



Which Future Are We Living In?

GTI Forum
October 2022



Twenty years ago, the essay *Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead* imagined alternative scenarios for the twenty-first century. Now, we stand partway into that unknown future, witnesses to the actual path of history (so far). Where are we? Where are we headed?

Copyright © 2022 by the Great Transition Initiative

A project of the [Tellus institute](#), the [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.

Opening Essay

Which Future Are We Living In? by Paul Raskin	1
--	---

Panel 1: Facing Dark Times

The Coming Struggle by Tariq Banuri	11
A Militancy of Despair by Diana Coole	14
Navigating a Fortress World by Richard Falk	18
Trending Troubles by Gilberto Gallopín	22
The Closing Fortress Gates by Gwendolyn Hallsmith	27
High-Tech and High-Risk by Al Hammond	29
Preparing for Resistance by Yogi Hendlin	31
Patchwork World Descending by Alexander Lautensach	34
Where Is the Mass Movement? by Valentine G. Moghadam	39
War and Decline by Radmila Nakarada	41
The Crisis of Fortress Capitalism by William I. Robinson	44
The Era of Rentier Capitalism by Guy Standing	48

Panel 2: Highlighting Bright Spots

Movements Show the Way by Victoria Brittain	52
Embracing the Planetary Flow by Susan Butler	55
The Case for Optimism by David Christian	59
Three Sources of Hope by Guy Dauncey	64
The Practical Idealism of Ecovillages by Frank Fischer	68
Rebuilding the World from Within by Tim Hollo	71
A Flowering of Radical Change by Ashish Kothari	74
Seeds of Eco-communalism by Anitra Nelson	78
From Vicious to Virtuous Cycles by Tom Oliver	81
Short-Term Action for Long-Term Change by Gus Speth	84
Beyond Barbarization by Martha Van Der Bly	86
Weaving Diverse Strategies by Selvi Adaikkalam Zabihi	91



Which Future Are We Living In?

Paul Raskin

Two tumultuous decades have passed since the publication of [*Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead*](#) (*GT*), the essay that prompted the formation of the Great Transition Initiative (GTI). Although the ambient pessimism of 2022 darkens the twentieth anniversary of a treatise that harbored hope for the future, it is also good reason to reflect on the durability of its message. The milestone inspires the theme of our September discussion: **Which Future Are We Living In?**

From the vantage point of 2002, *GT* envisioned contrasting scenarios for the twenty-first century. Now, standing partway into that unknown future, we are witnesses to how lived history collapsed all the possibilities into a single path—so far. The moment is propitious for locating where we are and where we are headed—and for recalibrating our conceptual framework and action agenda.

Rereading *Great Transition*

To some extent, *GT* shows its age: the expiration date has passed on certain details, and some formulations are a bit long in the tooth. Still, time's passing has only bolstered the essay's core premise. A world-historic shift is underway from the Modern Era to, in *GT*'s coinage, the Planetary Phase of Civilization. From modernity's centuries of transformation and expansion emerged something new under the sun: a global social-ecological system.

As a corollary, this perspective of an epochal shift now in progress sees the polycrisis proliferating and intensifying around us—climate change, biological extinction, economic instability and inequality, geo-conflict, pandemic, and so on—as the death throes of the fading era. Further, the contradiction at the heart of the contemporary predicament—the Modern Era, compelled to

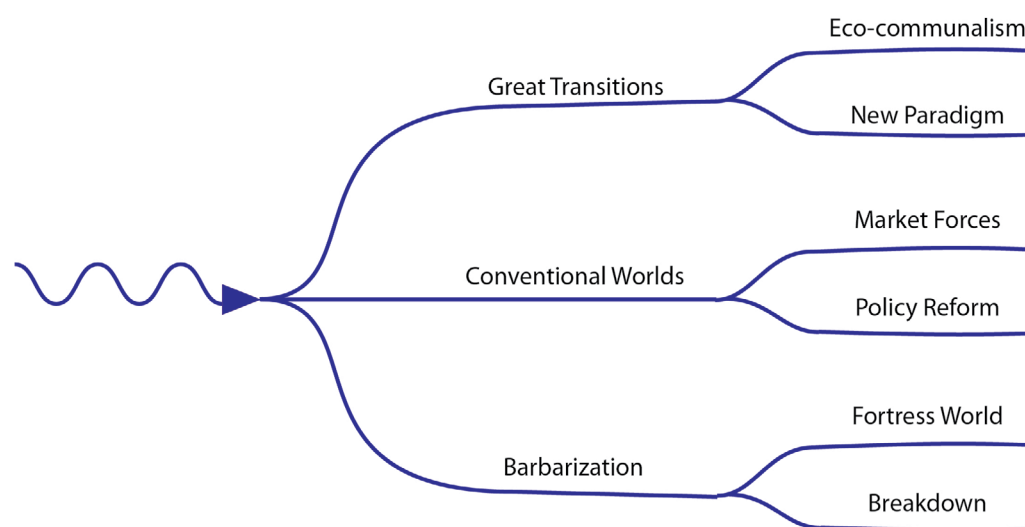
beget the Planetary Phase, cannot govern it—is exposed. A political economy rooted in globalized capitalism and a state-centric order is ill-adapted for managing the interdependencies and instabilities it generates, as illustrated by feeble official responses to mounting perils.

With outdated institutions out of sync with novel challenges, history muddles toward dangerous thresholds of discontinuity. In this time of uncertainty and apprehension, public confidence in conventional authority erodes. The loosening grip of prevailing norms gives way to contrasting oppositional cultures. The noxious eruption of chauvinism and demagoguery underscores the real danger (though not certainty) of a barbarized future.

At the same time, the twenty-first-century condition nurtures an ethic of cooperation and solidarity that can facilitate a transition to a just and ecologically sound future. All denizens of Earth have become a single community of fate with shared risks and opportunities. This objective circumstance urges forms of organization and consciousness resonant with the emerging imperatives of one world yet does not guarantee that they will prevail.

We are on a perilous journey from a moribund past to...where? Although we cannot predict the itinerary or destination, we can imagine different directions. *GT* organized the possibilities into three kinds of scenarios: structural continuity (**Conventional Worlds**), regressive devolution (**Barbarization**), and progressive transformation (**Great Transitions**). Then, variations were introduced within each of these archetypes to highlight key distinctions. Each envisions a unique form of civilization that might take shape deeper into the twenty-first century. Of course, endless variations on variations can be spun, but *GT* settled on a manageable set of six shown in Figure 1.¹ We peer into these futures, not to predict the unpredictable, but as prostheses for the visionary imagination and guides for near-term action. What critical uncertainties lie ahead? What long-range visions are plausible? How must we act to impede undesirable trajectories? What social actors might emerge to augment desirable trajectories?

Figure 1
Scenario Structure



In pondering these questions, *GT* concluded that all variations of Conventional Worlds were highly problematic. The [Market Forces](#) faith in the adequacy of self-correcting markets and human ingenuity for navigating the planetary hazards we face is a neoliberal fantasy for true believers and beneficiaries. Reality will gradually falsify the myth and strengthen the hand of centrist advocates for government-driven reform policies. But will their good intentions and ambitious rhetoric be enough? In a [Policy Reform](#) context, with capitalism, consumerism, and the state-based order sacrosanct, where would the political will come from to spur the vast coordinated action needed?

As Conventional Worlds falter, political and cultural space opens for precursors to Barbarization and Great Transitions. Much depends on the types of collective human agency that emerge. The sociological seeds of Barbarization have dismal antecedents in a long history of tyranny, tribalism, and jingoism. By contrast, the key social actor for a Great Transition—a unified movement for a just, democratic, and ecological world—would be unprecedented, a unique creature of the Planetary Phase. If this movement for a civilized future fails to consolidate at pace and scale, the forces of reaction could prevail, bringing an authoritarian [Fortress World](#), or failing that, crash the whole edifice of modernity in a spasm of [Breakdown](#).

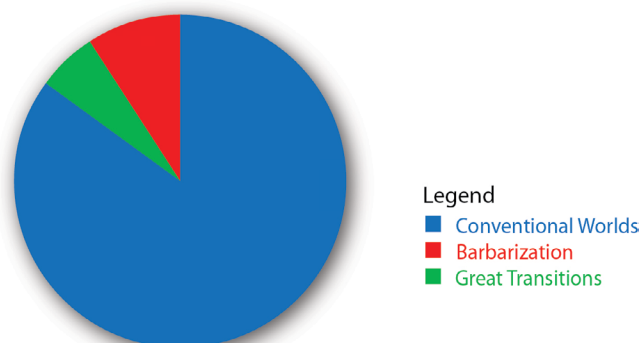
2002: Where Were We?

In 2002, the passage from the Modern Era to the Planetary Phase was well underway. Twentieth-century transnational precursors—world wars, global depression, United Nations, Cold War, nuclear threat—heralded the macro-shift, which took off in earnest after 1980. Strands of global connectivity—economic globalization, digital technology, ecological destabilization, far-flung cultural influence—multiplied, stretched, and strengthened. The shift unsettled psyches and incubated a dizzying array of worldviews and ideologies.

In short, the world of 2002 was a complex, dynamic, and unstable hive of competing tendencies. *GT* described it as in a mixed state comprising all six scenarios.² With neoliberal turbo-capitalism still at its zenith, **Market Forces** dominated almost everywhere, while in the background, the hum of **Policy Reform** could be detected in UN initiatives and civil society activism. Portents of **Fortress World** were palpable in resurgent tribalism and authoritarianism, while harbingers of **Breakdown** could be found in failed states, anarchic geopolitics, and runaway climate change. Nascent antecedents of a Great Transition stirred in new social movements and a rising consciousness reflecting both the cosmopolitan ethos of a [New Paradigm](#) and the localist emphasis of [Eco-communalism](#).

With a crude view of the whole, the world appeared as a mosaic patchwork of all the scenarios. The conventional development paradigm was dominant almost everywhere, if not hegemonic, with the composition of tendencies varying across places. The mottled state of the world in 2002 is represented impressionistically in Figure 2.

Figure 2
The World in 2002



2022: Where Are We?

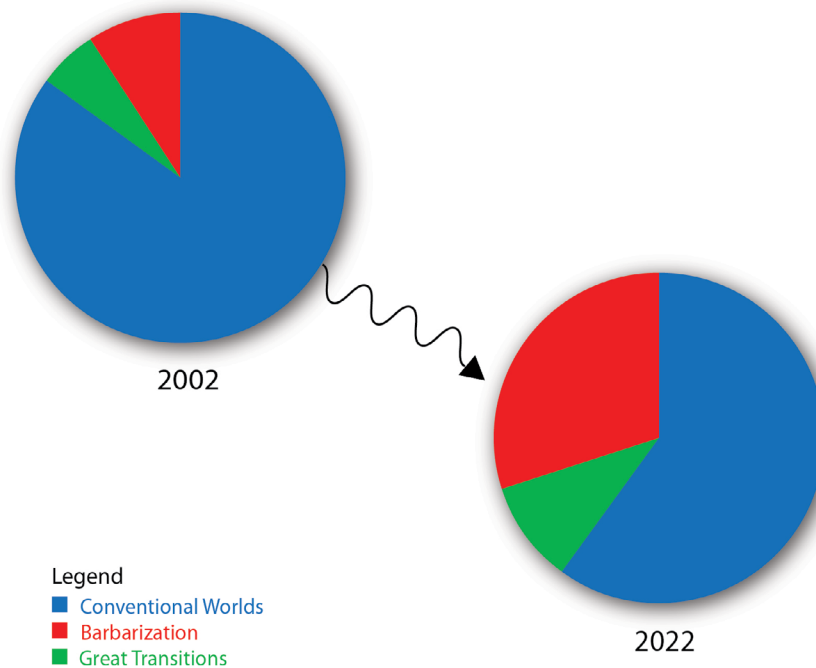
It is certainly not the best of times; in many ways, it is the worst of times. Surely, the dismal developments of the recent past have extinguished any remaining optimistic twinkles in the eyes of those paying attention. Still, near-term descent does not negate the long-term possibility (not probability!) of a better world fashioned through visionary struggle. That kind of action, based on militant hope, is the better friend of change than passive optimism.

