



July 2020

## Colliding Scenarios, Uncertain Futures

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

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In the current crisis, the temptation to find potential solutions is strong, yet still leads back to questions. As one of the authors of the original [Great Transition essay](#), I find it interesting to ponder the extent to which the various [scenarios](#) have been reflected in the real-world developments of the ensuing two decades. The answer to the question “Which future are we living in?” is all of them! At least in some places and often for a limited time, the gamut of the scenarios can be recognized. Since the Reagan-Thatcher period, the neoliberal Market Forces scenario has dominated, with many examples of Fortress World developing around the world. At the global level, Policy Reform can be seen in the Paris Climate Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals. Breakdown has been confined mainly to parts of the Middle East. On the other side of the spectrum, the Great Transition variant of Eco-communalism seems to be limited to several examples of local arcadian communities in the margin of mainstream developments. Discussions of systemic alternatives, such as the New Sustainability *Paradigm* variant of the Great Transition, were manifold, but mostly in academic and activist circles with little headway into real-world politics or actual large-scale change.

In Europe, around the turn of the century, when the Great Transition scenarios were conceived and published, high hopes and great expectations abounded for the expansion of membership and the peace, wealth, and stability of the European Union. A series of painful crises challenged these hopes and expectations: the 2008 banking crisis, followed by the Euro/debt crisis, a migration crisis, and Brexit. Lastly, in the year that an unprecedented seventy-five years of European peace and freedom is celebrated, the COVID-19 pandemic threatens the European project, giving momentum to nationalist narratives and simplistic controversies about (lack of)

solidarity. Again, the EU is split between the so-called frugal North and the allegedly spendthrift South, and between the liberal West and the more authoritarian East. Each time, in the past, the EU was eventually rescued through onerous negotiations by a patchwork of compromise policies among the needs and preferences of the member states. The European Commission has often tried to address threats and crises by advancing appealing and ambitious visions of a bright future. Now as well, the Commission aims to build back better and pushes its plans for a new Green Deal with even more fortitude; however, agreement among the disparate member countries about one common goal remains elusive, and a Great Transition does not seem near.

On the other hand, as civilization drifts towards grave risk, crises do provide opportunities to open the way for shifting perspectives and aspirations. Discussions about a more sustainable, post-coronavirus “new normal” are burgeoning on talk shows and across Internet platforms, but often narrow in on positive, yet incremental changes, like working more from home, less flying, eating less beef, cycling more, or making financial rescue and support packages contingent on conditions. Such conditions can involve various degrees of requiring companies to build better reserves and more sustainable practices. These ideas are excellent, but do not address the fundamental changes in the system likely to be required. Discussions about alternative no-growth, degrowth, or postgrowth economic systems continue, with serious and promising ideas such as Kate Raworth’s [doughnut economics](#). The current democratic representative voting system, for reasons including real or perceived inefficacy and lack of fairness, has lost attractiveness to many voters. Nevertheless, alternatives, such as David van Reybrouck’s inspiring proposal for a sortition system based on selection of representatives by lot (arguing for a government not just for the people, but really by the people), hardly receive serious debate.<sup>1</sup> Experiments with such valuable proposals have started, but so far do not seem to move us past the take-off phase of a Great Transition, yet.

Just as all [six scenarios](#) conceived twenty years ago have materialized somewhere, sometime (with considerable dominance of Market Forces, and arguably, Fortress World), the best global future I can realistically imagine would also have all six scenarios represented, but with dominance shifting to a “constrained pluralism” according to a New Sustainability Paradigm.<sup>2</sup> This would not mean one common egalitarian civilization, but a patchwork of regionally different sustainability paradigms,

such as imagined in the examples of Earthland's Ecodemia, Arcadia, and Agoria in Paul Raskin's follow-up to the Great Transition essay, [Journey to Earthland](#).

I see three complementary pathways towards such a more sustainable and attractive patchwork. First, the current crisis could spiral out of control towards *Breakdown*, and a *New Sustainability Paradigm* could rise from the ashes. This is a future that nobody wants, but for which we should prepare: with new virus outbreaks, biogeophysical tipping points, and economic crises likely, peaceful global emergency preparedness beyond military "planetary security" is a vastly underestimated challenge.

A second path would be a series of incremental but increasingly transformative policy reforms that gradually build critical mass for a more fundamental Great Transition take-off, thereby leading the world and its regions towards Earthland. Many concerned policymakers, business leaders, and academics might consider this to be the most logical path, but with the current poor appetite for international collaboration and limited voter support, it is perhaps neither the most potent for progress now nor even sufficient.

A third way would be the further development, transfer, connection, and upscaling of experiments based on alternative, sustainable economic and political systems, in parallel to the mainstream. To borrow the words of former Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Christiana Figueres, I remain "stubbornly optimistic" that addressing these pathways together (global emergency management, enhanced policy reform, and transformative redesign) can lead a Great Transition to Earthland.

## Endnotes

1. David Van Reybrouck, *Against Elections: The Case for Democracy*, trans. Liz Waters (London: Random House, 2016).

2. See Paul Raskin, *Journey to Earthland: The Great Transition to Planetary Civilization* (Boston: Tellus Institute, 2016), <https://greattransition.org/publication/journey-to-earthland>, 84-85.

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## About the Author



Rob Swart is an independent consultant on climate change mitigation and adaptation. His clients have included the Austrian Climate Research Programme, the Environmental Protection Agency Ireland, and the European Commission, among others. He previously coordinated international climate research at Wageningen University and headed the European Topic Centre on Air and Climate Change of the European Environment Agency (EEA). He has been extensively involved in the work of the IPCC, as lead author for the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Assessments, as Head of the Technical Support Unit of the Mitigation Working Group III during the 3rd Assessment, and as lead author of the WGIII and Synthesis reports during the 4th Assessment.

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## About the Publication

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Cite as Rob Swart, "Colliding Scenarios, Uncertain Futures," contribution to GTI Forum "After the Pandemic: Which Future?," *Great Transition Initiative* (July 2020), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/pandemic-scenario-swart>.

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