

# Scenes from the Great Transition

by Paul D. Raskin

*I'll let you be in my dream if I can be in yours.*

—Bob Dylan

Mandela City, 2084—The world today, a century after George Orwell's nightmare year, stands as living refutation of the apocalyptic premonitions that once haunted dreams of the future. This dispatch from our awakened future surveys the contemporary moment, scenes in the unfolding drama we call the Great Transition.

## What Matters

The whole edifice of contemporary civilization rises on a foundation of compelling human values. The prevailing pre-transition ethos—consumerism, individualism, and anthropocentrism—has given way to another triad: quality of life, human solidarity, and ecocentrism. These values spring from a sense of, a yearning for, wholeness at all levels: self, species, and biosphere. They are manifestations in the human heart of the interdependence of the world, the defining feature of the present historical era, the Planetary Phase of Civilization.

It has become clear that enhancing the quality of people's lives, not expanding the quantity of their possessions, is the only valid goal of development. The principle of material sufficiency, now widely held, has roots in the early decades of the transition, a time of turbulence and conflict that spawned a search for more meaningful and satisfying ways of living than the work-

and-buy treadmill offered. Today, people may be as ambitious as ever, but fulfillment has displaced wealth as the primary measure of success and source of well-being.

The second pillar of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*—human solidarity—affirms a strong connection felt for strangers in distant places and descendants in a distant future. This capacious camaraderie draws on wellsprings of empathy in the human psyche, the Golden Rule that threads through the great religious traditions. By mingling the destinies of all, the Planetary Phase has stretched esprit de corps across space and time to embrace the whole human family of today and tomorrow.

Perhaps most profoundly, affirming humanity's place in the web of life, this sense of connectedness extends beyond our own species to our fellow creatures who share our planet's fragile skin. The lesson was hard won, and much has been lost, but at last our highly evolved ecological sensibility has consigned the predatory motive of the past—the domination of nature—to the dustbin of history. Indeed, people today, understanding any compromise to ecological integrity as both morally wrong and foolishly self-destructive, are mystified by past indifference to the natural world. Our relationship to Earth is guided by humility in the face of our dependence on her bounty and by reverence for the exhilarating wonder of existence.

### **One World, Many Places**

Buoyed by this enlarged sense of place, globalism has become as deep-rooted as nationalism once was, perhaps more so. After all, gazing back from space, we behold an integral blue planet,

not the imaginary boundaries of political states. Philosophers and prophets have long envisioned a ring of community encircling the entire human family. But the cosmopolitan dream of One World had to await an unsentimental partner: mutual self-interest. The emergence of an interdependent world confronting common risks aligned subjective aspirations and objective imperatives. Idealistic and pragmatic concerns—the “pull of hope” and the “push of fear”—combined to forge the global citizen.

Thus, it has become axiomatic, self-evident to the average global citizen today, that the globe is the natural political unit for managing our interdependent affairs—not only sustaining the biosphere and keeping the peace, but cultivating an organic planetary civilization. Our thriving world culture and demos, for all its tensions and disputes, is perhaps the highest achievement to date of the Great Transition. The old skeptics, who could not see beyond nationalism, were myopic; the visionaries and activists who felt the stirring of a new consciousness and polity had the perspicacity to see the potential latent in the Planetary Phase.

Still, our enthusiasm for One World has been balanced by an equal commitment to Many Places. A century ago, it was common to speak of a unitary project of “modernity,” a process of convergent development that would replicate the institutions and norms of industrial societies everywhere. Instead, the transition has demonstrated in the crucible of history the counterproposition of many oppositional thinkers that plural paths to modernity were possible. Today, modern ideals—equality, tolerance, rule of law, and universal rights—find myriad expression across our landscape of distinct places.