In fact, all the scenarios depicted in *GT*—the good, the bad, and the ugly—began with a downward historical spiral rife with conflict and disruption. Indeed, the narratives envisioned a convulsive “systemic crisis” for this period even direr than what has actually transpired to this point. The Great Unravelling that is the *sine qua non* for a Great Transition still gathers. Our long-term global prospects are not diminished by *what has happened*. The grave concern is *what has not happened*, as I explain below.

The story of the past twenty years, told with an upbeat bias, would foreground advances in digital and medical technology, expansion of rights to excluded communities, surging renewable energy, and poverty reduction in China and other growing economies. But a balanced account would spotlight, as well, the brutal wars, financial meltdown, massive displacement, runaway ecocide, climate crisis, soaring inequality, revived nuclear threats, devastating pandemic, demagogic politics, reactionary movements, and the list goes on.

The comforting notion of “business-as-usual,” always an illusion, seems a quaint relic from a naïve past. The force fields of historical change that were at play in the complex world of 2002 have evolved and the social-ecological dynamics driving change have clarified. While today’s world remains a complex *mélange* of competing forces, their composition has shifted. Figure 3 suggests which scenarios have waxed and which have waned.

Figure 3
Changing World 2002 - 2022



Market Forces limps on as the dominant mode of development, even as cacophonous wake-up calls—resurgent nationalism, political-economic instability, the specter of ecocide—have interrupted the pipedream of frictionless transnational markets. The swirling chaos vitiates faith in unfettered capitalism and neoliberal nostrums. On cue, corporate globalists and political centrists, concerned about the survival of the system, have embraced a reform agenda. This Davos crowd of technocrats and latter-day social democrats, together with burgeoning civil society activists, have strengthened **Policy Reform**. Localities have been primary arenas for corrective action, and international negotiations have yielded significant, albeit largely rhetorical, successes, such as the UN sustainable development goals and climate agreements. Although such incremental reforms demand our support as an ethical and strategic imperative, they will remain an anodyne prescription for systemic disease so long as entrenched interests and behaviors quench real progress.

In the wake of fading Market Forces delusions and floundering **Policy Reform** corrections, a zeitgeist of fear and anger has churned. The alienated and disoriented become vulnerable to the cynical manipulations and false answers of demagogues, fascists, and political cultists as Conventional Worlds cedes space to its evil cousin Barbarization. **Fortress World** despots,

charlatans, and authoritarians feed off the chaos. They may prevail and, if they are unable to fashion a coordinated global police state, make **Breakdown** ultimately an ever more plausible scenario.

What of Great Transition? The great uncertainty of 2002 was whether a progressive force would consolidate to supersede reform and neutralize barbarization. The planetary predicament could be expected to spur a unified movement, but the fragmented oppositional landscape and legacy of mistrust had to be overcome. What landscape do we stand in today?

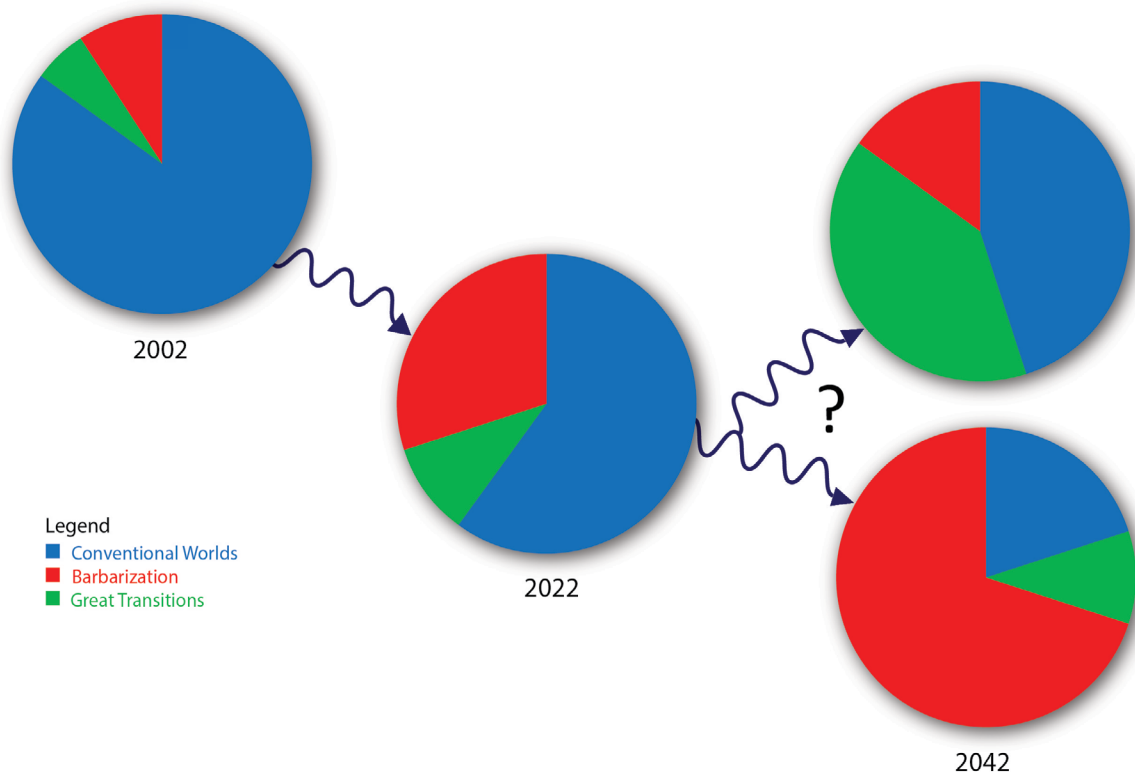
Over the decades, the preconditions for a systemic movement have evolved. We see it in the uptick of civil society campaigns across the spectrum of justice, peace, labor, and environmental issues. We see the millions in the streets under the banner “system change not climate change.” We see it in youth culture growing attuned to the need for a progressive political shift. We see it in expanding scientific knowledge on the fragile biosphere in what has come to be called “the Anthroposphere.” We see it when engaged academics and social visionaries critique the reigning system and posit alternatives. We see it in the turn toward post-consumerist lifestyles, cooperative economies, and indigenous ways and worldviews. We see it in the visionary search in the Global South for a better model of civilization.

We see all this, but not yet the critical global movement we need. Because this has not happened, the years have not been kind to a Great Transition, as Figure 3 suggests. The critical actor missing from the 2002 stage—a genuine global movement for system transformation—has yet to make its appearance. That movement “would be systemic, connecting across issues, themes and regions; it would promote a positive vision of global development; and it would build an organizational framework for common action, not only as protest but also as affirmation of the alternative vision.”³

Twenty years on, the uncertainties of 2002 remain. How do we foster a politics of trust that bridges divisive polarities: unity-pluralism, identity-solidarity, global-local, top-down-bottom-up? What structures of collective coordination can catalyze a diverse yet unified movement? Who will change the world? Does a Great Transition movement stir in the wings?

Those of us committed to the fight for a civilized future have done much to kindle hope. But as time grows short, we urgently need answers to these vexing questions. Hanging in the balance: the future humanity will be living in twenty years from now (Figure 4).

Figure 4
Which World in 2042



Endnotes

1. Paul Raskin, Tariq Banuri, Gilberto Gallopín, Pablo Gutman, Al Hammond, Robert Kates, and Rob Swart, *Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead* (Boston: Stockholm Institute, 2002), 14–19, <https://greattransition.org/gt-essay>.
2. Ibid, 94.
3. Paul Raskin, Steve Bernow, and Tariq Banuri, *Proposal for a Great Transition Initiative* (Boston: Tellus Institute, 2003), 5, <https://greattransition.org/archives/other/GTI%20Proposal.pdf>.

About the Author



Paul Raskin is the founding president of Tellus Institute. His work has focused on visions and pathways to a decent future from local to global scales. He has developed widely used integrated models for scenario analysis and served as lead author on major international assessments. In 1995, Dr. Raskin convened the international Global Scenario Group, whose valedictory essay—*Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead*—became the point of departure for the Great Transition Initiative that he continues to direct. His most recent book is *Journey to Earthland: The Great Transition to Planetary Civilization*. He holds a PhD in theoretical physics from Columbia University.



Panel 1: Facing Dark Times



The Coming Struggle

Tariq Banuri

My thanks to Paul Raskin for initiating this twenty-year retrospective on the *Great Transition* [essay](#). I found myself nodding in agreement with many of the comments made by colleagues in their responses, especially the continued salience of Conventional Worlds and the growing threat of [Fortress World](#) and [Breakdown](#).

When Paul Raskin first invited me to join the Global Scenario Group in 1998, what I found exciting was that it provided an alternative way of articulating, comparing, and synthesizing different ways of thinking about the world, or, to use Steve Marglin's conceptual formulation, different "systems of knowledge." Scenarios created the possibility of a real dialogue between those advocating diametrically opposed views—taking each set of assumptions at face value, projecting them into the future, and assessing the correspondence between aims and outcomes.

Raskin started the *GT* essay with Popper's quotation, "The future is always present, as a promise, a lure, and a temptation." These futures have always been present in people's imagination and embedded in the actions they take and advocate. Mainstream politics seemed to believe that the progress and prosperity achieved through Conventional Worlds would be extended indefinitely into the future. Many others are mindful of the multifaceted crisis we face today, and no longer share this confidence. Some, like us, believe that a great transition is needed, and that a cooperative, sustainable, and peaceful world is within our reach through alternative strategies and actions. Others have taken the crises as a call to arms, not against our common enemies (to quote John F. Kennedy) tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself, but against each other.

Some of them have started to build walls, others advocate hate and violence, and yet others rejoice in the breakdown.

Walls do not have to be physical entities (“how twentieth-century,” as the zoomers might say). Yes, Trump started building a physical wall, Netanyahu had already built one, and Boris Johnson was able to redeploy the English Channel as a physical barrier. But other walls have arisen or consolidated themselves in the meantime: visa restrictions have tightened, trade flows are interrupted, and even capital is flowing less freely. And technology has enabled the rapid proliferation of increasingly sophisticated surveillance systems, which are already far more effective than any physical barriers or bodies of water.

Far more ominously, it is in the minds of men (and women) that the walls of hate, anger, xenophobia, and bigotry have found their place again. Look around the world, and you see one country after another succumbing to the siren songs of ultra-right-wing forces: Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi, Benjamin Netanyahu, Rodrigo Duterte, Bongbong Marcos, Imran Khan, Jair Bolsonaro, Marine Le Pen, Boris Johnson, Viktor Orbán, the list goes on. It is a testimony to the growing appeal of the [Barbarization scenarios](#).

Personally, I do not find the increasing popularity of Barbarization scenarios surprising. A century ago, the world went through something similar love affair with violence and hatred. This was what Eric Hobsbawm called the “Age of Extremes,” when totalitarian ideologies swept Europe and Latin America. It took more than two decades of horrific violence for the world to find its way back to a more humane and cooperative dispensation.

