



February 2021

Searching for Solidarity

Contribution to GTI Forum [Interrogating the Anthropocene: Truth and Fallacy](#)

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In his [opening essay](#), Paul Raskin usefully expands discussion of the Anthropocene and connects the central tenets of this proposition to Great Transition theory. There is no question that he is correct when he writes, “The Anthropocene cat is out of its geological bag, prowling and insinuating itself into far-flung precincts of cultural, intellectual, and political zeitgeists.” At this point, it hardly matters what the august and insulated International Union of Geological Sciences ultimately decides.

For anyone concerned with the future, the challenge is to envision how the next stages of the Anthropocene might unfold. In prevalent conceptions of the Great Transition, solidarity is placed at the center of emergent processes of change. In short, the presumption is that the anticipated transformation will likely be out of reach in the absence of adequate social cohesion. But what could motivate this globally diffused unity of purpose? Or more prosaically, how will we get along in the Anthropocene?

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries gave rise to numerous philosophies and policy frameworks that sought in their own ways to achieve broadly similar ends. An initial list of the alternatives includes socialism, communism, capitalism, nationalism, internationalism, transnationalism, consumerism, and economic growthism. Other prominent, and arguably more benign, efforts were mobilized under the banners of trade unionism, science, public health, tourism, resource conservation, athletics, and the recently popularized Latin American notion of *buen vivir* (“good living”). On a smaller scale, one of the more successful programs to foster solidarity over the past century has been Nordic social welfarism, though it must be

acknowledged that this achievement is attributable to the galvanizing of conjoint bonds among relatively small and homogenous communities rather than large and dissimilar publics.

In recent years, and building on a deep legacy from different religious doctrines, Pope Francis has become an important voice in efforts to identify and leverage aspects of our common humanity. Writing last month on the pages of the *New York Times*, the Pontiff [observed](#) that “sometimes, when you think globally, you can be paralyzed. . . [yet there] are moments in life that can be ripe for change and conversion.” Reflecting specifically on the challenges of COVID-19, he aspires to arouse solidarity through a sense of “regard for all citizens and seeking to respond effectively to the needs of the least fortunate.” The Pope concludes his reflections by noting that “What ties us to one another is what we commonly call solidarity. Solidarity is more than acts of generosity, important as they are; it is the call to embrace the reality that we are bound by bonds of reciprocity. On this solid foundation we can build a better, different, human future.”

While in equal parts eloquent and inspiring, it strikes me that this heartfelt homily lacks a strategy for meaningful implementation. How do we proactively instill harmony in a world that seems prefigured for fragmentation and strife?

A contemporary retort is to regard climate change as the ultimate assault on the future of humanity, an existential threat from which we have no other choice but to cooperate. However, scratch the surface of well-meaning appeals to shared destiny and initiatives to curtail heat-trapping wastes are more accurately characterized as a race to secure competitive advantage by way of technological breakthroughs. Indeed, Raskin acknowledges this point when he poses the question, “[W]hat if somehow a tweak of chemistry neutralized CO₂ as a greenhouse gas?” In other words, we are in a headlong rush to discover the atmospheric equivalent of a coronavirus vaccine—a “solution” that will loosen the constrictions of the immediate crisis without the need to address its underlying causes.

So we are left, ultimately, with a conundrum, one that has persisted for the past century. Whether we call the emergent future the post-Anthropocene, the Good Anthropocene, or the Planetary Phase of civilization, how do we induce mutualism and common purpose over competition and discordance? Around what objectives should social movements be seeking to forge social

coherence? For me, Raskin's clear-eyed ruminations point to a need to envision and operationalize global solidarity in ways that do not rely, as they do today, either on instrumentally constructed arrangements for international trade or moral appeals to our better angels.

But where might we begin? Are there small-scale social innovations that could serve as useful and encouraging templates? In a [primer on sustainability](#) published last month as part of Polity's *Short Introductions* book series, I highlight several experiments, some familiar and others more obscure including community renewable energy schemes, communal kitchens, food swaps, local manufacturing, and producer-consumer cooperatives. Perhaps the most salient insight from these experiences is that we cannot just talk about solidarity. Neither can we rely on governments and other putatively benevolent but distant institutions. We need to live it as well as teach it in our schools so that there is a robust corps of avid and enthusiastic practitioners who can deliver the lessons into neighborhoods and living rooms.

About the Author



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About the Publication

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Cite as Maurie Cohen, "Searching for Solidarity," contribution to GTI Forum "Interrogating the Anthropocene: Truth and Fallacy," *Great Transition Initiative* (February 2021), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/anthropocene-cohen>.

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