Thus, the fabric of planetary society is woven with hundreds of regions of astonishing diversity of character and size. Some took shape around old national boundaries or metropolitan centers; some followed the perimeters of river basins and other bioregions. Some are small and rather homogenous, while the larger ones are complex structures with sundry internal areas. The formation of regions was not without conflict, and tensions remain. However, aided by our highly effective negotiations bodies and adjudications of the world court, our regional structure has largely stabilized.

The different regions can be clustered into three broad types, often referred to as Agoria, Ecodemia, and Arcadia. The whimsical names draw on Greek roots to evoke the classical ideal of a political community—active citizens, shared purpose, and just social relations. In Athens, the *agora* served as both marketplace and center of political life; the neologism *ecodemia* combines the word roots of economy and democracy; *arcadia* was the bucolic paradise of Greek myth. Thus, commerce figures prominently in Agoria; economic democracy is a priority in Ecodemia; and local community and simple lifestyles are particularly significant in Arcadia.

Agoria's more conventional lifestyle and institutions would make it most recognizable to a visitor from the past. Ecodemia's collectivist ethos and socialized political economy depart most from classical capitalism. Arcadia's self-reliant economies and face-to-face democracy (at least in cyberspace) have antecedents in small-is-beautiful localism, long a strong current in environmental subcultures.

Some argue that these regional forms are direct descendants of the three great “isms” of the past: capitalism, socialism, and anarchism. This claim does have a degree of validity: Agoria’s free-market emphasis gives it a capitalist orientation (“Sweden Supreme” according to one recent critic), Ecodemia’s insistence on the primacy of social ownership was the foundation of socialism, and Arcadia’s stress on small-scale, local effort was the essence of the humanistic anarchist tradition.

However, such ideological labels mask as much as they reveal. Its social democratic structure notwithstanding, Agoria displays a dedication to sustainability and rights of a different order than, say, the old Sweden (a paragon of its time). Ecodemia’s commitment to democracy and environmentalism bears little resemblance to the autocratic socialist experiments of the twentieth century. Arcadia’s highly sophisticated societies are enthusiastic participants in world affairs, not the pastoral utopias of the old anarchist dreamers.

## **Governance**

Planetary decision making flows through an intricate web of local, regional, and global nodes and connections. The prime challenge in building and maintaining the governance structure lies in finding a balance between the competing imperatives of global responsibility and regional autonomy. In the early decades of transition, stale ideological dualities polarized political discourse—cosmopolitanism versus communalism, statism versus anarchism, top-down versus bottom-up. The solution, remarkably simple and germinating for decades, had been masked by

the nationalist mystifications during the decades of the Cold War, the Era of the Hegemon, and the Time of Troubles.

Today, the *principle of constrained pluralism*, our guiding political philosophy, transcends the seemingly intractable dualities of the past. This principle contains three complementary subprinciples—*irreducibility*, *subsidiarity*, and *heterogeneity*. The *irreducibility principle* sets the scope for global decision making, affirming that the adjudication of certain transregional issues—universal rights, biosphere resilience, world peace, fair use of common resources, and shared cultural and economic endeavors—is necessarily and properly retained at the global level of governance. The *subsidiarity principle* sharply limits the scope of irreducible global authority, ceding decision-making authority to the most local level feasible. The *heterogeneity principle* validates the rights of regions to meet global responsibilities in diverse ways compatible with their forms of development.

Our world constitution has enshrined these principles, and few find them objectionable. To a considerable degree the governance system achieves the three goals embodied in the slogan “As global as must be, as local as can be, as diverse as need be.” Still, with the devil in the details, the framework is implemented through an animated process of popular political contestation (almost always peaceful). In particular, agreement on which decisions should be considered irreducibly global is a work in progress, an evolving tug-of-war between advocates for a more tight-knit world state and those for a more decentralized commonwealth.

The world assembly includes representatives of regions as well as at-large members selected by popular vote in worldwide elections. At-large representation gives voice to One World politics, stimulating vibrant world parties as a counterweight to regional parochialism. Strong regional representation ensures that the Many Places are not forgotten. This balance provides safeguards against tyranny from above or below.

