



November 2022

Patchwork World Descending

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

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When Paul Raskin and his co-authors introduced the [Great Transition scenario framework](#) two decades ago, they postulated a Planetary Phase of Civilization during which a global social-ecological system was to emerge, anticipating the unfolding Anthropocene with its polycrisis.

The [six scenarios](#) in the model differ profoundly in several respects. The two Conventional Worlds scenarios represent transient stages in a dynamic transition process. Their dependence on unsustainable processes doomed them to falter, as is being confirmed now. The remaining four scenarios can be conceived as sustainable end states, albeit with different extents of human security; however, they could also turn out to be fleeting transitional stages. Their sequence and durations in the overall transition process remain open.

The scenarios are archetypes (categories), blueprints that can combine globally into conglomerate pictures that vary over time and space in their composition. Diverse combinations of scenarios and variable intensities are conceivable, depending on local contingencies of culture, geography, climate, and ecology—as is indeed exemplified in many regions around the world today. Thus, all six scenarios are still salient for the time being. But the model now integrates those multidimensional possibilities of variation and combination. With the faltering of Conventional Worlds, the question arises which of the remaining four might be developing some kind of dominance or greater likelihood for the future.

In contrast to Paul Raskin's [introductory assessment](#), I regard the 2022 status quo as nowhere near the “worst of times.” It still entails a host of possibilities, albeit diminishing. The Great Unravelling, postulated as a precondition for any kind of Great Transition or Barbarization, is only

just beginning. While many of the uncertainties of 2002 remain, we can identify several trends that allow some guarded predictions.¹

Firstly, we observe a general trend towards **less sustainability**. The increases in per capita consumption, in economic inequity, and in population sizes are outpacing purported “green” solutions. Accelerating ecological deterioration, climate change, and other manifestations of pollution are contributing to the fragility of economic systems and social orders. This trend is summarized as the Anthropocene polycrisis, or “Human Predicament.”²

The second salient trend marks a **decrease in collective agency**—meaning the likelihood that the first trend will be somehow halted or reversed through collaborative international initiatives, to pave the way towards a Great Transition. This trend is evident in the political impotence and the failing of governments and states, in the preference for laissez-faire over reform, in the continuing neglect of scientific warnings, and in the rejection of ecological exigencies as reasons for modifying our public policies and individual conduct en masse. The UN continues to pursue ambivalent, non-binding development goals that are largely unsustainable. The decline of multilateralism in international relations has eroded human security in most regions.³

The patterns of thinking and behaving that underlie those trends show no sign of reconciliation with the mounting opposition from people who perceive the urgency of the polycrisis and who call for decisive action—on the contrary. Even outside the US, many societies seem more divided, opinions more polarized, positions more entrenched, and governments less decisive. Calls for reform are met with vociferous opposition based on denial, ignorance, prejudice, and fundamentalist inertia. This growing polarization jeopardizes what achievements may still be possible. On the one hand, people on all sides are finding it more challenging to “prepare to be offended” by the cultural Other; on the other, pervasive moral relativism perpetuates shallow political correctness.⁴ Within the camps of conservatives, neoliberals, environmentalists, and humanitarians, disunity and fragmentation reign. I propose that the third significant trend that reveals something about future scenarios is one of **social and political fragmentation**.

Fragmentation is driven by a general trend towards divergence and regional independence. The trend often manifests in affirmation of local political and cultural rights, though seldom opposing

economic globalization. At a time when solidarity and collaboration has become more important than at any previous time in history, the world harbors more sovereign countries than ever before, more religious hatred, more focus on differences than commonalities. The idea of human rights as a unifying ethical concept for all of humanity is increasingly questioned and modified according to specific cultural preferences, as in the oppression of women. The global anarchical system allows any country to opt out of human rights, on grounds of cultural exceptionalism and religious “freedom.” The new young generation has not turned out more secular and inclusive, as many advocates of modernity had hoped; instead, many subscribe to religious dogma or political fanaticism, providing opportunities for demagogues and false prophets.

The fact that the world is gravitating towards a patchwork of diverse cultural environments and social orders is significant. It renders multiple collapse events highly likely, triggering social tipping points and leading to global de-growth. It also paves the way for a more culturally heterogeneous and politically fragmented world described in [Eco-communalism](#) and [Fortress World](#). In contrast, possible “structures of collective coordination,” under which movements for reform could crystallize and expand their territory, appear hampered in their infancy by massive public relations campaigns from capitalist hegemons, such as the fossil fuel industry. Widespread and unwitting support for the status quo comes from the masses of the unconvinced, uninformed, and uneducated.

