

# Multipolar Traps: Why Good Intentions Aren't Enough for Systemic Change

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I took a pretty long break from spending more than 5 minutes a day on social media – it lasted about 3 years lol

At the time, I walked away because the platforms had largely destroyed our ability to do business, and on a personal side, I see little benefit in social media.

But since December, I've been back on it, much more than my 5 minutes a day. This time, posting again on [Facebook where CE has a huge following.](#)

Interestingly, what used to get a huge amount of traction 5 – 7 years ago, seems to no longer. Things like personal transformation, consciousness, new-paradigm thinking, interesting advancements in quantum science etc. Basically things that help us build a new worldview and help people grow get about 20% the traction as things like technological innovations and politics.

This is somewhat disheartening as those other topics were a big part of our bread and butter and what I feel are important for us to focus on culturally. But since COVID and the decline of more conscious forms of media, polarization seems to have increased dramatically and cultural tastes have changed to what's available in newsfeeds.

Along with that have come several realities: content is getting shorter, where memes or distracting content are king. And people's desire to read more than 20 words at a time on social media has dropped to 10 – OK I'm being a smidge hyperbolic here, but you get the point.



I realized I had been spoiled the past few years by writing on Substack and largely getting meaningful comments from people who actually took the time to read the 6-minute article and put down a meaningful comment – even if they disagreed with me.

But on social media, perhaps 10% of people will read something that is 150 words. And most of the comments are angry rants that have little to do with the actual story itself. Instead what comes is assumption filled comments that would not exist if people only took the time to read.

People will often think that what drives this is simply the existence of social media itself. But it's not, this behavior is built and reinforced by system features that are largely seen throughout every aspect of our society: **multipolar traps**.

I've written about something quite similar with regard to technology in my piece called ["The 'Race To The Bottom' Trap: Why Companies Produce Low Quality Crap"](#) I also touched on some of these ideas in my piece ["Moloch & Our Systems of Bad Incentives"](#)

I'm writing about this today because I want people to consider the total nature of what is driving our systems, and at the same time, creating our culture.

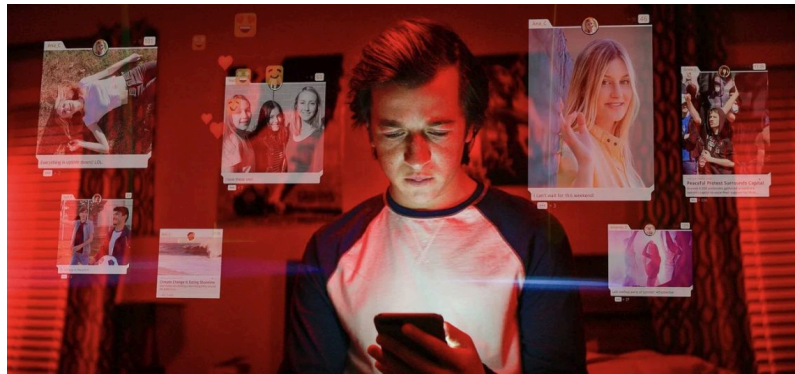
### **Thinking in Terms of Multipolar Traps**

Understanding these traps is crucial for anyone interested in creating meaningful social change, as they explain why good intentions alone often fail to solve systemic problems.

A multipolar trap occurs when multiple independent actors, each making decisions for their own survival or success, collectively create outcomes that harm everyone – including themselves – usually as they seek short term gains. The “multipolar” bit refers to the fact that there is more than one actor engaging in this behavior.

What makes these situations particularly perplexing is that people often clearly see the damage they're causing but cannot entirely stop without putting themselves at a serious disadvantage.

Consider social media platforms and content creators, who find themselves caught in an attention arms race. While everyone involved would prefer to create and promote meaningful content, the competitive nature of the attention economy forces them to use increasingly aggressive tactics to capture viewers' attention.



If any single platform or creator attempted to buck this trend, they would likely lose their audience to competitors who continue using these engagement-driving techniques. The result is an online environment that becomes increasingly optimized for engagement at the expense of quality, even though

this outcome truly serves neither the creators nor their audiences.

Speaking from my own experience here, let's say I choose to stick to my guns and ONLY post content on Facebook that is about the things I deem most important: personal transformation, consciousness, new-paradigm thinking, interesting advancements in quantum science etc. Not only that, but I spend time on long-form videos, articles and podcasts as well.