That struggle is upon us once again, a struggle between what the great Sufi scholar Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) called “God as Will” and “God as Wish,” the former reflecting the inexorable force of history and the latter the intelligible process towards the realization of human freedom. The Breakdown scenarios today may represent the inexorable force of history as humans try to figure out a way to deal with their fears, anxieties, and paranoia. But counteracting it and running in parallel with it is the equally inexorable process of the pursuit of human freedom in peace and cooperation.

To many today, it makes sense to follow the path of Breakdown, just as most would have been well advised, in the pre-1970 cornucopian age (or “the golden age of capitalism”), to follow the logic of Conventional Worlds. Yet, two decades ago, a growing number of us chose to plant our flag elsewhere, i.e., in the possibility of a great transition. We could see clearly that another world is possible, and that the pursuit of peace and freedom is just as meaningful today as it was a half century ago. Two decades have passed since we started looking for fellow travelers, and, indeed, we have been heartened to find many, though not yet in mainstream politics.

If the past is any guide, this movement will grow, others will come, including those in mainstream politics, and the world will find its way back towards cooperation, partnership, solidarity, and sustainability.

The only question is whether this will happen through peaceful means, and whether we have learned enough from our past to be able to avoid repeating the sanguinary history of the twentieth century.

About the Author



Tariq Banuri is an independent scholar of the political economy of development, sustainability, and climate change, and an Associate Fellow at Tellus Institute. From May 2018 to 2022, he was Chairman of Pakistan’s Higher Education Commission (HEC), where he introduced numerous reforms. Previously, he served as Professor of Economics at the University of Utah, Director of the Division of Sustainable Development at the United Nations, and the founding Executive Director of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute Islamabad. He has contributed to the design of several national institutions and international networks and served on key policy and research entities and UN Committees. He holds a PhD in economics from Harvard University.



A Militancy of Despair

Diana Coole

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



Diana Coole is Professor Emeritus of Political and Social Theory at Birkbeck University of London. She is the author of several articles and books, including *Women in Political Theory: From Ancient Misogyny to Contemporary Feminism* and *Negativity and Politics: Dionysus and Dialectics from Kant to Poststructuralism*.



Navigating a Fortress World

Richard Falk

As usual, Paul Raskin, in his opening reflections, exhibits his uncanny ability to conceptualize the global historical moment as a holistic reality, giving a plausible account of its most characteristic features. And he does so without diminishing the complexities presented as the shifting tectonic plates of adaptive change during a time of systemic transition. There are many indications that Raskin's general portrayal enjoys a strong resonance for those of us who similarly are trying to understand the most globally significant developments of the last twenty years. Among this small, yet growing transnational community of commentators, the only future-affirming responses that seems responsible are forms of engagement that enhance the prospects for positive transformation.

Whether an acceptance of global scenarios of fundamental change is instructive enough to alter our basic perception of the human condition is crucial in contemplating what lies ahead. A specific priority concern relates to whether the world in 2022 appears to be significantly more prone to collective disaster than that in 2002, and whether such a dismal trend is poised to continue, and likely accelerate, over the course of the next twenty years. In effect, [Barbarization](#) in the dual forms of [Fortress World](#) and [Breakdown](#) scenarios is appropriately receiving increased [civil society](#) attention compared to twenty years earlier. This is a reaction to such earth-scale happenings as greatly heightened dangers of major wars between nuclear weapons states, the COVID pandemic, and the worsening of adverse climate change indicators. It is not only this widespread harm that has been and is being done and threatened, but the added perception that dramatic failures to exhibit any strong disposition on the part of the most influential political leaders and economic voices on the planet to take any meaningful account of the ongoing transition from our modern world of distinct moving parts to an overriding reality of [unity](#) reflective of an emergent planetary civilization. The distinction between a

fragmented world managed by centers of power and authority and an integrated world underpinned by the ethos and praxis of the whole usefully stretches our imaginative capacities beyond current systemic limits. As such, it gives global-scale problem-solving the promise of effectiveness and legitimacy in the process of shaping the contours of a new paradigm.

It seems that we are experiencing the sunset phase of the old paradigm that guided modernity more convincingly than the dawning of such a New Paradigm. Yet we cannot be sure. The jumps of consciousness that have produced the greatest historical discontinuities—as with spread of religions or empire, technological breakthroughs, major wars—have been mainly interpreted and understood after the fact. In contemporary circumstances, the primary challenge is to make the jump by thinking ahead because drifting into the future, as at present, seems to be exemplifying a dysfunctional collective resignation in the face of the inevitable, which amounts to a “waiting for the Apocalypse.” Implicit in the [Great Transition scenario framework](#) is a haunting bio-ethical-genetic question: do humans have a robust enough species will to survive and flourish?

Up until this century, or at least up until the explosion of the first atomic bomb, the presence or absence of such a species will seemed irrelevant to the kind of futures that now not only confront humanity, but also underlie prospects for maintaining the ecological habitability of the planet. In the past, parts in the form of tribal communities, nations, even civilizations would collapse and disappear, but the integrity of the whole was not at stake. The radical difference now is that the whole is in a situation of seeming end-time jeopardy.

And yet despite this growing knowledge of planetary precariousness, reinforced by expert consensus and the nightmare visions of prophetic voices, the fears and anger of the multitudes seem to be being sidetracked by the worst forms of fragmentation associated with state-centric nationalism, regional bloc formation, and rising geopolitical tensions. It is not only the tenacity of the old paradigm, but the concentration of resources, energies, and passions on maximizing the competitive dominance of parts variously configured as “global states” or regions.

Although we glibly talk of a state-centric world and international law as underlying the UN Charter purporting to be founded on “the equality of states,” the design and operation of this world-of-parts existentially rests on inequality, hierarchy, and hegemony. A variant of this

configuration is itself embodied in the UN Charter, as the five winners in World War II, among the most dangerous political actors in the world, were given a right of veto in the one part of the UN vested with the power of decision, the Security Council. The landscape of power has changed since 1945, but the reality of this vertical structure of a fragmented world remains.

Indeed, after the Soviet collapse, the US government gradually seized the opportunity to preside over a hidden transition to “a planetary civilization” by managing its embodiment in Fortress World. It paid the costs of sustaining hundreds of military bases throughout the world and navies and air power in every ocean, as well as achieving control over space and the technics of cyber conflict. Every conflict was potentially within the strategic reach of the United States, which retained for itself the exclusive prerogative of intervening by force while enjoying all the benefits of impunity. In this sense, the US has been constructing a unipolar sequel to the bipolar “balance of terror” that existed throughout the Cold War. This undertaking could be interpreted as the first credible effort to take account of the emergent planetary civilization, adopting the form of Fortress World, which Raskin labels as one of two types of Barbarization.

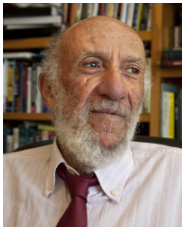
Perversely, given the circumstances, Fortress World could be seen as the safest and currently most plausible entry point to a planet-centric world, even though unpalatable from the perspectives of human rights, humane governance, and civilizational diversity. I never thought that I would entertain such a distasteful view of the human future, but given the foreseeable remoteness of more desirable alternatives, it deserves a further assessment of positive potential.

More than Great Transition alternatives, Fortress World is already in being, although currently under serious challenge in both Ukraine and in relation to Taiwan. Russia and China strongly reject the postulates of US management of Fortress World, as does most of the Global South, at least rhetorically. If Russia incurs defeat in Ukraine, and China backs off challenging the independence of Taiwan, a more benign and responsible version of Fortress World could emerge in Washington, more closely resembling the leadership role played by the US in the period immediately following the end of World War II. I am imagining the growing pressures of transition inducing a hybrid scenario of a demilitarizing Fortress World fusing with a New Paradigm based on hierarchically guided global problem-solving, centered not in the UN but in the responsible geopolitics of the

dominant state, a rebuilt “city on the hill,” a redemptive “American exceptionalism.”

This postulated future is not congenial to my values, aspirations, and calculation of probabilities, nor could I hope for any influence in the manner of its evolution should it come to pass. In this sense, my existential engagement in the politics of transition would continue to be conditioned by the strivings of “a citizen pilgrim” for a new order premised on human rights, ecological reverence, social democracy, global rule of law, universal accountability, and nonviolence. This collective reality would amount to a process of continuous pursuit of humane global governance, embodying a patriotism for humanity and ecological well-being, privileging local empowerment and globally constituted problem-solving. In effect, a New Paradigm that built on solidarities and a sense of planetary community managed and guided from above and below by mysterious movements of a North Star shining upon the global common good. Now the stuff of dreams, but who really knows?

About the Author



Richard Falk is Albert G. Milbank Professor Emeritus of International Law at Princeton University, Fellow of the Orfalea Center of Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Associate Fellow at Tellus Institute. He directs the project on Global Climate Change, Human Security, and Democracy at UCSB and formerly served as director of the North American group of the World Order Models Project and the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Occupied Palestine. He is the author of such books as *Power Shift: On the New Global Order*; *(Re)Imagining Humane Global Governance*; *Religion and Humane Global Governance*; and *Explorations at the Edge of Time*. He holds an SJD from Harvard University.



Trending Troubles

Gilberto Gallopín

Twenty years after the publication of [Great Transition](#), and twenty-five after the delineation of the six scenarios in [Branch Points](#), the hopes for a change in course remain unfulfilled. We are stuck in a [Market Forces](#) world. [Policy Reform](#) has made progress, with examples like the international agreement on the Sustainable Development Goals, the continuation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and a number of international agreements that aimed to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, alleviate poverty, etc. But these have proven neither sufficient nor effective enough. Yes, global poverty has been falling until recently, but inequality has increased dramatically. And GHG emissions are still increasing globally with corresponding changes in climate, biodiversity is being lost, the possibility of nuclear war has reappeared, and other signals indicate that we are not in a Policy Reform trajectory of gradual, ordered progress.

As was true twenty years ago, local patches and seeds of almost all scenarios are evident in the present, including [Fortress World](#), [Breakdown](#), and [Eco-communalism](#) (but, as I see it, not the [New Paradigm](#)). They are perhaps more noticeable now because of the exacerbation of contrasts. But none are dominant today. And the unfolding of the New Paradigm scenario seems farther away than we had thought two decades ago.

This is my perception of where we are. But regarding where we are heading, the view becomes blurrier; some of the new trends or driving forces that have emerged over the past two decades augur well for the future, whereas others look quite ominous.

I see the major changes in the driving forces that occurred since the original publications of the Global Scenario Group as the following, with the originally defined trends summarized and

shown in bold and significant changes during the last two decades in italics.¹

1. Economic and geopolitical forces: the end of the Cold War, a universal expansion of the capitalistic system, and an acceleration of globalization

1.1. The evolution of the unipolar world that emerged after the end of the Cold War into a bipolar world with the ascent of China, and probably to a multipolar (oligopolar) world later. Today, the US, China, and Japan are the three biggest economies (in that order), and by 2050, the ranking will likely be China, the US, and India (obviously, within the Conventional World assumption).

