

Catastrophic Dehumanization

A formal model

Thomas Homer-Dixon
Cascade Institute

November 2024

WORKING PAPER - SUMMARY

A formal model draws on insights from conflict, critical-transition, and catastrophe theories to explain the causal mechanisms that produce sudden dehumanization in situations of extreme conflict, a phenomenon characterized by a sharp discontinuity between the psychological states of identification and non-identification with other people.

A set of discrete, plausible assumptions about the psychology of human conflict are stated as axioms, allowing them to be represented as mathematical functions. These functions conjoin to produce a bifurcated catastrophe "response surface" in a three-dimensional state space defined by the variables injustice, opportunity, and identity. The surface represents a finite set of possible psychological states and pathways of movement between these states.

Taken together, the model and surface provide a psychological theory of the nonlinear collapse of interpersonal identification. The model's internal operations and alternative parameterizations are discussed and possible avenues for testing suggested.

CITATION:

Homer-Dixon, Thomas, Catastrophic Dehumanization: A Formal Model (November 14, 2024). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5061588> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5061588>