ix.

⁴ Ophuls, [Apologies to the Grandchildren](#), 2018.

⁵ [Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity](#), p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 243.

⁷ Robert Sherick, “C is for California”, <https://erco-op.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/C-is-for-California.pdf>

⁸ California Energy Markets, “Judge Considers Barring PG&E From Paying Dividends”, March 8, 2019, p. 8.

“inspections and begetation-management...PG&E...called the proposal infeasible and estimated that complying with it would cost as much as \$150B.”

strategies rather than to longer term and more complicated solutions (corporate and market restructuring). And while walking and chewing gum at the same time should not be a challenge, with my own pessimistic hat on, it may be a bit of a challenge.

California faces this mitigation versus solution choice in many areas. It wants to consider a different way to procure energy (AB-56), investigate a new utility paradigm (I.15-08-019), mitigate fires (SB-901), and build a new grid (DRP and IDER) amongst other things – all critical considerations. Ophuls' primary thesis is that scarcity of natural resources and the tragedy of the commons will require action that is not supported by our current governance structure. Ophuls, ever the pessimist, points out that short term always wins over long term: "economic man *must* ignore the interests of posterity, for it has no agent he can bargain with in a market place and nothing of economic value to offer him."⁹ And posterity doesn't vote: "Incremental decision making largely ignores long-term goals; it focuses on the problem immediately at hand and tries to find the solution that is most congruent with the status quo."¹⁰ And our governance structure has a "time-lag problem...procedural checks and balances built into our basically adversary system of policy making can subject controversial decisions to lengthy delays."¹¹ "Environmental policy making may simply bog down in a morass of hearings, suits, countersuits, and appeals, as government agencies, business interests, and environmentalist groups use all the procedural devices available to harass each other."¹² "In sum, administrative overload, fragmented and dispersed authority, protracted delays in making and enforcing social decisions, and the institutional legacy of the era of growth and exploitation are likely to obstruct timely and effective environmental policy making."¹³

So is the Zombie Apocalypse approaching? This question, slightly reformulated, is addressed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Report on Global Warming of 1.5° C.¹⁴ It appears we could fend off the zombies at their current rate, but that the rate of growth of zombies will exceed our capabilities without a different path. Unfortunately, all of the paths are paths that our industrial/economic world (the "natural" path) do not intend to take. So as Ophuls posits, we will have to wait for the crisis and lose more desirable paths while we wait. So, criticality is important, but only important as the critical nature is identified and addressed. There is no proactive in the tragedy of the commons, there is only waiting for the crisis to impact the industrial/economic bottom line. The California Energy Commissioner Weisenmiller said PG&E was the first corporate causality of climate change.¹⁵ But many people are likely to see it as a failure of leadership, bad California Law (reverse commendation), and a very tragic accident. So, zombies may be bad, but there are other problems to address as well.

⁹ Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity, p. 180.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 191.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 194.

¹² Ibid, 195.

¹³ Ibid, 195.

¹⁴ IPCC, Global Warming of 1.5° C, October 2018. <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>

¹⁵ California Energy Markets, "Retiring, Energy Official, Millennial Lawmaker Urge Action on Climate," February 22, 2019, p.3.

Ophuls' writings cover over 40 years, 1977 to 2018, and his Cassandra warnings evolve from a rediscovery of "primordial wealth"¹⁶ to "the challenge is to persuade key personnel to participate in wargaming the end of industrial civilization."¹⁷ You've been warned.

"We've got five years, my brain hurts a lot
Five years, that's all we've got
We've got five years, what a surprise"¹⁸

¹⁶ Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity, p. 244.

¹⁷ Apologies to the Grandchildren, p. 136

¹⁸ David Bowie, The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars, "Five Years", 1972.