1.2. The global economic crisis triggered by the COVID pandemic and reinforced by the war in Ukraine (of unknown duration and consequences)

2. Social: in particular, poverty and national and international inequity

2.1. Significant reduction of global poverty during most of the period

2.2. Unprecedented increase of inequality within and between countries

3. Demographic forces: population growth concentrated in poor countries and regions; changing age structures related to youth-dominated populations in poor areas and an aging structure in the rich areas

3.1. Increasing number of refugees from armed conflicts and environmental change

3.2. Rising xenophobia in Europe and other parts of the affluent world

4. Environmental: increasing environmental stress, widespread ecosystem disturbance, and an increase in global ecological interdependence

4.1. An earlier manifestation of the impacts of climate change than predicted, with a rapidly closing window of opportunity to avoid its worst effects

4.2. The surpassing of a number of environmental “planetary boundaries”²

4.3. Discovery of new large shale oil and gas resources

5. Technological: the continuation of the technological revolution, the expansion of global information and communications, and the private control of technological innovation and diffusion and of its benefits

5.1. Fast growth of energy production from renewables

5.2. Ascent of electric vehicles

5.3. Fast growth in energy efficiency (appliances, lighting, buildings, vehicles)

6. Global governance: the continued proliferation of non-governmental organizations, the strengthening of civil society, and the reinvigoration of the United Nations system

6.1. International agreement on the UN Sustainable Development Goals established in 2015

6.2. Emergence and spread of international terrorism

6.3. Weakening of the globalization process and relative reinforcing of nationalistic politics

6.4 Expansion of populist political movements in many countries

Some of the current drivers are more compatible with undesirable or untenable scenarios, and others with desirable ones, as illustrated in the table below. Check marks indicate that a trend is compatible with a corresponding scenario or scenario class; question marks indicate a lack of clarity around its impact.

	Market Forces	Policy Reform	Breakdown	Fortress World	Eco-communalism	New Paradigm		Conventional Worlds	Barbarization	Grat Transitions
1.1 Move to oligopolar World (effect depends on synergic or antagonistic relations established)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓?		✓	✓	✓?
1.2 Global economic crisis		✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	
2.1 Δ- Poverty	✓	✓				✓		✓		✓
2.2 Δ+ Inequality			✓	✓					✓	
3.1 Δ+ Refugees				✓					✓	
3.2 Δ+ Xenophobia				✓					✓	
4.1 Δ+ Speed of climate change		✓?	✓	✓				✓	✓	
4.2 Surpassing planetary boundaries		✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	
4.3 Discovery of new shale (slows down shift to renewables)	✓		✓	✓				✓	✓	
5.1 Δ+ Renewables		✓			✓	✓		✓		✓
5.2 Δ+ Electric vehicles	✓?	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓
5.3 Δ+ Energy efficiency	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓
6.1 SDGoals		✓				✓?		✓		✓
6.2 International terrorism		✓?	✓	✓				✓	✓	
6.3 Weakening of globalization + reinforcing of nationalistic politics.			✓	✓					✓	
6.4 Expansion of populism	✓			✓				✓	✓	

Considering all of such trends, which scenarios do we seem to be approaching (or moving away from)? The future does not “come”; it is built by the social actors interacting with other social and ecological processes within the physical and thermodynamic constraints of the world. The accumulation of trends in one or two directions can operate as early warning signals of the need to steer the changes towards desirable futures.

These new trends, viewed collectively, favor the Barbarization scenarios. To a lesser degree, they could favor the Policy Reform scenario, although this depends on an effective and timely reaction by policymakers that is not evident today. Very few drivers seem to be compatible with the Eco-communalism scenario, and even fewer, the New Paradigm scenario. Last, the New Paradigm scenario appears to be facilitated by a small number of trends, some of them also with large “if” questions. Lastly, although some trends favor the continuation of the Market Forces scenario, it is the most unlikely scenario by the end of the century given its fundamental unsustainability.

As Paul Raskin rightly pointed out in his opening reflections, the preconditions for a systemic movement have evolved, but the critical global movement we need has not yet materialized.

Today, we do not see the systemic movement we thought was necessary and possible, but we are much nearer than two decades ago to an unwanted systemic restructuring of the Earth System (abrupt climatic change, ecosystems loss, revival of the risk of nuclear war). And great uncertainty prevails.

This situation could provide the impulse for the needed global will to change course. If not, or if we are too late, a systemic reorganization (most likely catastrophic) will occur well before the end of this century, and it is impossible to anticipate which line of futures will prevail in the aftermath.

Endnotes

1. Gilberto Gallopín, “Back to the Future,” *Energy Policy* 123 (2018): 318–324.
2. Will Steffen et al., “Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet,” *Science* 347 (2015), <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.1259855>.

About the Author



Gilberto Gallopín is an independent scholar based in Argentina, and Associate Fellow at Tellus Institute. He has worked throughout the world on a wide spectrum of issues pertaining to sustainable development: ecological systems analysis, integrated scenarios, global modeling, environmental impact assessment, and development policy. He has previously held senior positions at the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Stockholm Environment Institute, International Center for Tropical Agriculture, International Institute for Sustainable Development, and International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA). He has also served as a professor at the University of Buenos Aires and Executive President Fundación Bariloche. He has published numerous articles and books. He holds a PhD in Ecology from Cornell University.



The Closing Fortress Gates

Gwendolyn Hallsmith

Which of the Global Scenario Group's [scenarios](#) you are living in depends on where you are. If you are living in Jackson, Mississippi, you are in [Breakdown](#). Flooding has left the city's residents without water since August 29. If you are unlucky enough to be a Ukrainian, [Barbarization](#) has a new meaning, one where former comrades are trying to kill you and wipe out your version of civilization. In Pakistan, where more than one-third of the country is [under water](#), you are in Breakdown as well. The same for parts of the Middle East where temperatures were so high this summer that neither plants, animals, nor human beings could survive without technological interventions that consume massive amounts of energy.

If, however, you live in a gated community for the elite, then [Market Forces](#) still looks like a relevant option for your world, even though you really live in [Fortress World](#). These gated communities are everywhere but are especially obvious in places where wealth inequality has reached obscene proportions like the US, South Africa, Kuwait, Kazakhstan, and Russia. Some of the gates to Fortress World are not physical—they are snob zoning provisions that require granite curbs and golden doorknobs in the suburbs of Boston, or rural areas so far from jobs that only people with big gasoline budgets can live there.

Some of the gated communities look like [Eco-communalism](#), but in fact the homes there are so expensive that only the elite can afford them. Take for example Cobb Hill, the ecologically oriented cohousing development in rural Vermont developed by none other than Donella Meadows herself, where family homes cost over \$500,000, well over the “affordable” threshold for Vermont, where the median household income is \$63,477 and the median home price is \$230,000. A two-room, 400-square-foot apartment in the common house at Cobb Hill, a unit that was supposed to be affordable, sold recently for \$450,000.

The gates to Fortress World are increasingly invisible—when we isolate ourselves into enclaves, we become less attuned to what other people experience. Recent demographic studies in the US have shown what some of us notice during election years to be true: people are increasingly moving to places where there are others who share their political views, income, and skin color.

Some of the gates to Fortress World are immigration laws that prohibit people who are experiencing Breakdown from moving to places where they could thrive. Right now, there are 26.6 million refugees in the world, 50.9 million internally displaced people, and 4.4 million asylum seekers. Ask them where they live, and they won't talk about Market Forces or business-as-usual incrementalism. Neither will the 2 million people who are imprisoned in the US, the largest number in any country, a number that has increased 500% in the last forty years. More gates to the Fortress.

If we agree with the sentiment expressed so eloquently by Eugene V. Debs that “While there is a lower class, I am in it, while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free,” then if there are any people on Earth living in Breakdown and Fortress World, we all are living there on some level.

About the Author



Gwendolyn Hallsmith is founder and executive director of Global Community Initiatives. She is the author of six books on sustainable community development and has worked all over the world to foster local economies, good governance, and healthy ecosystems. She founded Vermonters for a New Economy to work on economic solutions at the state level, and the Headwaters Garden and Learning Center, an ecovillage in Cabot, VT. She has a master's degree in Public Policy from Brown University.



High-Tech and High-Risk

Al Hammond

Reflecting on the [six scenarios](#) outlined in the 2002 [Great Transition essay](#), I would argue that we remain largely stuck in Conventional Worlds, despite growing signs of [Fortress World](#) and [Breakdown](#). In the US, the turn away from democracy by many of the leaders of the MAGA-Republicans shows the weakness or improbability of [Policy Reform](#). Globally, the growing tension between the US and its allies, on one side, and China, on the other, is partitioning and disrupting markets—dimming the promise of [Market Forces](#) world—while the threat of a major nuclear disaster in Ukraine brings Breakdown closer.

I am a student of science and technology, and while we live in a time of rapid innovation in both, it has proven a mixed blessing. In 2002, for example, the growing Internet seemed a plausible tool for the rise of a global social movement. But that potential has been undercut by the rise of social media and their algorithms that reinforce extreme views to grow both audience and profits; unless they can be done away with and personal privacy better protected, the Internet remains an increasingly invasive wasteland, and the way forward seems limited. Likewise, it is hard to imagine a policy regime that would subject corporate artificial intelligence (AI) software to independent assessment of its potential for social harm. (In China, the surveillance state is run by the government, not by the private sector, which seems even worse; India shows signs of following that pattern too.) Maybe the powerful computers we carry in our pockets (smart phones) will one day empower better individual and societal choices, but that future is not yet apparent.

The rapid progress in biotech offers hope of doing away with many kinds of illness—for those that can afford the therapies. And synthetic biology in particular could plausibly enhance global food supplies, even replacing farming, ranching, and forestry (and their environmental

pressures) to a considerable extent by producing their products in the lab. But we lack a policy mechanism to ensure that all populations can benefit from such innovations, or tax regimes to distribute the financial wealth new technologies create beyond a very small portion of the population.

Another set of rapidly advancing technologies are those for military purposes. Drones, hypersonic missiles that travel at five times the speed of sound, biological weapons (if Russia's threats are to be believed), AI-guided fighter jets, and battlefield management software—the world's armaments have gotten much deadlier since the end of the Cold War. And that means the human and economic costs of global war, should it occur, will be much greater. China is increasingly rattling its military might over Taiwan; the US, pledged to defend Taiwan, is also arming Japan and Australia. North Korea, and increasingly Russia, are nuclear-armed wild cards.

Beyond technological drivers, climate change will become an important stressor well before 2050. It will drive more heat waves, fires, and flooding, but also much more massive immigration (and attendant social disruption), with tens or hundreds of millions fleeing equatorial or other regions short of water or where agriculture is no longer possible. If higher-latitude regions such as the US, Canada, Northern Europe, and Japan prepared for and welcomed such influxes, it would offset their aging and declining populations and strengthen their economies, but the political will for that is not apparent.

It may well be that my pessimism is too influenced by old age; hopefully, younger generations will have both the motivation and the inspiration to find solutions.

About the Author



Al Hammond is a serial entrepreneur, a widely published author, and a pioneer in market-based solutions to poverty. He is co-founder and Executive VP for Strategy of Healthpoint Services, which delivers safe drinking water to rural and small town communities in India, and the former leader the Health for All program at Ashoka, a global network of social entrepreneurs. He has served as a consultant to the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, US federal agencies, the United Nations, major corporations, and private foundations. He holds degrees from Stanford and Harvard Universities in engineering and applied mathematics.



Preparing for Resistance

Yogi Hendlin

Amidst the global polycrisis, the instabilities pile up: the Russian war on Ukraine is compounding the economic instability caused by COVID pandemic. The rich keep on living life as usual (profiting even!), while the poor often see the infrastructure on which they depend grind to a halt. As long as economic inequalities and the break of the social contract are tolerated, we will head towards a [Fortress World](#), where, as Paul Raskin [notes](#), “despots, charlatans, and authoritarians feed off the chaos.” The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can alleviate entrenched inequalities, but they are far from sufficient.

Until we face up to *realpolitik*—that we need to create, through action, large disincentives for the powerful to hoard resources—we will continue to be trampled over. We need to embrace a commitment to *ahimsa* (in the original, Sanskrit meaning of the world), which requires more disciplined active resistance. Understanding that *ahimsa* is routinely mistranslated as “nonviolence” is crucial: there is always some violence involved in life, but a harm-reduction approach according to a public health model means that it is morally imperative as a form of nonviolence to remove those who are doing massive violence to present and future generations as well as the more-than-human world.