As I've seen from my testing, this content can't compete in the algorithm and so we lose a ton of eyeballs. This then affects our ability to monetize, and our ability to do this work entirely.

So I'm then faced with the question: do we move to shorter videos, political posts and memes that largely cannot explain complex ideas, that further harm social discourse, and that further reduce people's attention span, just so we can survive and pay bills like everyone else?

If I say yes, we accept that reality and try to limit damage as much as possible, trickling in important stuff as much as I

can and avoiding polarizing language and cheap tricks. If I say no, we lose and aren't part of discourse – ultimately leaving the system in the same state anyway because we're no longer there offering a different perspective.

It's an odd thing to wrestle with, but you kind of find a balance. That said, these days, our reach and influence pales in comparison to the people who don't think about things in the way I described above. Who instead do everything they can to create chaos, grab people's attention, and distract the shit out of people. Those creators take the largest pie in terms of income, leaving scraps for wiser creators not wanting to play those games. But it also means those wiser creators have a tough time growing. Further, new creators come to the plate, see “what works,” and follow suit.

### **It's Not Just Social Media**

These traps appear throughout society.

Companies who want to adopt sustainable practices without risking their market position have a hard time because if their competitor doesn't

adopt them as well. They often lose market share. While that might be doable for massive corps, many smaller ones can't afford to lose that profit and often die out.

Think of nations that get caught in military arms races. Every time someone else develops a bigger and better weapon, everyone else feels less secure, so they then develop their own. We're left with more destructive weapons and an incentive to keep investing in more weapon development. And so the process continues on and on.

These traps also incentivize conspiracy and corruption. Big Pharma and insurance companies block meaningful healthcare reform, buy media influence, create complex billing systems that prevent price transparency, lobby against bulk medication pricing, fund political campaigns of legislators who protect their interests, and create smear campaigns against people like RFK Jr to sow public distrust in people trying to point out the corruption.





In each case, individual actors are forced to make choices that collectively lead to worse outcomes for everyone because the system creates that dynamic and then our thinking is shaped by it. Then we further shape the culture and system as this model trends quality downward.

### Recapping...

When we see a company engaging in environmentally destructive practices, our first instinct might be to blame their leadership – and this is somewhat correct too. Many company leaders pollute and know it's bad to do yet do it anyway because they can afford fines and don't care because they win in the

end... when you define winning as gaining more money and power – which “success” within our system design.

From a distance, we can think “Nah, all these companies can still make a living without polluting,” and you might be right. But making a living in a system where power buys you option, influence and dominance, where people fear “If I don't dominate, I will be dominated,” you're going to have a lot of people choosing to dominate – thus choosing this dynamic.

It's both a consciousness/worldview issue and a system design issue. Both have to be addressed here.

There are also company leaders that might genuinely want to do better but are afraid to take the risk because there is literally a ton of risk with “doing the right thing” within our existing system design. Recognizing the multipolar trap at play here helps us understand why simply appealing to corporate conscience rarely creates lasting change.

This type of discussion around system design remains the largest aspect of our

work over the last 16 years that has not yet broken into the larger cultural discussion.

People are waking up to many truths, but when it comes to acknowledging the bunk nature of system design, most of the dialogue in the alternative space is shaped by the fact that conservatives have largely taken over the alt media/thinking space. Their lens shapes the cultural dialogue, and their lens wants things to stay the same.

Addressing deeper systemic design doesn't come up, and it doesn't help that the mob simply calls everyone a 'socialist' or 'communist' when they do.

Hence why we culturally experience a [crisis of imagination](#).

\*For a deeper dive into central banking as one of the roots of system design issues, [check this out](#).

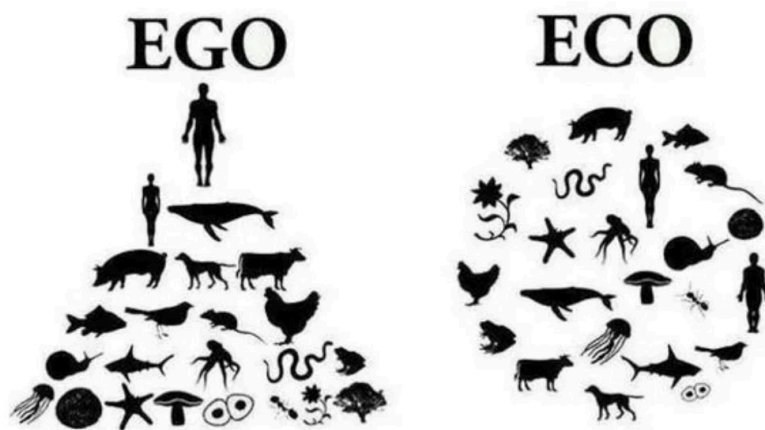
### **Solving For Multipolar Traps**

I've been thinking a lot about 'progress' lately. What is that? How do we even define it? If North Americans buying an incredible iPhone that can solve challenges in their lives also creates a

reality where millions of people on the other side of the world are enslaved to mine minerals for those phones, did we really make progress? This doesn't even include environmental and wellness damage...

