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Rebuilding the World from Within

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

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When evaluating which [scenarios](#) among the six in the 2002 [Great Transition essay](#) have become most salient in the two decades since, there appears to be broad consensus that, in the (possibly apocryphal) words of Chinese premier Zhou Enlai when asked about the impact of the French Revolution, “it’s too early to tell.”

I echo that consensus with a slight tweak. It is my contention that the Conventional Worlds scenarios of [Market Forces](#) and [Policy Reform](#) are no longer truly at play, if indeed they ever were. It is time we let go of them across our broad movements for change.

Despite post-Cold War triumphalism claiming the dominance of capitalist liberal democracy, that system underpinning the Conventional Worlds scenarios never reflected a status quo in the Majority World. Indeed, market forces have never truly been about the “free” market, but about domination. The same case can be made about liberal democratic systems enabling a certain amount of democracy within continuing systems of coercion. In both cases, the underlying domination and coercion are becoming more blatant as breakdown approaches, with the crisis of legitimacy and confidence in economic and political systems seeing power-holders resort to ever greater force to maintain control.

In my country of Australia, as just one example, we are seeing governments criminalize protest, intervene in markets to support their favored fossil fuel technologies, imprison refugees in offshore detention, racially profile and target BIPOC communities for more brutal policing, bulldoze community gardens, require mutual aid projects to secure liability insurance, cut taxes for the wealthy while making welfare ever more punitive, and hand ever more public space

to private interests to profit from. The relaxed and comfortable Land Down Under is increasingly looking like [Fortress World](#), as faith in markets and politics-as-usual crashes through the floor.

Meanwhile, communities around the country are getting on with the hard yet joyful work of living into being the world we want to live in. Massive fires and floods, not to mention the pandemic, triggered bigger than ever mutual aid projects, with neighborhoods mobilizing to support each other when governments went missing in action. Community renewable energy cooperatives and micro-grids are being established from one end of the country to the other. Indigenous communities are setting up local safety networks to get a step ahead of violent policing. Co-housing initiatives are appearing as a way to manage the utterly out-of-control cost of housing. And community independents and grassroots Greens are winning seats in parliaments by bypassing the media and going door-to-door to build support.

The choice we face now is between Barbarization and the Great Transition.

The problem is, though, that so many of the individuals and organizations who might, could, or should be working towards a Great Transition are still imagining that the Conventional Worlds path is the only real option, vainly pretending it still exists, deriding those of us working towards transformation as unrealistic, impractical dreamers. This is a central part of the reason why those of us seeking transformation are not making sufficient headway: we have failed to convince our allies that it is the only realistic path. Indeed, many of us still find it hard to grapple with letting go of Conventional Worlds ourselves.

Looking back at Antonio Gramsci's famous statement about the old world dying and the new struggling to be born, it is time we acknowledged that we are now in the interregnum.

If that is the case, what does it tell us about what our path from here should be?

My contention is that our task is not simply to build and cultivate the [Eco-communalist](#) and [New Paradigm](#) worlds and hope that they can take over, but to actively dismantle the world as it is now. We should challenge not only the Fortress World alternative, but also the Market Forces and Policy Reform alternatives as problematic, as magical thinking, relying on the idea that the systems which created the mess we are in can get us out of them. We need to use our activities as we

build the better world to withdraw remaining consent from the existing systems, to protest them and expose the wrongs they cause, to actively and practically demonstrate that our new models will keep us safer than the state will, will make us more prosperous than the market will, and will create joy and meaning in our lives. Only by both letting go of and dismantling the old world can we enable the new to be born.

In closing, the 2002 essay makes the claim that the path to Eco-communalism necessarily leads through barbarism. We must challenge that idea. It is certainly the case that, in order to cultivate a new world, we need the old world to break down, but there is an active question about what form that breakdown could take. We are taught to believe that the end of the state means Mad Max, and the end of the market means starvation and privation. But we have the capacity to influence what the breakdown looks like as much as we have the capacity to help determine what comes after. Indeed, it is the same process.¹

Endnotes

1. These ideas are set out in more detail in my book, *Living Democracy: An Ecological Manifesto for the End of the World as We Know It* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2022).

About the Author



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