

The Five Horsemen of the Modern World

May 10 2016

Global warming, food shortages, water shortages and quality, chronic illness and obesity - these worldwide crises share striking similarities: each is getting worse, despite extensive and concerted efforts to control them. [Daniel Callahan](#) calls them the five horsemen of the modern world.

"I have not been able to find any global crises of similar magnitude in terms of death, morbidity, or projected destruction that have proved so recalcitrant to change," he writes in his new book, [The Five Horsemen of the Modern World: Climate, Food, Water, Disease, and Obesity](#), published by Columbia University Press. Callahan, a pioneer in bioethics, has done a comparative examination of the five horsemen and found insights that could lead to a way forward.

He begins by mapping the history of each of the crises. Among the threads common to all of them is that they have gotten markedly worse since the 1970s and sparked ideological splits, infighting among specialists, and conflicting public opinion.

Next, Callahan examines features that contribute to each of the horsemen. They include a growing world population- and one that is rapidly aging- and an expectation for continued economic growth that is necessary but is itself often harmful to the good of the planet and, as Callahan puts it, "the good of our individual bodies."

He ends with recommendations for addressing the crises. They involve reckoning with the most tenacious root of the problems: "the potent and

enduring idea and value of progress, that human life ought always to get better, that it has no natural stopping point and should never cease to move ahead." While the love of progress is unlikely to be abandoned, Callahan says it might be tempered by "a combination of intensified fear of environmental and biological harm, research and policy drive, and an agitated public, eager for solutions and prepared to accept some high economic and personal costs." An era in which the public accepts such limits would amount to "a new Enlightenment to supplant the Enlightenment we now live in, which goes back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries."

The involvement of business, with its money and clout, is essential. Too often, Callahan notes, it is industry that has blocked reform and then been matched in obstinacy by angry researchers. "The first step is to persuade the research, academic, and policy communities to accept what I will call the diplomatic model of relationships, typically now seen between and among nations, and to open a serious dialogue with the business community," he writes. He ends with hope, citing examples that such diplomacy has already begun with [global warming](#) but needs to spread to the other horsemen as well.

"Callahan, a pioneer in bioethics, has written a thoughtful meditation on our most recalcitrant worldly challenges, from the health of our bodies to the wellbeing of our planet. Well-written and accessible, *The Five Horsemen of the Modern World* demonstrates how the complex mix of technology, politics, and media have slowed progress and calls for a more productive partnership with sustainable businesses to chart a path forward."—Paul Sabin, Yale University, author of *The Bet*: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon and Our Gamble Over Earth's Future.

"It is hard enough to write a wise book on a single major social problem, but Daniel Callahan has written a wise book about five of them, ultimately proposing important suggestions for moving forward. The

Five Horsemen should be mandatory reading for anyone interested in climate change, food distribution, the water supply, [chronic illness](#) or obesity—in other words, all of us. This book challenges us to look at the global and local ramifications of everything we know and do."—Barron H. Lerner, New York University School of Medicine, author of *The Good Doctor: A Father, A Son and the Evolution of Medical Ethics*

Provided by The Hastings Center

Citation: The Five Horsemen of the Modern World (2016, May 10) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-05-horsemen-modern-world.html>

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