Skillful means and discernment can help us focus on reducing structural violence by whatever means are most effective, while not devolving into dehumanization, cruelty, or normalizing violence. Facing the moral and political cowardliness of pacifism means that we need to start learning how better to say “no,” individually and collectively, to foreclose the slow violence of industrial neoliberalism.

From a public health perspective, avoiding major harms through social acupuncture (making

elites fear engaging in antisocial omnicidal behavior) is a well-known method of achieving social aims. We don't let smokers smoke anywhere they want, because the externalities of their actions (secondhand smoke making others sick, and the social burden of their personal smoking-related illnesses) harm themselves and others. So why do we do nothing against structural and slow violence? The question then becomes, if [Market Forces/Conventional Worlds](#) and [Barbarization](#) (especially Fortress World) are systematically reducing the freedom for self-determination and closing down pathways towards a Great Transition which is based on solidarity writ large, what can we do to turn the tide?

Clearly, we cannot fight in the traditional ways in which previous liberations have been fought (via war), as the state (now corporate controlled) has the monopoly on legitimate violence. But there are many other ways to muck up the gears, or precisely target those most responsible for large-scale suffering. We have much to learn from the power of organization from those who have successfully deposed their despots, be they in Chile or Sri Lanka. Our hope must remain that we can grow global networks of solidarity and peace faster than mutual heart-deadening dehumanization fills the gap.

As we stop polluting as much, move away from combustion engines, and move towards a circular economy not requiring our new infrastructure to use raw resources based on slave labor, we can more quickly than we imagine find ourselves living in a world that prioritizes human and environmental health and integrity. We don't need to reinvent the wheel in dreaming up what needs to be done; we just need to implement and enforce.

More immediately, I find the most hope in youth movements like Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for the Future, and quixotically, in fiction like Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* and Starhawk's *City of Refuge*. Neither of those books include wholly nonviolent action. Some sort of principled, militant intervention is present, and increasingly seems to be required. But no group has as of yet started putting despots and ecocidal billionaires in their places, shifting the balance of power. Both Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi's peace movements would never have been successful without their militant, violent counterparts, allowing them to play good cop to these bad cops, giving their overlords a choice of whom they preferred to deal with. So, far there

are no such counterparts to Extinction Rebellion or Fridays for the Future. But these groups will come, one way or another. And when they do, we should not condemn them. For they are doing the hard work of no-saying, multisolving through a *via negativa*. For now, the pressing question is, how can we translate our passion and vision but reticence for shared sacrifice into a more courageous demonstration of physical action and solidarity?

About the Author



Yogi Hendlin is an Assistant Professor at the Dynamics of Inclusive Prosperity Initiative at Erasmus University Rotterdam, where he conducts research at the intersection of public health and environmental political philosophy. He is also a research associate at the Environmental Health Initiative at University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), where he analyzes how the chemical and fossil fuel industries marketed their products despite known environmental risks. He holds a PhD in environmental philosophy from the University of Kiel.



Patchwork World Descending

Alexander Lautensach

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.



Where Is the Mass Movement?

Valentine M. Moghadam

The questions that Paul Raskin poses in his opening reflections are very timely: “What future are we living in now?” And “What structures of collective coordination can catalyze a diverse yet unified movement? Who will change the world?” To my mind, it is precisely the continued power of [Market Forces](#) that have led to Barbarization and near-[Breakdown](#). And this after all the disasters those forces have wreaked on the world, for which they have not been held to account. Given the close ties between market forces and ruling classes, especially here in the US, we can hardly expect attempts at policy reform to be substantive and enduring.

In the post-Cold War early 1990s, there was much talk about a “peace dividend” and “human security,” but those aspirations lost out to civil conflict, big-power military interventions, and the “Washington Consensus,” with its neoliberal agenda of privatization and austerity. At the turn of the century, there was optimism about global civil society, transnational advocacy networks, and global social movements—including the transnational feminist networks that I studied. The anti-globalization movement produced the World Social Forum, but after a twenty-year run, it seems to have exhausted itself—likely because of its lack of a political program and leadership. Those of us who hoped it would unite the many diverse and disparate groups around something akin to an International eventually realized that this would not come about. Who, indeed, will change the world?

The future we are living in is perilously close to Barbarization. The past twenty years have seen the US bombardment, invasion, and occupation of Afghanistan; the devastating US/UK invasion and occupation of Iraq; and the 2011 NATO assault on Libya. Saudi Arabia, the richest country in the Middle East, has used US weapons to destroy the poorest country, Yemen. Syria has endured assaults by Israel and Turkey, and the US assassinated the top general of a

sovereign state, Iran, in a sovereign state, Iraq—after it had abrogated an international treaty (the Iran nuclear deal). NATO continued its eastward expansion, and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, European states decided to increase military spending, arm Ukraine, and call for Russian accountability for its crimes. One could be forgiven for wondering where US Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s “rules-based international order” has been in the past twenty years, and where former Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Margot Wallstrom’s “feminist foreign policy” stands on Western militarized masculinities and arms sales. Who will change this brutal state of affairs?

The peace movement in the US is small, but it is vibrant and committed to a world of dialogue, international cooperation, and the reallocation of resources away from corporate and military sectors toward public health, good schools, clean water, decent work, and improved public transit. In the US, Code Pink, Massachusetts Peace Action, WILPF, Madre, the ANSWER coalition, and similar organizations exemplify the best in collective coordination. But they have yet to mobilize a mass movement because corporate interests (including the corporate-led media) and the political elites of both parties are adamantly opposed to their proposals—and to the new paradigm it entails. [Eco-communalism](#) is ideal, but some longstanding champions now seem to prefer “[eco-Leninism](#).” There is something to be said for that, but perhaps we first need a mass peace movement to stop the madness of endless weapons production, corporate profits, and military assaults, and compel our leaders to invest in the human security and dignity of all peoples, from the low-income Americans who experience appalling infrastructure and “deaths of despair” to the poor Yemenis who suffer hunger, bombardments, and the destruction of cultural heritage.

About the Author



Valentine M. Moghadam is Professor of Sociology and International Affairs at Northeastern University, where she researches globalization; transnational social movements and networks; economic citizenship; and gender, development, and women’s movements in the Middle East and North Africa. Her books include *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, the award-winning *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks*, and *Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement*. She holds a PhD in sociology from American University.



War and Decline

Radmila Nakarada

Unprecedented wealth and devastating social and environmental consequences, new realms of freedom and the expansion of repression (from torture to digital control and global policing of the information world), celebration of common values and the “ethical cleansing” of the global order by the erosion of the rule of law (i.e., the practice of self-exemption and double standards), accumulated knowledge and expanding ignorance—all coexist in a reality whose intricate interactions and distances are far from being deciphered. Practices of resistance are disconnected and limited in reach, and often face defeat. This was the case, for instance, when 40 million citizens around the globe protested the planned intervention in Iraq in 2003, to no avail. Thus, a question looms: can a major transformative shift toward a [Great Transition future](#) be made by a “thousand cuts” (to quote sociologist Wolfgang Streeck), or does it require a different strategy?

To facilitate such a shift, we need to refocus on the exceptionally threatening issue of war. Reaffirming peace as the prime imperative of the human species—in other words, respecting Life as the highest value—has to become a central global cultural and political priority. Dismantling war as practice, instrument, and institution is the necessary precondition for departing securely from the present and reaching a desirable future. Since the end of World War II, instead of upholding the uttered promise “Never again,” and above all getting rid of nuclear weapons, humankind opted for investing increasing cognitive and material efforts to produce and perfect the weapons of mass destruction that are capable of eliminating the very idea of a future.

This practice of preparing for war has continued despite the end of the Cold War and a long series of arms treaties. The apocalyptic logic of the arms race, increased military expenditure,

and production of ever more sophisticated lethal arms has not been suspended as the military interventions and the display of weapons in ensuing conflicts in the post-Cold-War world testify. Economic interdependence has been proven to have no preventive capacity, the United Nations has dissolved into an ineffective preventive and peacemaking institution, and the pain of previous sufferings and destructions has not had a lasting self-restraining, moderating effect. And here we are now, amidst the prospect of a new Cold War, a conflict deadlier than the previous one, with numerous military interventions, the highest military expenditure ever, and, alongside other conflicts, a war in Ukraine that is generating a global economic, energy, food crisis, and bringing the world closer, with each passing day, to a nuclear option.

This is the context within which we are deliberating on a path toward a Great Transition in the twenty-first century—amidst the shame and mystery of war, amidst the possibility of an apocalypse.

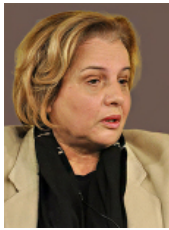
To conclude, somewhat paraphrasing Antonio Gramsci, we are leaving the present but without reaching the future. In order to reach it, two major conditions are required. First is a major transformative shift in the US, the most powerful state in human history. This means abandoning its ahistorical project of eternal hegemony and restraining the power of the military industrial complex and financial centers beyond democratic control. It also entails abandoning the project of maintaining by any means available the capacity to outcompete other nations in all domains. Internally, it requires transforming the neoliberal capitalist paradigm that has for decades assaulted American society, polarizing it, angering it, silencing it, de-democratizing it, and rendering it less equal. Second is the emergence of a new South, the alliance of victims who are able to think through a paradigm shift by understanding the workings of the global system, one's own society, historical traumas, structural hurdles, and internal missteps.

In other words, a Great Transition requires an end to the hegemony of a militaristic United States and the re-emergence of the voice and alternative practice of the Global South. These two directions may bring a new "Never again," a chance for the future.

Endnotes

1. Wolfgang Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End?* (London: Verso, 2016), 13.

About the Author



Radmila Nakarada is a sociologist and Professor Emerita at the University of Belgrade, where she created the first undergraduate and graduate program in peace studies in Serbia. She researches global challenges, the breakup of Yugoslavia, and political transition. She served as a member and first spokesperson of the Yugoslav Truth and Reconciliation Committee, as well as the co-editor of *The Nobel Prize for Peace: Between Idealism and Political Cynicism*. She holds a PhD in sociology from the University of Belgrade.



The Crisis of Fortress Capitalism

William I. Robinson

Any discussion of which scenarios for the future have become more salient since Paul Raskin and his co-authors published their seminal 2002 essay [Great Transition](#) must place global capitalism and its crisis at the center of analysis. We are all too familiar with the symptoms of our existential predicament: unprecedented inequality; the spread of hunger and disease; the collapse of the biosphere; widespread social disintegration; the displacement of hundreds of millions by climate change, economic collapse, wars, and persecution; the breakdown of state legitimacy; and

the violent crack up of the post-World War II international order. Yet all these symptoms have a common denominator that cannot be considered as simply another factor in discussion of alternative futures: a global capitalist system whose imperative to endlessly accumulate trumps all else.

The future is not predetermined, and nothing is inevitable. We are at this time in the situation described by Gramsci that so many people have of late cited, and with good reason: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old way is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” We do not know which future we are living in precisely because the battle for the future is being waged at this very time. Nonetheless, as Raskin also [observes](#), correctly in my view, the Barbarization [scenario](#) has gained significant ground over the past two decades at the expense of Conventional Worlds, whereas Great Transition scenarios have made considerably less headway.

At the structural level, capitalism faces a crisis of chronic overaccumulation. The transnational capitalist class has accumulated obscene amounts of wealth, well beyond what it can reinvest. The flip side of this expansion of surplus capital is the expansion of surplus humanity—billions

locked out, thrown beyond the precipice of survival, and held down by an expanding global police state. Low-end estimates place the number of migrants and refugees worldwide at nearly 400 million, while United Nations data indicates that over one billion people may become climate refugees by 2050.¹ The ten richest men doubled their fortunes during the COVID pandemic while the income of the 99 percent of humanity fell.² Capitalism's crisis is also political: capitalist states face spiraling crises of legitimacy, and the system is rapidly losing its ideological hegemony.

