

Light, entropy and why care keeps society alive

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Everything tends towards decay unless energy is applied. That is not ideology, it is physics.

In this video, I explore light through the lens of entropy and explain why care, maintenance, and public services are not optional extras but survival mechanisms.

Austerity withdraws energy from our systems. Neoliberalism assumes self-maintenance. Both are wrong.

If we want societies to endure, we must invest in care, because entropy never rests.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5A_28igS5Y&si=Ur_zAWWjuqsPkADg

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=fdyz7-1a01556-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

Welcome to this, the fourth in my video series on the importance of light, which I'm putting out over this Christmas season. And this time, I want to look at light through the lens of entropy.

Left alone, let's be honest, everything falls apart. It's not cynical to say that; it is simply the consequence of the laws of thermodynamics. Entropy always increases without energy, and it is light that resists that process. That is another reason why light is so important in our world, and so in our economy.

Entropy is the tendency towards disorder. Buildings decay; bodies weaken; institutions erode; and maintenance is not optional as a consequence. We have to look after all of these things, and of course, ourselves. Life only exists because we are constantly absorbing energy, and that energy mostly comes from light.

The order that is created, though, is temporary, and it is care that sustains it. We cannot neglect this process or decay advances. We do therefore have to take care seriously. Care is, in fact, an energy input into our systems.

Healthcare resists bodily entropy.

Education resists social entropy.

Infrastructure and its maintenance resist physical entropy.

And all of these things require continuous investment.

Cuts in that case can only increase disorder. But in that one statement, there is a massive economic message. Austerity withdraws energy from our economic systems is the inference of what I just said. Austerity pretends decay is efficiency. It treats breakdown as inevitability, but that is not about economics. Economics is about maintaining capital, and austerity is clearly about the mismanagement of capital as a consequence. It is a failure, and not an input into the way in which we manage our economic cycle.

Neoliberalism in this sense assumes that economic systems self-maintain, but they clearly do not. Worse still, neoliberalism assumes that all our systems of economic management are isolated and removed or apart from the rest of the world, but again, that's not true. Our economic systems are integral to the rest of the world, as of course we are. So, markets do not and cannot replace care, and failure to care then produces crisis.

Crisis is then blamed on failure, but that failure is the failure of neoliberalism itself. Quite simply, care is not built into neoliberalism, and therefore, it fails.

And maintenance is absolutely essential. It rarely produces headlines, but it does prevent disasters, and its success looks like nothing is happening because life goes on; that's the point. But what care does is protect the politically vulnerable, until it stops, that is.

Public services in this sense are part of the process of keeping the lights on, and that is

why they're so important. They stabilise society, they resist breakdown, they are not waste, they are survival mechanisms.

You cannot control entropy. You can only manage it. And that is why survival is our goal, but that also requires humility, plus, I'm going to say it yet again, care, because that is the fundamental input that is required if we are to succeed in this absolutely essential role of managing decay, which entropy makes inevitable.

I'm not talking about ideology here. I'm talking about necessity. The choice is not whether systems fail because we know they will. The choice is how quickly they will fail and who will bear the cost. That is what is important here, and we can recognise that and realise that politics of care does indeed recognise this entropic process.

The politics of care is then all about maintenance. It's all about valuing continuity, and essentially, it's about investing in light because without light, none of those things are possible.

What we have to accept is our future depends on whether we accept this responsibility for maintaining the light. If we don't keep the lights on, we will fail. If we do invest in continuing with the light, we will succeed. This is not a matter of choice. This is a matter of necessity, but it's something more than that. It's deeply political because keeping the lights on is something that we know will not happen automatically.

We know that fossil fuels are failing us. We know that the systems that are dependent upon them have to come to an end. We know we have to make alternative choices about how we keep the lights on. We know that will change the power structures within society, and we know that this will require democracy to be working at its very best.

Can we do that? That's the challenge that light presents us with. We must rise to that challenge.

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