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Confronting Collapse

Contribution to GTI Forum [After the Pandemic: Which Future?](#)

Gwendolyn Hallsmith

A quick survey of the [GTI scenarios](#) and the world around us will show that we slid from Conventional Worlds to Barbarization in the first three months of 2020. The threat of a Breakdown loomed amidst the economic fallout of the pandemic: over 40 million people unemployed in the US, for long food distribution lines, and homeless people put in parking lots for proper distancing. At the onset of summer, escalating violence bared the ugly teeth of Fortress World, as police across the country took violent actions against peaceful protesters and accelerationist provocateurs turned our cities into war zones.

We are in the middle of an enormous change.

Business closures, supply chain breakdowns, crumbling collateral, and vast new sovereign debt all form the winds of a perfect economic storm. Here in Vermont, the college system alone will need a bailout of \$25 million, almost equal to its annual appropriation. Multiply that by all the colleges and universities in the world, and you get one small piece of the big picture. States and cities that rely on income, sales, and meals taxes are already going broke; we can add their annual budgets to the money needed for bailouts.

Homeowners, tenants, and business owners are not paying rents, mortgages, and other debts. Student loans are not being paid back. The real estate under it all is for sale, including traditional institutions like colleges, churches, and commercial centers in downtowns. All this adds up to the conditions for a monetary meltdown like none we have ever seen.

If countries retreat from international agreements as quickly as people locked down at the threat of contagion, we could see the return of hyperinflation, deflation, and/or devaluation of major

world currencies like the dollar. As we pick up the pieces of the shattered economy, the route to the Great Transition becomes clear: we need to recapture and democratize money as a lever for resource allocation and collective power.

Lights in the Darkness

Amidst the ever-present threat of collapse, we need to find new ways to exchange goods and services with each other when money is scarce or unreliable. Time banks, for example, allow people to trade using time instead of money. Here in Central Vermont, the Onion River Exchange has been operating for over ten years. Such time banks have been flourishing all over the world.

The practice of business barter is not new: the Wir banking system in Switzerland, for instance, has been running a commercial barter currency for almost ninety years. It is easy for two contractors to trade with each other, but if a contractor wants to trade with someone who supplies agricultural amendments, Wir can help facilitate that the transaction.

During the pandemic, mutual aid networks have blossomed all over the world. People have been pooling resources, volunteering time, and helping their neighbors through the crisis. What if these networks could be the foundation for basic income and provisioning for people without a reliance on money? Digital currency platforms like those developed by the [Mutual Aid Network](#) could help us accomplish that.

Special-purpose currencies also have an essential role to play in this rethinking of money and exchange. One of the beauties of special-purpose currencies is that we can value things according to what our community thinks are important instead of what the financial markets prefer. The arts can be supported through an arts currency; ecological practices can be supported with currencies based on carbon reductions, damage remediation, water conservation, and waste cleanup. Having different kinds of money for different kinds of transactions makes a lot more sense on a finite planet than the one-size-fits-all system we have now.

Eco-Communalism

Here in Cabot, Vermont, you can see the tiny spring flowers of [Eco-Communalism](#) taking hold. Our ecovillage has weathered the storm of the pandemic largely by being far enough away from urban

areas or tourist hubs. We have ramped up our food production, doubled the size of our community garden, taken on sixty new chickens, planted mushrooms, and increased our greenhouse space. We are working hard to relocalize all aspects of our lives.

We are already simultaneously in [Breakdown, Fortress World, and Eco-Communalism](#), depending on where and how you live. My view is that a way of life more in harmony with nature is absolutely necessary for survival. The Great Transition is not a scenario; it is an imperative. If in the time of pandemic you are doing a lot less of what you thought was your “normal” life and are constrained and frustrated, you probably need to find a different way of life, if you still can. If, like people living in ecological intentional communities, you are doing a lot more of your “normal” life, or your life hasn’t changed all that much, the Great Transition is alive and well where you are. It is a choice that is possible to make. We need a lot more people to make it.

About the Author



Gwendolyn Hallsmith has over thirty years of experience working with municipal, regional, and state government in the United States and internationally. She is the author of six books on community resilience and sustainable economics. She founded Vermonters for a New Economy in 2012, and is currently working on legislation for a Vermont State Bank. She lives in an ecovillage in Cabot, Vermont, called the Headwaters Garden and Learning Center, where she and her husband write topical songs about the new economy for their small musical group called The New Economistas. She has a Master's degree in Public Policy from Brown University and studied theology at the Andover Newton Theological School.

About the Publication

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