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The Case for Optimism

Contribution to GTI Forum [Which Future Are We Living In?](#)

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Going back to [Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead](#) twenty years later, I was impressed and surprised by how much of it still seems perceptive and relevant. And I still feel, as that essay argued, that we must resist excessive pessimism about the future, even as we recognize that catastrophic futures are a real possibility.

The *GT* identified [six plausible scenarios](#) for coming decades within three broad categories. “Barbarization” scenarios envisage either the existential collapse of human societies, or the emergence of more and more grim, authoritarian oases in which armed elites defend their privileges against impoverished majorities. “Conventional World” scenarios imagine a future in which change takes the form of “incremental market and policy adjustments” that will probably be too cautious to ensure a good future. That scenario also comes in two versions: in one, market forces dominate change, while in a second, Keynesian version, governments steer market activity. Finally, the *GT* described two more hopeful scenarios. One envisaged a de-globalized world of autarkic democratic communities, while the other, the “New Sustainability Paradigm”—clearly the preferred future of the essay’s authors—imagined a world in which humans collaborate globally to manage the planetary environment sustainably.

Twenty years later, it is easy to be pessimistic. A [United Nations report](#) released early in September 2022 shows that for the first time in many decades, crucial measures from the Human Development Index (which assesses life expectancy, educational levels, and standards of living) have fallen for two years in a row, mainly as a result of the pandemic. We are also witnessing new levels of military, economic, and cultural conflicts between different world regions which, along with increasing inflation and inequality, are driving living standards

down in many parts of the world. The media heighten our fears because of the relish with which they report bad news (“if it bleeds it leads”), and because of the simple fact that our nervous systems are designed by natural selection to respond faster and more eagerly to threats than to opportunities.

Despite all this, there are powerful reasons for resisting excessive pessimism. There is a naïveté of pessimism as well as a naïveté of optimism, and pessimism is a poorer driver of creative problem-solving than optimism. Stand back and take a wider view of how we got to where we are today, and there are many reasons for optimism. Our species is exceptionally good at creative problem-solving. Indeed, we are the first species in four billion years that is so good at accumulating new information about our surroundings that we have suddenly become a dominant force for change on a planetary scale. Of course, our remarkable scientific and technological creativity can be used to build nuclear weapons and genetically engineered viruses as well as to find solutions to ecological and social challenges. But so many technologies (just think of having a tooth extracted 200 years ago!) have had profound benefits. So we should not rule out the possibility that we humans will manage to build a better global future, even if we get there after decades of global turbulence in which regions and states beat their chests like competing alpha chimpanzees.

Here are some more reasons for optimism about the near future.

Increasing global collaboration in solving global problems: There is ample evidence of an increasing, even accelerating tendency towards global collaboration and connectedness, and this is the culmination of trends dating from the very beginnings of human history. Over time, the networks within which humans share information, languages, technologies, goods, and religions have expanded from the tiny, loosely connected communities of the earliest human history, to the supra-regional links of the Silk Roads era, to the global networks that have emerged since the sixteenth century. In the last century, commercial, political, electronic, and personal ties between regions have multiplied at an unprecedented rate, creating the tendons, nerves, and muscles for some form of global collaboration. It is remarkable that today every nation on earth has signed up to the Paris Accords and to the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. It is right to treat such agreements with skepticism; nevertheless, the existence of a formal global consensus on what a good future might look like, and of institutions to manage and maintain that consensus,

would have been inconceivable a century ago.

There is a powerful analogy here with multicellular organisms. They emerged late in evolutionary history, as natural selection drove selection for cells in which more and more genes promoted collaborative behavior and intercellular communication. Despite the many pockets of friction and tribalism that are inseparable from increasing global contacts, humans are beginning to form a sort of global super-organism. As cells of this emerging planetary being, we are learning that our individual chances of surviving and flourishing depend increasingly on the survival and well-being of humanity as a whole.¹

Our accelerating technological and scientific virtuosity also arises from trends reaching back to the beginnings of our history as a species. We humans have a unique ability to share and accumulate information about our surroundings. And it is that ability that has turned us, over many millennia, into the first planet-changing species in our planet's history. Technological optimism can be overdone, but it can also be underestimated. The speed with which vaccines were developed during the pandemic is a reminder of our astonishing creativity, so it is reasonable to expect surprising and unexpected new solutions to contemporary problems such as the need for sustainable energy or new methods of carbon sequestration.

The revolutionary dynamism of capitalism: It is fashionable to say that capitalism is incompatible with a sustainable future for humanity. I disagree, mainly because capitalism is so protean. As the *Communist Manifesto* recognized, capitalism is itself a revolutionary force. All forms of capitalism assume some form of private property and the ability to make private profits, but in the twentieth century, capitalism adapted to a world in which large profits can be made not by depressing the living standards of wage earners (that was the capitalism Marx described) but by raising them to levels that most nineteenth-century workers would have found inconceivable. Today, capitalism is remaking itself again, as scholars and businesses and governments learn that that there may be huge savings and profits to be made during the transition to a more sustainable future.² So, it is perfectly realistic to imagine a transformed future without demanding the abolition of capitalism. Indeed, the twentieth century's experiments with the elimination of capitalism did not end well. (I write as a historian of Russia and the Soviet Union.) It is not unreasonable to imagine a capitalism that flourishes within the "limits to growth" of a climate change world, one

steered by governments willing to collaborate globally, acting with broad popular support, and committed to sustainable futures.

Shifting attitudes on climate change: In the mid-twentieth century, climate change was not viewed as a serious issue. Today, we are close to a tipping point at which governments, businesses, and voters throughout the world accept that climate change poses existential challenges. As we cross that tipping point, things may start to change very fast. It is not unrealistic to hope for significant, positive, and rapid policy changes on climate change and many other global challenges.

All in all, there are many grounds for optimism. Collapse remains a possibility, but our task is to avoid that scenario for the sake of future generations; and that means imagining and steering towards better future scenarios. But of course, the real future will not look like any one scenario we can imagine today. It will be a complex and contradictory mashup of many scenarios, spiced by many “unknown unknowns.” There will be dangerous twists and turns, but the astonishing transformations of the last few centuries make it realistic to hope for positive and transformative changes in the coming decades.

Endnotes

1. On intelligence and collaboration as planetary phenomena, see W. Foord Doolittle, “Could This Pandemic Usher in Evolution’s Next Major Transition?,” *Current Biology* 30, no. 15 (2020): R846–R848, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7321030/>; Adam Frank, David Grinspoon, and Sara Walker, “Intelligence as a Planetary Scale Process,” *International Journal of Astrobiology* 21 (2022): 47–61, www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/5077C784D7FAC55F96072F7A7772C5E5/S147355042100029Xa.pdf/intelligence_as_a_planetary_scale_process.pdf.
2. See, e.g., Rupert Way et al., “Empirically Grounded Technology Forecasts and the Energy Transition,” *Joule* 6 (2022): 2057–2082, [www.cell.com/joule/fulltext/S2542-4351\(22\)00410-X](http://www.cell.com/joule/fulltext/S2542-4351(22)00410-X).

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David Christian is Professor of History and Director of the Big History Institute at Macquarie University in Sydney. By training a historian of Russia and the Soviet Union, he has become interested in world history on very large scales, or “Big History,” since the 1980s. He taught at Macquarie University from 1975 to 2000, then at San Diego State University, before returning to Macquarie in 2009. He was founding president of the International Big History Association and co-founder, with Bill Gates, of the Big History Project. He is the author of *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*, among many other books and articles. He holds a PhD from Oxford University.

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