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A Militancy of Despair

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

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The prevailing view among participants in this discussion is that the [Conventional World scenario](#) (structured in the 2002 [Great Transition essay](#) to reflect the ideological struggle between left and right, but now recognizing the defeat of progressive policy reform agendas) remains hegemonic in the form of global capitalism. At the same time, however, its unsustainability has become more pronounced: not just because the concentration of capital has widened inequality and eroded social values, but also because the environmental consequences of its systemic imperative to generate overconsumption and conflict are now palpable on a worldwide/biospherical scale. In response, there is a widespread view among contributors (which I share) that we are already drifting into [Fortress World](#)—but that this is merely a prelude to [Breakdown](#).

There is no point repeating the dismal metrics that support this conclusion, but it is also striking how many nonetheless refuse to relinquish hope for a more humane outcome. Their optimism typically combines a recitation of Enlightenment values (democracy, equality, fairness, rights, etc.) with examples of [Eco-communalist](#) practices. The latter are associated with additional values of solidarity, inclusion, and sustainability, while being presented as vestigial signs that Barbarization might yet succumb to a better alternative.

The disjunction between the pessimistic, evidence-based analysis of where we are now and the normative-imaginative, anecdotal basis for enduring hope-against-the-odds, is striking. Current arguments are reminiscent of debates in the 1970s, following the publication of *Limits to Growth* (1972) and the rise of a counterculture that spawned influential New Social Movements. Deep Ecologists then formulated many of the ideals now associated with Eco-communalism. New Left thinkers like Herbert Marcuse championed such avowedly utopian values: while on the one hand

acknowledging their roots in older forms of Utopian Socialism expounded by critics of industrial capitalism like William Morris, he insisted that benign values remain merely utopian unless forces capable of realizing them are identified.

My reasons for recalling this link are threefold. First, inasmuch as the Eco-communalist vision is judged prefigurative of a [New Paradigm](#) supporting a Great Transition, it is important to recognize that it is not really new but rooted in nineteenth-century views: views that were already criticized as nostalgic, romantic, impracticable, and backward-looking. Like those of the Enlightenment, the ideas that inform it were forged in relation to problems of modernization and modernity. A genuinely new paradigm for the Anthropocene surely needs novel ideas appropriate for a post-humanist era and will require us to be brave in asking hard questions about everything previously taken for granted. New ontologies that decenter the human as a basis for exploring myriad human-nonhuman relationships are promising here, but we should probably revisit modernity's idea of History as a continuous unfolding of progress, too, acknowledging that other once-great civilizations succumbed to periods of barbarism.

Second, even in comparison with fifty years ago, it is clear that the concentration of power and concomitant evisceration of opposing forces condemn many of the values being mooted today to remaining merely utopian. One gaping hole in the current scenarios is a comprehensive analysis of power relations, which are not adequately captured by references to global elites and not sufficient for identifying oppositions and their strategies.

Third, it is important not to evade the fact that the end of the modern age, with its material foundation in fossil-based energy, summons a transformation that is significantly more radical than any change envisaged previously. Given that the environmental context for action in the twenty-first century has suffered a possibly irreversible shift into a state that poses an existential threat to life itself, it is no longer enough to trade on older ways of ways of thinking that evolved during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If the Earth's passage from the relatively stable climatic conditions of the Holocene into the chaos of the Anthropocene is being accompanied by an equivalent process of socio-political Barbarization, then the changes needed to achieve substantial, sustainable improvements are of an utterly different magnitude to anything imagined for previous transitions.

Fantasies about turning the clock back to a kinder, smaller, more rural world are simply not available in the aftermath of industrialization and its consequences, or with 8 billion (and rising) needy bodies. History, moreover, suggests that when conditions fall apart and people find themselves living with chronic uncertainty, their desperation is more likely to benefit neofascist regimes offering strong leadership and easy (usually nationalist) solutions. The spread of social media and of conspiracy theories since 2002 only adds a new layer of improbability to hopes for some spontaneous surge of human solidarity.

If it is to be contested, it would be helpful to have more details about what Barbarization entails. In some examples, it seems to involve Western nations turning themselves into fortresses against migrants from the Global South while in others, Fortress World suggests smaller enclaves in which wealthy elites strive to insulate themselves from everyone else (these are presumably as likely to occur in, say, India as in Europe). These models are actually quite different, but in either case if Breakdown is indeed the destiny of Fortress World—since no insulation can endure—it is surely important to understand what we are up against.

Basically, we need to understand how bad the situation is. Is Barbarization a gradual process of ongoing, multi-faceted deterioration, and if so, how quickly and definitively is it moving? If it is already present, then how different might it become from now on? Can it, for example, remain a relatively familiar social formation, populated by global capitalism, racism, inequality, brutalization and so on, which merely get worse over time; or is it already an unprecedented and more radically other formation marked by more significant social disintegration, anarchy, environmental chaos, chronic insecurity, and war? On the other hand, is Barbarization also just a transitional phase on the way to an end state of full-blown Barbarism and total Systems Collapse? If so, just what might this involve for ordinary people? Clarifying such issues is important not least for mobilizing opposition. I would wager that, at this stage, people are more likely to be galvanized by an uncompromising appreciation of just what imminent collapse means for the fabric of their everyday lives than by abstract hopes of a utopian alternative.

There are some additional, practical reasons for doubting the viability of Eco-communalism as a possible escape route. For one thing, it seems to rely on a similar, and equally unfeasible, geography of insulated enclaves to Fortress World. Like the privileged fortresses of the wealthy, however, such

settlements are equally vulnerable to global climate effects like floods, wildfires, and droughts. Land grabs and food thefts are further risks during Barbarization. Another reason for skepticism is the difficulty of scaling up the kind of examples described, either to prevent Breakdown or to provide an alternative lifestyle thereafter (at least unless much of the world's population has been wiped out, future biotechnologies have been unimaginably successful and survival just means satisfying basic needs).

To conclude, I have explained why I have significant doubts about current eco-communalist practices, no matter how beguiling, as possible signs of a Great Transition. More generally, I question the value of appending ungrounded hope to otherwise pessimistic analyses. I'd therefore like to finish by suggesting that given where we are in 2022, it may now be more helpful to advocate not a Militancy of Hope, but a Militancy of Despair, in which starting with a worst-case scenario—a ground zero—may be more efficacious in provoking ordinary people to what Herbert Marcuse would have called The Great Refusal.

About the Author



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