These are explosive conditions. Crises are times of escalating social and political conflict. They are also times when the variables that help us make sense of things are most fluid and great uncertainty hangs in the balance. What is certain is that the existing state of affairs cannot be sustained. Radical change is coming, but exactly what that change will involve is not yet clear. The crisis has devastated communities around the world and disrupted sectors that were privileged enough in the twentieth century to enjoy some security and stability. Just as Raskin notes, the resultant mass social anxiety has provided far-right, authoritarian, and neofascist forces with opportunities to recruit these destabilized sectors into a mass base for the Barbarization scenario.

The ultra-rich appear to have read the writing on the wall. They are preparing for a collapse by buying up islands, building luxury bunkers, and hiring private armies. In his book *Survival of the Rich*, Douglas Rushkoff describes a meeting he had with a handful of tech billionaires, concluding, "Their extreme wealth and privilege served only to make them obsessed with insulating themselves from the very real and present danger of climate change, rising sea levels, mass migrations, global pandemics, nativist panic and resource depletion. For them, the future of technology is about only one thing: escape from the rest of us."

Should the Barbarization scenario solidify, global capitalism would become a fortress in which the global elite and a narrow stratum of highly skilled intellectual and technical workers are able to survive, even flourish for a time-being, behind the ironclad walls of a global police state, with tightly controlled flows of labor and resources from the mass of humanity to the privileged few. However, such a Fortress World should not be counterposed to collapse, because it could not be sustained indefinitely. Apart from massive widespread conflict that unprecedented

inequalities and mass deprivation generate that elsewhere I have referred to as global civil war, the fortress can never be self-contained. The collapse of agriculture, resource depletion, the inability to maintain industrial production and global supply lines, and so on, would not make the fortress sustainable.

Why have Great Transitions made such little headway? It is precisely the failure of both the liberal elite and the left that has paved the way for the rapid advance of Barbarization. The liberal elite has pushed a savage capitalist globalization on us for four decades, in the process destabilizing and throwing into insecurity countless communities and whole countries and regions. This same elite that gave us Conventional Worlds is proving utterly ineffectual in its efforts to develop a reformist alternative to its [“Market Forces”](#) version. We need to be clear, moreover, that the technocratic, so-called “enlightened” sectors of the global elite organized in the World Economic Forum and other transnational forums are also committed to to a more regimented and authoritarian control over the global population, surveillance, and technocratic “global governance,” a commitment that makes substantial reform more difficult.

Debate as to whether the solution to our existential crisis passes through reform or a more radical transformation of a revolutionary nature is sterile and misleading. We need radical reforms that can ameliorate the worst of the climate catastrophe, redistribute wealth downward, expand social welfare on a mass scale, impose some regulation on the global market, and rein in capital’s policy prerogatives. The only hope of achieving radical reform is not by appealing to the good sense of the powers that be but by sustained mass struggle that could leave those powers with no alternative but to take substantial reform measures. In the long run, however, radical reform can only attenuate the crisis. As I insisted in my most recent book, [Can Global Capitalism Endure?](#), the system cannot survive beyond the present century. The question is, will it take humanity down with it, or can we overthrow it?

The struggle for radical reform may push back the threat of Barbarization and create more favorable conditions for an accumulation of counter-hegemonic and anti-systemic forces. The left has not, in most cases, been able to develop a credible and viable alternative to Conventional

Worlds or to provide effective leadership to the global revolt that has been mounting in recent years. There is a disjuncture between the proliferation of mass movements and popular uprisings around the world and a socialist-oriented left that could serve as a rudder to help steer these struggles into larger transformative projects. Localized and particularist struggles can achieve important goals and build pressure for more significant change. But they cannot rein in the power of global capital absent their aggregation into more far-reaching emancipatory projects. This is not a rhetorical call for socialist revolution—in any event, Raskin’s [Eco-communalism](#) conveys the idea. Rather, it is simply recognition that we cannot pull back from the abyss unless we are able to impose an alternative social logic over that of private capital accumulation.

Endnotes

1. Jon Henley, “Climate Crisis Could Displace More than 1.2bn People by 2050, Report Warns,” *The Guardian*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/sep/09/climate-crisis-could-displace-12bn-people-by-2050-report-warns>; International Rescue Committee, “100 Million People Displaced Around the World: What You Need to Know,” June 14, 2022, <https://www.rescue.org/article/100-million-people-displaced-around-world-what-you-need-know>; Marie McAuliffe and Anna Triandafyllidou, eds., *World Migration Report 2022* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2021), <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/wmr-2022-interactive/>.
2. Oxfam International, “Ten Richest Men Double Their Fortunes in Pandemic While Incomes of 99 Percent of Humanity Fall,” press release, January 17, 2022, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/ten-richest-men-double-their-fortunes-pandemic-while-incomes-99-percent-humanity>.

About the Author



William I. Robinson is a Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of California at Santa Barbara. His books include *The Global Police State*, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, *Latin America and Global Capitalism*, and *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention and Hegemony*. Previously, he was an investigative journalist in Central America and has lectured around the world on the global economy, international politics, and contemporary world affairs. He is active in several social justice movements, including immigrant rights in the United States and justice for Palestine. He holds a PhD in sociology from the University of New Mexico.



The Era of Rentier Capitalism

Guy Standing

In 2002, when Paul Raskin et al. penned the [Great Transition essay](#), I was in the throes of leaving the UN system, having become convinced that the multilateral system had been emaciated and captured by the forces about which I had been writing, and about which I have been writing in the ensuing two decades. In particular, by the end of the twentieth century, the global economy and global society had become dominated by Big Finance. Driven by the financial sector, governments created intellectual property rights regime based on the US model that gave monopoly profits to corporations possessing patents and so on, enabling corporate conglomeration to thwart the working of market forces.

Most saliently for our collective narrative, what happened in that period is that a new globalized class structure took shape. All transformations throughout history have been forged, for better or worse, by the emerging mass class. All Barbarisms have been forged by alliances of elements of the retreating “ruling” classes and elements attracted by atavistic narratives. All the great rebellions through history have been led by oppressed classes in defense of the commons.

It was clear to me—rightly or wrongly—that by 2002 the emerging mass class was the [precariat](#).¹ But as with all emerging “working classes,” it was split, not yet a class for itself. The progressive part required an alliance with the progressive intelligentsia in order to forge a narrative and countermovement. This stuttered into momentary life around the time of the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement, but it was a false dawn of primitive rebels, defiantly leaderless, knowing what they were against but not yet knowing what they wanted instead. In the wake of COVID and in the midst of huge drops in real living standards during the turbulent 2020s, a new progressive dawn is coming.

Rentier capitalism linked to financialization has coincided with another defining feature of the past two decades, best described as neo-mercantilism, reminiscent of what occurred early in the twentieth century, when the declining imperial powers were European and the rising one was the United States. Symbolically, since China joined the WTO in 2001, it has become the dominant imperial power and rentier state, in dangerous competition with the declining imperial power, the USA.

Globalization has involved nation-states and regional blocs, notably the European Union, advancing the economic returns, the rents, of their national corporate champions. It has been an era of huge subsidies from governments to cut production costs of corporations and to raise profits. It has been an era of the commodification of capital, orchestrated by private equity, backed by central banks. Big corporations do not compete with market forces: they just buy up potential rivals. And rentier capitalism has penetrated all sectors, including the blue economy, which covers 70% of the world's space.²

All the time, new class configurations emerge. The global plutocracy are rentiers supreme, gaining billions on top of their billions while economic crises plunge the precariat into more debt and distress. But the beneficiaries are not just the proverbial top 0.1%. They include the elite and salariat below them, amounting to about 30% of the population in a typical OECD country. The value of their private property has boomed under rentier capitalism. They look down on the precariat and may feel sorry for them and their discontent. But it is more likely to be pity, rather than empathy. And pity is akin to contempt.

And here comes the [Barbarization](#). At the political level, it is marked by a vulgar neo-fascist populism, marked by atavism, in which populists promise to bring back some mythical Yesterday. We have seen it in Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro and their amoral entourages on one side of the Atlantic, and we have seen it on the other side in Viktor Orban, Vladimir Putin, the forces around Brexit, now, sadly, in Sweden and Italy.

It is all too easy to be gloomy, especially in a global system of hypocrisy over vicarious violence. However, there is a countermovement taking shape, as the precariat grows and becomes more of a class for itself. A countermovement takes time to evolve, and only afterwards do commentators

see it was there. The Owl of Minerva only flies after Dusk.

But a necessary condition for a progressive transformation is that the old progressive agenda must be fully exposed as defunct for the times. This has surely become clear since 2002, with both State Socialism and Social Democracy now little more than “dead men walking.” Twentieth-century laborism, with its commitment to a goal of full employment, is holding back transformation.

The new dawn must begin with a correct diagnosis of rentier capitalism and a strategy for dismantling it. Ultimately, rentier capitalism is about the extension of private property rights at the expense of the commons, which have been systematically plundered, emaciating the essential base of “society.” The beautiful thing is that it is not only the precariat who value and understand the vital need for the commons. Most people understand it. An anger-driven struggle to revive the commons and turn them into the base of a new Renaissance will lead to a new class alliance, an alliance of social forces that is vital if a Great Transition is to occur.

Endnotes

1. Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, 3rd ed. (London, Bloomsbury, 2021).
2. Guy Standing, *The Blue Commons: Rescuing the Economy of the Sea* (London, Pelican, 2022).

About the Author



Guy Standing is Professorial Research Associate at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He is a Fellow of the British Academy of Social Sciences; co-founder and now honorary co-president of Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN); and Council member of the Progressive Economy Forum. His books include *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens*, *The Corruption of Capitalism: Why Rentiers Thrive and Work Does Not Pay*, *Plunder of the Commons: A Manifesto for Sharing Public Wealth*, and *Battling Eight Giants: Basic Income Now*.



Panel 2: Highlighting Bright Spots



Movements Show the Way

Victoria Brittain

The scenarios in the [Great Transition essay](#) were mapped out in that other world of twenty years ago, when Conventional Worlds of [Policy Reform](#) and [Market Forces](#) had not so dramatically failed. There is so much to say about how the world has evolved, but I have gone for brevity and, I hope, clarity.

[Barbarization](#) is an accurate word for the realities we live today. Here are some examples: state torture, kidnapping, assassinations, bombing of civilians, occupations of countries for decades, gross and growing economic inequality within countries and between countries. All this is now normalized in the practices of the most powerful country on the planet and is copied on every continent.

Also, for the first time, we are living in a world where, according to UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 100 million people have been forcibly displaced by the linked issues of climate change and war, for which the key responsibilities lie with Western governments' policy choices.¹ The International Organization for Migration has predicted that 1.5 billion people will be forced from their homes by 2050. An international academic team of scientists has forecasted that by 2070 three billion people will be living in deadly high-heat-stress areas.² We are witnessing a first phase of climate suffering in the Global South, and the rest of the world will not escape in the coming escalation.

[Fortress World](#) is also normalized by Western governments ignoring international law: the Mediterranean Sea is a graveyard as Europe repels refugees with boats, walls, armies, and payments to Libya, Niger, and Turkey to keep them away. Australia imprisons them on remote islands, the UK government fights its own judiciary to fly them to Central Africa, and the US uses a panoply of inhuman cruelty on the Mexican border.