Local communities remain one of the only sectors to be relatively immune from the influence of hegemons, exemplified by the world’s growing number of successful ecovillages.⁵ The growth of the Global Ecovillage Network indicates not only that Eco-communalism can develop below the radar of globalized capital but also that it already thrives in the world of 2022, reviving ideals such as repurposing and repairing. Its multidimensional resilience, self-sufficiency, multiculturally inclusive ethic, and global coherence enable it to contribute to a major scenario.

Parallel to the decrease in agency, their environment forces people’s decisions at all levels: pollution, overpopulation and squalor, new and old diseases, floods and droughts, shortages, and famine. The days of the megalopolis with footprints the size of entire countries are coming to a close. Their remnants will morph into smaller Fortresses, supplied from what portions of the surrounding bioregion they can retain under their control. Elites are withdrawing into cleverly

marketed refugia that promise them security from the collapse.⁶

The archetype of Great Transitions differs from Barbarization in its greater extent of equitable human security and collective agency. Current evidence suggests a decrease in both, which tips the balance towards Barbarization. Furthermore, the trend towards fragmentation shifts the focus away from larger Fortress World conglomerates to regions and communities as potential centres of resilience. Amidst insecurity, displacement, global anarchy, and harsh physical conditions, it will be up to communities to establish islands of Eco-communalism to stave off the [Breakdown](#) outside of Fortress World islands.

In all likelihood, the resulting mixed scenario will consist of some minor Fortresses supported by their surrounding footprint territories. Beyond those, a patchwork of variously secure or insecure local fiefdoms and communities will reflect the spectrum from Breakdown to Eco-communalism. The anarchic context will feed frequent violent conflict, mitigated mainly by a universal scarcity of resources.

Many official evaluations apply positive tinges and upbeat tones, to the point of skewing their findings. Such good intentions aside, has the time not come to face Gaia's judgment as the caring, sapient species we like to portray ourselves as?

Endnotes

1. Trends and predictions through the lens of educational reform are given in Alexander Lautensach, *Survival How? Education, Crisis, Diachronicity and the Transition to a Sustainable Future* (Paderborn, Germany: Schoeningh-Brill Publishers, 2020).
2. The Human Predicament is outlined in Nate Hagens, "Where are We Going? The 40 Shades of Grey," *The MAHB Blog*, May 18, 2018, <https://mahb.stanford.edu/blog/where-are-we-going/>.
3. Human security is often conceptualized as the four pillars of socio-political, economic, environmental, and health-related security. For a didactic overview, see Alexander Lautensach and Sabina Lautensach, eds., *Human Security in World Affairs: Problems and Opportunities, 2nd edition* (Prince George, Canada: UNBC, 2020), <https://opentextbc.ca/humansecurity/>.
4. Coping with personal offense can determine the cultural safety of individuals. Alexander Lautensach and Sabina Lautensach, "Prepare to be Offended Everywhere: How Cultural Safety In Public Places Can Prevent Violent Attacks," *International Journal of Sustainable Future for Human Security (J-Sustain)* 3, no. 1 (2015): 56–62, http://www.j-sustain.com/files/pub/file/Vol%202015/Vol%203%20No%201/J-Sustain_Vol3_No1_5662_SS-019-01152.pdf.
5. The Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) provides a network of communication, mutual learning, and political agency for the world's community of ecovillages (approximately 10,000 to date, very few of which cater to elites), balancing its diversity of cultures and political priorities: <https://ecovillage.org>. The potential political power of cities was explained by Benjamin Barber, *If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities* (Princeton, NJ: Yale University Press, 2013).
6. Such refugia extend on the concept of the gated community but largely ignore the principles of ecological self-sufficiency in favour of extreme affluence: Douglas Rushkoff, "The Super-Rich 'Preppers' Planning to Save Themselves from the Apocalypse," *The Guardian*, September 4, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2022/sep/04/super-rich-prepper-bunkers-apocalypse-survival-richest-rushkoff>.

About the Author



Alexander Lautensach is an Associate Professor at the School of Education at the University of Northern British Columbia. His current research focuses on human ecology, cross-cultural education, and environmental ethics. He is the author of *Environmental Ethics for the Future: Rethinking Education to Achieve Sustainability and Survival How?: Education, Crisis, Diachronicity and the Transition to a Sustainable Future*, as well as associate editor of the *Journal of Human Security*. He holds a PhD from the University of Otago.

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Cite as Alexander Lautensach, "Patchwork World Descending," contribution to GTI Forum "Which Future Are We Living In?," *Great Transition Initiative* (November 2022), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/which-future-lautensach>.

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