Regional democracy takes many forms: the representational systems typical of Agoria, the vigorous workplace nodes of political activity in Ecodemia, and the direct citizen engagement found in many Arcadian communities. People are highly engaged in the political process at all levels of the governance structure—such involvement is considered a right and duty of citizenship. The boundless bandwidth of modern cyberspace enables authentic mass participation throughout the multiscale governance structure: the quantum entanglement of our computational processes breeds popular entanglement in our political processes.

## **Economy**

We view contemporary economies as means for attaining social and environmental ends, not ends in themselves. Thus, setting global and regional goals for people and planet that define the legitimate operating space for economies comes first. Then, governments at all levels from global to local, prodded by vigilant civil-society watchdogs, must ensure that the scale and patterns of production and consumption remain within these socio-ecological boundaries.

Even in Agoria, where competitive markets are given the freest reign, they are highly fettered. Comprehensive regulatory frameworks align business and consumer behavior with nonmarket goals. Notably, large privately held corporations were long ago rechartered to make social purpose, not just profit, a fundamental bottom-line aim. Broad stakeholder participation ensures that workers and relevant community members have real influence on decision making.

Ecodemia's systems of "economic democracy" have expelled the capitalist from two key arenas of economic life. First, the conventional firm, based on private owners and hired employees, has been replaced by worker-owned enterprises, complemented by nonprofits and highly regulated small businesses. Second, private capital markets have given way to socialized investment processes. Publicly controlled regional and community investment banks, supported by participatory regulatory processes, recycle social savings and tax-generated capital funds. To receive funds from these banks, capital-seeking entrepreneurs must demonstrate that their projects, in addition to financial viability, promote larger social and environmental goals.

Despite their localist *Zeitgeist*, Arcadians prize their connections with cosmopolitan culture and world affairs, facilitated by advanced communication technology and efficient transportation systems. Some regions have become centers of innovation in such technologies as ecological agriculture, modular solar devices, and human-scale transport devices. Abuzz with artistic ferment, Arcadia is the source of more than its share of contemporary music, modern forms of folk and craft traditions, and creative digital media. Export of these products and services, along with ecotourism, supports the modest trade requirements of these relatively time-rich and slow-moving societies.



Overall, the forms of economic enterprise are much more varied than when huge corporations dominated the economic landscape. One reason for this transformation is the surge in nonprofit entities nearly everywhere as people strive for purposive and ethical work. Another is the diverse forms of privately held businesses, such as the social corporations of Agoria, the worker-owned cooperatives of Ecodemia, and the small private operations of Arcadia. A third is the explosion of the labor-intensive secondary economy, offering a breathtaking array of aesthetic goods and skilled services as well as many an outlet for creative expression. Social policies that shorten work weeks in the formal economy encourage this “peoples’ economy.”

Of course, the world economy is far more than the sum of these many parts. Global institutions play an essential role in marshaling “solidarity funds” for needy areas, developing transregional infrastructure, conducting space exploration, and promoting education and research for the common good. Moreover, world trade, while controversial, plays an important role in our interdependent economy. Except for small parties advocating extreme autarky, consensus holds that rule-governed interregional trade is a legitimate and important feature of planetary society.

World trade policy aims to bind a global culture and counter anachronistic nationalisms—when goods stop crossing borders, it has been said, bullets start. Also, trade enriches lives by providing access to locally unavailable products and, as with food imports to water-parched areas, reducing environmental pressure. In short, contemporary trade advances the larger social goals of solidarity, sustainability, and fulfillment.

Still, the debate on how to create rules that do not subvert regional prerogatives can be fierce. The tilt today is toward a circumscribed trade regime, fostering a meaningful degree of economic interdependence in a framework of regional semiautonomy. Regions exhibit great variation in their participation in world trade, some embracing the economic vitality and product diversity it offers, others erecting high barriers to imports, and most falling somewhere between open and protectionist extremes.

