

Prologue

On a tiny planetary speck, in a vast and otherwise lifeless universe, a chance combination of chemical and geo-physical conditions allowed the evolution of creatures which increasingly relied on social organisation as their means of survival. This ‘genus’ of homo anthropoids continued to perish arbitrarily, sometimes in great numbers. Between one million and half a million years ago, one species in this genus – homo sapiens – developed social institutions to organise the community to control the natural environment for sustenance and against external threats. This social organisation has, so far, enabled homo sapiens, unlike its homo relatives, to transcend biological and environmental threats and protect its infant and physically weaker members. Yet, from time to time, these social institutions seem to over-evolve, becoming divorced from their primary functions of both binding their community’s members together and integrating with the natural environment. The excessively intensified powers and autonomous goals of these institutions drove the societies that they originally evolved to serve, into disaster or extinction. Such communities became socially ‘top-heavy’ and collapsed.

On Rapa Nui (Easter Island) in the Pacific, in the tropical woodlands of Central America and, more diffusely, in the centres of the Roman Empire, castes of warrior and priests brought their societies to economic, social or environmental collapse. To use a concept elaborated throughout this book, in these societies the dominant organisations of the power holders became ‘dis-embedded’ from the social relationships on which the way of life was founded; and also from the natural environments on which the populations depended. In the past two or three centuries another pattern of dis-integrated power and socio-institutional imbalance has been developing and expanding from its homelands on the Atlantic rim. Age-old cooperative and reciprocal relationships for meeting cultural and economic needs have been replaced by, or converted into, systems of indirect and unequal trade through commodities exchanged for money. During the last century or so, one commodity-mediating organisation has come to predominate.

This business corporation has come to resemble, in its functions and consequences, the environmentally and socially destructive powers of the

priestly/kingship castes of the failed civilisations of the past. Like them, the corporation exercises almost unassailable powers. It drives out, or absorbs alternatives. As Naomi Klein has recently warned, in her book *This Changes Everything*, corporate business – through the systems of production and consumption which it propagates and defends – threatens, this time on a planetary scale, to destroy much of the environment on which humanity and other life forms depend. By pursuing their goals and advancing their powers, corporate business institutions may succeed in precipitating the end of this galactically unique phenomenon of sentient life. Depleted and impoverished life might persist in the face of cataclysmic climatic and bio-chemical change. Or planet Earth might even return to the lifeless uniformity of the rest of the universe. Such awesome prospects are neither imminent nor inevitable. However, like the more immediate and human desecration already ensuing, these enormous threats provide compelling reasons for understanding the corporate nemesis better, and for exploring ways to challenge and displace its current dominance. It is with these implications in mind that this book was written and should be read.

