Abstract: Human societies use complexity within their institutions and technologies to address their various problems, and they need high-quality energy to create and sustain this complexity. But now greater complexity is producing diminishing returns in wellbeing, while the energetic cost of key sources of energy is rising fast. Simultaneously, humankind’s problems are becoming vastly harder, which requires societies to deliver yet more complexity and thus consume yet more energy. Resolving this paradox is the central challenge of the 21st century.

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