### **The Way We Live**

Fascinated with twentieth-century history, people are mindful of the dreadful worlds that might have been and appreciative of the opportunities they have been given. Committed to advancing the transition in their public lives, they prefer, in their personal lives, lifestyles that combine material sufficiency with qualitative fulfillment—“Rich lives, not lives of riches,” in the motto of the old movements. The pursuit of money is giving way to the cultivation of skills, relationships, communities, and the life of the mind and spirit. Indeed, those still enthralled by conspicuous consumption are considered aesthetically impoverished and spiritually backward.

Our maturing egalitarian ethos has fostered greater economic equality. Within regions, policies maintain income spreads within rather narrow bounds through fair remuneration policies supported by redistributive taxes and sharp limits on inherited wealth. In tandem, global policy has marshaled resources to close the grotesque pre-transition gap between rich and poor regions. With tighter income distributions, the material well-being of the average world citizen is far higher than at the turn of the century. The right to a basic standard of living is a universal right of

citizenship, provided through a guaranteed minimum income, a full-employment policy, or a more traditional welfare system, depending on the regional approach. Except for a few nagging pockets, absolute poverty has been eradicated.

These profound cultural changes have been made possible by the surfeit of a once scarce commodity: discretionary time. Where higher labor productivity increased output in the past, now it shrinks work weeks. Equally important to “time affluence” has been squeezing out the vast waste from pre-transition economies that increased the social labor budget with no tangible benefit. That means the end of long commutes, inefficient resource use, and product obsolescence, and shrinking such unproductive sectors as defense, finance, and litigation.

Demographers report that world population has peaked at about eight billion people. Although this is far lower than turn-of-the-century projections, many believe this figure remains too large for a small planet. Still, the moderation in human numbers is a remarkable achievement, especially considering how average life expectancy has increased to about 100 years. Several developments led to the decrease in fertility rates, chief among them the education of girls, the empowerment of women, and the near-universal access to birth control. All this was supported by the tenacious world program to reduce poverty, a *sine qua non* of the Great Transition development paradigm.

Longer lives and fewer children have led to adjustments in family structure. While transitional and nuclear families are still common in most regions and are prevalent in Agoria, alternative forms have proliferated. Collective living communities, often built around workplace collectives,

are popular in Ecodemia, and communal experiments abound in Arcadia. Diversity in living choices is part and parcel of this time of tolerance and pluralism.

Settlement patterns remain in flux, whether in urbanized Agoria or the rural precincts of Arcadia. A “new metropolitan vision” guides the redesign of neighborhoods into integrated mixed-use communities that place home, work, commerce, and leisure in proximity. This nurtures a sense of community within cities and, with sophisticated public transportation networks, radically reduces automobile dependence. One can see the day when sustainable urban development forms will replace the dysfunctional conurbations we have inherited.

The transition has achieved momentous victories in the long struggle for social justice. The emergent solidarity culture of respect and care for every person steadily eroded atavistic prejudice. The extension of the rights of citizenship to include material security and access to knowledge was key. These guarantees, by diminishing fear and ignorance, diluted the twin ingredients that throughout history have fed xenophobia and bigotry. Of course, this shift would not have happened—and would remain vulnerable to stagnation or even reversal—without the persistence and vigilance of the movements for the rights of women, indigenous peoples, and minorities of all stripes.

The great turn toward environmental sustainability is a proud chapter of the transition. The battle has been waged on many fronts: the reduction of the material consumption in households, the adoption of closed-loop industrial ecologies, the development of technologies that radically improved energy efficiency, the renewable resource revolution that brought down the curtain on

the fossil fuel age, the explosion of ecological agricultural systems, and the greening of transport systems. With far more work to do, the restoration of Earth's vitality remains a passionate enterprise of the citizens of this damaged planet.

Now, the unfinished journey of transition arcs toward a new century of challenge and opportunity. As we look ahead with hope, let us also look back with gratitude. Our lives confirm what the pivotal generations of the Great Transition could only imagine: another world was possible!