How do we catalyze change? A reinvigorated peace movement is part of the answer. The arms manufacturers and their political allies are essential targets for action against their distortion of ethical values and policies. The failure of the 2003 worldwide mass movement actions against the West's war on Iraq brought disillusionment and cynicism as the US-led military coalition ignored it and went ahead to destroy an ancient civilization and an organized, educated, modern country—like others before and since. But there are still more vibrant peace movements in action across the world (especially against nuclear weapons).

Across the Global South, there are strong grassroots movements for justice, ecological, and sustainability issues massively embraced by the youth, in particular, on every continent. From Gaza to Latin America, collectives of artists are the lifeblood of these movements. Against all odds, these artists and activists keep hope alive of the different future many of us believe is possible.

The collapse of the “rules-based international order” which followed the shock of World War II's scenes of barbarism became our reality long before we saw Donald Trump in power. (Think President George W. Bush and Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba, devised to be outside US and international law and where the invention of a category of prisoner called “enemy combatant” for President Bush by his lawyers evaded the 1949 Geneva Conventions on the rights of prisoners, and doomed almost 1,000 men seized by the US in Pakistan and Afghanistan.) Guantanamo Bay and other secret US prisons from Asia to Europe symbolize how complete lack of accountability in the US War on Terror twenty years ago became the order under which we still live now. The torturers, the lawyers, and the politicians who gave the orders flourish today, but their war crimes will not be forgotten by history.

A significant multiplier of resistance to Barbarism lies in the call for a **New Enlightenment** in which education and transformed media would be infused with the key topics and questions surrounding a Great Transition. The ambitious educational goal would require a worldwide mobilization of linked but autonomous groups ready to animate these ideas which could produce a society informed enough to transform our limping democracies into a planetary civilization and change the world. The seeds of this lie in multiple strands of citizen journalism across the world already challenging the misinformation power of much mainstream media.

Finally, I very much appreciate Paul Raskin's [words](#) of "action based on militant hope" and believe there is much in this discussion which equips us with hope to face the dramatic realities of this last twenty years and its trajectory into Barbarization. The "stuff of dreams," as Richard Falk [put](#) his hopes, is to work for.

Endnotes

1. "More Than 100 Million Now Forcibly Displaced: UNHCR Report," *UN News*, June 16, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/06/1120542>.
2. Xu, Chi et al., "Future of the Human Climate Niche," *PNAS* 117 (2020): 11350–11355.

About the Author



Victoria Brittain served as a journalist in Saigon, Algiers, Nairobi, Washington, and London, working for The Guardian and other media outlets in the UK, US, and France. She has worked extensively in Africa and the Middle East and has written, co-written, and edited a dozen books and plays dealing with the Cold War, the so-called war on terror, and structural violence in Palestine and Lebanon, frequently through the lens of women's experience. Her latest books are *Love and Resistance in the Films of Mai Masri* and *Writing Palestine*, edited with Haifa Zangana.



Embracing Planetary Flow

Susan Butler

Twenty years after the publication of the [Great Transition essay](#), we remain stuck in [Conventional Worlds](#). However, that system is fast falling apart, all by itself. We are heading into Barbarization, including both [Breakdown](#) and (perhaps temporarily) [Fortress World](#). But this is necessary for the Great Transition to begin for a clear and simple reason: we need a new mindset. We can't just smoothly reform ourselves out of our old civilization and into the Great Transition because the old categories of thought need to completely break down.

Amazingly, this is already happening spontaneously. My evidence is the astonishing war on truth taking place across so many disciplines at once—politics, journalism, health, education, and even science. Our long-term mass pickling in the bad faith world of advertising, our enthrallment with the beautiful world of movies, and now the epistemological wilderness of social media is having an effect. Old certainties look quaint, their seamy underside is exposed, and the toxic ulterior motives in the manufacturing of consent are evident everywhere.

We are in for a period of serious strangeness, volatility, and uncertainty. I am glad some of the global organizations are facing up to uncertainty. They will gain humility. Because it is beyond us. We can't, as government officials or even as activists, put our hands on the ship and steer it. All we can do is contribute ideas, memes, and values. We can care. We can stay true to our experience of love and faith. This is what can ensure immunity to the various creeping totalisms now becoming epidemic.

To get a break from the uncertainties, I like Peter Zeihan, whose most recent book is *The End of the World is Just the Beginning*. According to his research, our overshoot situation has been heading into reverse for a long time. If you desperately need more 30 and 40-somethings, because your largest cohort is retiring en masse, you should have started working on that

years ago. According to Zeihan, Pax Americana, put in place after World War II to neutralize the Soviet threat, promoted globalized peace and prosperity over the past seventy years so successfully that industrialization became possible for much of the developing world, prompting large populations to move out of rural agriculture and into burgeoning cities with employment opportunities. Fewer children were needed.

The US has been abandoning the global policeman project since the end of the Cold War. We no longer maintain the large fleet of destroyers it takes to patrol the sea lanes. And we no longer have any interest in making the world safe for China. Globalization is coming to an end. Without it, China cannot carry on. 80% of its food and energy comes from far away, and it has an export-based economy. Moreover, it has the worst demographics in the world. No more Conventional World there before too long, even without some enemy disrupting its vulnerable ocean-based supply chains. Without safe shipping lanes, without China, without six-continent-wide just-in-time supply chains, the cell phone is no longer possible. Our huge incredibly interdependent world is starting to unravel. Only regional trade will be possible, and much will depend on the happenstance of geography. With a nod to humanity's reliable propensity for war, Zeihan expects China to cease to exist within ten years, 500 million perishing of famine within a year once food and energy are largely cut off. This is the kind of previously unthinkable change we will be seeing, which will presumably start making us think differently.

Another certainty, besides geography and demographics, Zeihan factors into all his forecasts is war. It looks to me like World War III has already started. Violent conflict between the major powers, East and West, has already begun and can only make everything worse, speeding up the drastic changes we were already in for. Europe this winter will be showing us a lesson in what it means not to have fossil fuels available as we are accustomed to. It is one thing to virtue-signal, but quite another to suffer the physical discomfort and political instability we confront without fossil fuels.

Another certainty is migration: because of war and climate change, this is set to increase to astonishing dimensions. Large populous areas are becoming uninhabitable. Before long, migration will become a major thing even within the United States. Once an area gets hit with natural disasters so frequently that rebuilding no longer seems viable, especially if governments are

weakened by infighting and finance get wobbly, rebuilding won't happen. If energy supplies are compromised often enough, hotter areas will start to empty out. Pretty soon everyone in the US—and the world—will either be on the move themselves or dealing with an influx of people.

Migrants, being human, are intelligent and have agency. They cannot be wished away, walled out, or outlawed. They have to be dealt with. Ironically, just as many economies are threatening to shrink because of demographic insufficiency, millions of people will soon have no economy to belong to. Perhaps healthy people of any race will soon be a greatly sought-after resource.

All these certainties will have to be dealt with, but critical uncertainties, and opportunities, still lie in wait in the realities Zeihan never mentions: psychology, philosophy, and culture. Physical limits form a frame, but within that, anything can happen, dependent only upon life and the limitless human spirit. High tech is the crowning achievement sitting atop globalized industrialization. But technology sits first of all atop water, food, energy, basic security, and social cohesion. All of these are at risk from war and climate change. And everything sits atop fossil fuel use, which is depleting and needs to stop anyway because of climate disruption. So, before too long, there will be no more high tech. Hard to imagine because tech has become so entwined with our modes of production that without it, production must shrink to suit pencil-and-paper modes.

We are getting lessons fast and furiously, from the pandemic, from supply chain disruption, from migration, from war, and from ubiquitous unintended consequences. It would seem that enough new lessons are fast approaching to effect a change to our mindset.

In conclusion, the world is about to see the end of globalization. Without the supply chains supporting reliable high tech, Conventional World is completely out of the picture, as is a [New Paradigm](#) since that seems to require a high-tech foundation. Likewise, [Fortress World](#), if that can even get started, will be short lived if it is dependent on long supply chains. Without social cohesion and productivity, no center will hold. What is left is [Eco-communalism](#) which can exist at any scale. As detailed by other contributors, there are many kinds of initiatives all over the world headed in this direction, preparing the way.

Eco-communalism can benefit from disorder, disruption, and difficulty. Humans evolve best when challenged. We made it through ice ages, and we will survive global warming, especially once

Conventional World comes to a crashing halt. “Vast coordinated action” won’t be necessary to bring it down. Conventional World as we speak is strangely and irrationally bringing about its own demise—in Europe, in Russia, in China, and in North America. Eco-communalism will rush in once the “sacrosanct state-based order” fades away, and the opportunistic demagogues fail. There will be no other choice.

We don’t have to organize to make it happen. We don’t need “structures of collective coordination” to save ourselves because any structures made with the mindset of our existing civilization won’t last anyway. We can just relax, find our center, and love fiercely. The rest will come, without effort, without planning, by simply being ourselves and merging with the ineluctable ecological flows of our beautiful blue planet.

About the Author



Susan Butler is a certified permaculture designer and a designer of passive solar and natural buildings. Previously, she specialized in historical preservation and studied alternative medicine. She has published articles on local community economics, transportation and land use, and climate change mitigation.



The Case for Optimism

David Christian

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).

About the Author



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.



Three Sources of Hope

Guy Dauncey

The [Great Transition scenarios](#), detailed in the 2002 [Great Transition essay](#), stand the test of time. All six are alive and well, not as scenarios but as realities.

In the two Conventional World scenarios, [market forces](#) still determine almost everything, regardless of the human or ecological costs. [Policy reforms](#) to guide us towards a more sustainable world are in play every day, often to good effect, but usually riddled with lobbyists' loopholes.

In the two Barbarization scenarios, Trump and his MAGA Republicans are working hard to build a [Fortress World](#) that will protect the billionaires and punish the rest, derided as "losers." If you are homeless, burnt out of your home by a forest fire, or flooded out of your village, the [Breakdown](#) scenario is also already happening, as [33 million people in Pakistan](#) know all too well.

In the two Great Transition scenarios, the [Eco-communalist](#) future is happening in a scattered patchwork of initiatives, but with little that approaches self-sustaining communities. On Vancouver Island, where I live, tens of thousands of people want to live this way, but the Conventional World's planning, money, and land ownership rules foil all but the most persistent dreamer. The [New Paradigm](#), which I suspect is desired by 75% of Canadians (all but conservative voters), is probably the furthest away, with very few institutional advances in its direction.

This makes it challenging, as I peer through the tears and the tear gas to surmise our possible future. But during the 1920s, in the United States, who would have predicted the hugely radical

changes that happened in the 1930s under Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal? Almost none. Who, during the 1930s in Great Britain, would have predicted the creation of a full welfare state within fifteen years? On the flip side, during the optimistic first decade of the 1900s, who would have predicted the slaughter of World War I that was to come? This line of thought can cut both ways.

Yet I am determined. I hold onto hope, and do whatever I can to express it. My hope has three sources. The first is cosmo-evolutionary. In response to the law of entropy, I believe—along with others—that there is a balancing principle at work called syntropy, a self-organizational tendency that operates through consciousness, giving us agency. The entire Universe is deemed to be panpsychic, enabling syntropy to operate everywhere, as the Seattle neuroscientist Christof Koch has [concluded](#).

Most scientists are mystified by the origins and nature of consciousness, and similarly mystified—or appalled if they are strict materialists—by the notion of syntropy. From this perspective, it is syntropy that causes atoms to self-organize into molecules, molecules to self-organize into organisms, couples to choose to make their marriages work, climate activists to devote their lives to ensuring that the crisis does not become a global catastrophe, and Great Transition Network members to work for a great transition. Seen through this lens, our impulse to build a better world stems from this ancient syntropic impulse, dating right back to the birth of the Universe. That is what I call “deep hope.”