I plan to write an essay soon on the topic of progress, but for now, I think it's important to recognize two things:

1. Moving beyond zero-sum games is key, as this is largely how our system operates. Simply put, a zero-sum game is where one party's gain necessitates another's loss. The opposite of this is creating win-win scenarios.
2. Our decisions make an impact far beyond what we often realize. Thinking about the total impact of our decisions, 7 generations deep for example, is important to bring into our culture.



This idea is foreign to people and often unfathomable because we've mostly only

ever known zero-sum games. How easy is it to imagine the plausibility of something that you've never really experienced firsthand? Often it is hard.

Thus, most people will always say: "Joe, everything you're saying is not possible when it comes to this level of change." To which I say, "Great, I'll speak to the people who are willing to work on this."

Before I get into some specific and practical ideas, our actions and creations are held by a culture and worldview – a consciousness if you will. That is the largest fundamental piece to how true, deep change occurs, and thus there is a fundamental shift in how we see ourselves, and each other, and truly embody that, that is required to get to a regenerative future.

Hence, change starts within.

Aside from that, one of the traps we get into (pun intended) is forgetting to think about solutions in various frames. We might see a short-term solution and think "That's dumb, doesn't solve the bigger picture." But sometimes solving something important in the short term is

exactly what's needed while we work on a longer term solution.

I often suggest looking at solutions in various frames because any deep change is going to require a long transition.

**Short Term, In System Change:** this involves working within existing structures and institutions and making immediate improvements or adjustments.

Examples: Change policies within existing government frameworks that deter multipolar traps. Try to bring people like RFK Jr into positions of power where they can point out the levels of corruption and do obvious things like removing harmful chemicals in food.

**Short Term, Out System Change:** this would be creating alternative structures or solutions outside current systems, things that can be done quickly but are separate from mainstream.

Examples: starting a neighbourhood tool library, local community currencies, or building mutual aid networks.

**Long Term, In System Changes:** here we embrace the gradual transformation of existing institutions, working to evolve them over time, but knowing that the end goal is still **Long Term, Out System Change.**

Examples: Transitioning energy infrastructure to new energy tech, reforming education systems from within so everyone would have access to better education, not just wealthy folks.

### **Long Term, Out System**

**Changes:** building entirely new systems and structures for a fundamental reimagining of how society could function. This is obviously the furthest out idea and would make many **long-term, in-system solutions obsolete.**

Examples: developing new forms of governance or stewardship, and creating regenerative economic models.

Ultimately, change has to be embraced on all levels, and different types can be worked on by different people and organizations etc. It's not up to one person or organization to figure it all out right away. The most important part is

coming to the table and conversing about and addressing our challenges on this level.

### **The Takeaway**

I hope it's clear that solving multipolar traps requires a multifaceted approach that seeks to fundamentally transform the systems creating these destructive dynamics and the consciousness that has built and reinforced them. Yes, there are elitists out there who collab and conspire to take the from the masses, and these are the systems they build and reinforce to keep playing the game. Without them, new people will follow right in behind them as they get sucked in by the existing game dynamics.

I have often believed that building cultural awareness around these dynamics is key as it helps us better define problems so we can actually solve them, vs. poorly defining them and solving for something that doesn't get to the root cause.

Systems thinking, complexity, curiosity, embracing uncertainty and being willing to challenge our own ideas are key parts



of this process as well. No, change will not happen overnight, but changing the conversation around how we discuss and define challenges helps us a lot more than blaming one political side or another, or thinking this is all about 'good' vs 'evil.'

For a deeper dive on a spirit to hold while exploring our society in this manner, [this piece I wrote is helpful](#).

I'll end off by saying, for those interested in some big picture questions to ponder:

How can we create structures that align individual incentives with collective well-being?

What coordination mechanisms might help us escape current traps?

How can we develop governance frameworks that prevent these traps from forming in the first place?