My second source of hope is the strength of “the movement.” Writing as someone who is deeply immersed in the policy world, and working on multiple fronts, I observe a fairly consistent consensus of ideas and proposals for change within the various movements for climate action, biodiversity action, social justice, peace, affordable housing, a living wage, a well-being social solidarity economy, financial and banking reform, democratic reform, Black Lives Matter, Indigenous Land Back, regenerative organic farming, prison reform, and so on. I exclude what used to be known as the New Age movement, and the holistic health movement, where I observe a retreat from progressive advocacy and an advance into unhinged conspiracy theories.

I observe, however, that most people, in most of these movements, are not well-briefed on what is happening in the other movements. The days are just too short. The climate activists

and affordable housing advocates don't know about public banking, or how central banks could contribute through Quantitative Easing (QE) for People. The biodiversity activists don't know about community land trusts. The peace activists don't know about the housing solutions. And yet we need each other. No one can get elected on a climate platform alone. The strength of the Green New Deal is that it recognizes that climate action needs climate justice, which needs economic and housing justice.

Each of the movements feeds into the river of progressive change. My hope lies in the potential for integrative initiatives that weave the movements together. As the decade advances, we will see a steady increase in climate-induced disasters, debt, evictions, and political distress. The paranoid MAGA movement is going "[Full Caesar](#)," working to replace democracy with authoritarian leadership, blind to the historical reality that this marked the beginning of the fall of the Roman Empire.

We need to counteract this with a stronger opposing force. My third source of hope, therefore, is not to predict the future but to make it happen. If I was to draft a Theory of Change for the whole wide river, it might look like this:

IF leaders can work together who are committed to building the larger movement, the river of change;

IF such leadership can be funded, enabling them to reach out to leaders in the many contributing movements;

IF they (we) can develop a cohesive platform for progressive change that will excite and unite most people in the contributing movements;

IF we can develop self-organized study circles that will enable people learn what unites them, and contribute to the platform for change;

IF people promote the platform in their various initiatives and protests, spreading awareness to the public and media; and

IF we can inspire political parties to embrace the platform, people to run for political office, and all of us to campaign to help them win,

THEN we will be able to achieve transformational change at the depth needed for the great transition,

BECAUSE this, or something like it, is what it will take.

About the Author



Guy Dauncey is an author and ecofuturist working to develop a positive vision of a sustainable future, and to translate that vision into action. He is the founder of the British Columbia Sustainable Energy Association and the author or co-author of ten books, including *The Climate Challenge: 101 Solutions to Global Warming* and *Journey to the Future: A Better World Is Possible*. He is an Honorary Member of the Planning Institute of British Columbia, a Fellow of the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland, and a Fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts.



The Practical Idealism of Ecovillages

Frank Fischer

In his opening essay, Paul Raskin has raised the most critical question facing the future of the next generations. When it comes to assessing the Global Scenario Group's [scenarios](#), I would first note that they have been very helpful in teaching environmental politics. Until I discovered them, I usually searched around to find ways to portray the future under severe climate change. The Great Transition proved to be a very useful framework for discussing the possibilities with students. While the scenarios can no doubt be updated, I have still found nothing more helpful.

As for the specific question—Which future are we living in?—I think that all three models will be evident for some time, depending on different circumstances around the world. The Conventional World will surely do its best to hang on for as long as possible, before turning full-scale to [Fortress World](#). How long the existing system can manage to survive is unclear. It is easier to predict the hard life for those outside the fortress; they will live with poverty, hunger, and violence. Here forms of barbarism will everywhere be present.

Unfortunately, much of the work done in the name of transition and sustainability unwittingly operates within the parameters of techno-industrial culture. I have found this to be true of many well-intentioned environmental projects, including most of the Transition Town efforts I have visited. The point is even more pertinent when it comes to academic work. Very little of the teaching and research in contemporary universities recognizes or acknowledges the need for a deeper structural transition. Nearly all of it remains safely ensconced in the [Policy Reform](#) mode, serving mainly to help sustain the unsustainable system of which it is a part.

The only sustainable strategy that I see is a holistic form of [Eco-communalism](#) which stands outside of the techno-capitalist system and its presuppositional boundaries. Much of the

discussion of the Eco-communalism, however, remains too abstract. It tends, as such, to ignore practical alternatives at hand. As the result of the effort to think through the alternatives with students, I ended up writing a [book](#) that called for Eco-communalism and presented the ecovillage movement as the most developed and available form I could identify.

To be sure, intellectual work is essential; still, however well-intentioned, it is too often disconnected from the practical tasks at hand. Here the thing that is most impressive about ecovillagers is that, on a day-to-day basis, they practice what they preach. Dedicated to living self-sufficiently in keeping with a set of ecological principles, they are idealistic and practical at the same time.

These environmentalists are essentially committed to the sort of egalitarian, nonmaterialist mode of consciousness we generally advocate. As I explored this movement, both intellectually and personally, I found well-developed networks of people living in ecovillages around the world, from Germany, Brazil, Denmark, Thailand, India, the United States, just to mention the few that I know best. I also surprisingly discovered that Senegal has developed a national ecovillage program sponsored by a central government agency, established with the help of the Global Ecovillage Network.

Operating outside of conventional economic and cultural arrangements, life in many of them is culturally rich—with films, lectures, crafts, colorful festivals, and art exhibitions—and quite livable. They are also politically engaged in environmental activism outside of their own orbit. Internally they typically practice a politically challenging form of consensus decision-making. Rather than just emphasize the idealistic features of the ecovillage model, which are to be applauded, I stressed their potential as a defensive form that people can turn to when the climate crisis hits in full force. This includes the urban variant of the ecovillage, some of which are quite impressive.

Given its goal of pioneering material sufficiency in socially harmonious communities, the movement offers a concrete, existing alternative model to build on and extend, rural or urban. Many will say that a turn to ecovillages is impractical. And that is the case at present for most. But things are starting to change rapidly, and the options might well look quite different under social and economic collapse. As circumstances become more and more unbearable, many can discover

the ecovillage—or something like it—as a viable alternative. It may not be available to the masses, but a turn to urban ecovillages, as well as eco-neighborhoods, could substantially increase its availability.

History, moreover, bears this out. During times of severe hardship, many people collectively retreat to the land, in part to grow food for their families and in part to escape social turmoil in the cities. As new generations confront similar hardships, they can discover and use the low-carbon tools and practices that the ecovillage movement has rediscovered or developed for survival in just such times. In addition, these eco-communities can serve ethically and spiritually to preserve democratic and egalitarian values essential to a sustainable transition in many parts of the world, even if only pockets of sustainability.

None of this is to say that ecovillages are the solution to the crisis. We still need to politically struggle globally for the Great Transition. But we also need to look reality in the face. The transition is not currently in the offing, and it is not at all clear if or when it will come about. Thus, as Lester Brown put it, we need a [Plan B](#). The ecovillage movement, I submit, should have a place in that plan.

About the Author



Frank Fischer is a research scholar at Humboldt University in Berlin and Faculty Fellow at the University of Kassel in Germany, as well as an Emeritus Professor of Politics and Global Affairs at Rutgers University. His research focuses on environmental policy, the politics of climate change, and US foreign policy. He is a co-editor of the journal *Critical Policy Studies* and the author of such books as *Citizens, Experts, and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge*; *Climate Crisis and the Democratic Prospect: Participatory Governance in Sustainable Communities*; and *Truth and Post-Truth in Public Policy*. He holds a PhD from New York University.



Rebuilding the World from Within

Tim Hollo

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



Tim Hollo is executive director of the Green Institute, where he focuses on eco-political philosophy, practice, and policy related to the rights of nature, universal basic income, and participatory democracy. He is a Visiting Fellow at the Sydney Environment Institute at the University of Sydney and author of *Living Democracy: An Ecological Manifesto for the End of the World as We know It*. He previously served as Communications Director for Australian Greens Leader Christine Milne and has been both a board member and campaigner at Greenpeace Australia Pacific. As both environmentalist and musician, Tim founded Green Music Australia to reduce the environmental impact of the music sector and drive social and cultural change.



A Flowering of Radical Change

Ashish Kothari

As always, Paul Raskin stimulates with his opening reflections. I acknowledge that in the art of analyzing the present (“Which future are we in?”) and predicting the future (“Which future are we heading towards?”), others are much more capable. I would like to therefore restrict my response to the radical transformations taking place right now towards greater justice, equity, and sustainability, and comment on what I think is the potential of these to save life (human and non-human) from the perils of regression and complete collapse (for which Raskin’s use of the word “barbarization” is rather unfortunate, given that it was a derogatory way that the Greeks and Romans referred to those who did not speak their tongues, were foreign, and considered “uncivilized”).

Over the last decade, I have been trying to document, understand, and be part of many such transformations in India (through the Vikalp Sangam process) and globally (through the Radical Ecological Democracy and Global Tapestry of Alternatives processes).¹ This is not the place to explore these initiatives in any detail, but I would like to mention a few to show what is happening and illustrate their potential. The Zapatista autonomy movement in what is today known as “Mexico” is well-known to many; not so well-known but equally exciting and radical is the Kurdish freedom movement in the quadri-junction of what are today known as “Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey.” In both of these, there is a strong rejection of the “state” as a power-centralizing institution, inevitably doomed to be alienated from the “citizens” it claims to represent and work on behalf of. In both, democracy is radical, exercised from the ground up, and encompassing both political and economic dimensions, with a firm rejection of statism and capitalism. Also, in both, ecological limits and respect of the earth are part of the worldviews on which practice is based, as is a deep commitment to the freedom and emancipation of women from various forms of patriarchy and toxic masculinity. The assertion of cultural identity and diversity, and

education systems that are suited to all the above rather than homogenized schooling that creates clones to fit into currently dominant systems, are also in both. Finally, both are now a few decades old, and while they are by no means perfect, and face enormous challenges from the nation-states within which they are located (including an ongoing and globally neglected war waged by the Turkish state on the Kurdish region), they show the potential of a radical present and future.²

In central India, the Korchi Mahagrame Sabha, a federation of ninety village assemblies has asserted self-determination, the sustenance or revival of community-governed commons, tackling internal challenges such as gender inequality, and much else.³ It does not reject the Indian state, but attempts to move towards relative autonomy from it, while also engaging with it to make it more accountable to people's rights and welfare.

The potential of holistic transformation that these and other initiatives show can be represented by a Flower of Transformation, with five petals: radical political democracy, radical economic democracy, social justice, cultural (and knowledge) diversity, and ecological wisdom.⁴ There are, of course, many dimensions of these and a bewildering *pluriverse* of practices and worldviews across the world, but many or all of them encompass ethics and principles that may be in common (albeit with diverse manifestations): solidarity, interdependence, dignity of labor, diversity, autonomy, human rights and rights of nature, and peace and nonviolence, among others.

We are, of course, very far from such holistic transformations, locally to globally. But I contend that not only the seeds, but also the saplings and trees (or, to not forget the seas, the polyps and reefs) of a radical change are very much present; they are only much less visible than the acts and ideologies of devastation and regression. We tend to focus much more on the bad news than the good: pick up any newspaper or watch any 24/7 news channel as evidence. Despite so much Indigenous and modern scientific knowledge to the contrary, we think of the "fittest" as those who can compete to the death, rather than those who can collaborate to thrive in situations of both plenty and scarcity. Both ancient paradigms (*swaraj*, *buen vivir*, *sumak kawsay*, *kyosei*, *ubuntu*, *minobimaatisiwin*, commons, and many more, including radical reinterpretations of mainstream religions) and new ones (degrowth, ecofeminism, ecosocialism, and more) exist as substrata under what is more visible, many manifested in practice now, many waiting to erupt.

Will these grounded and conceptual alternatives lead us to a better collective future? I have no idea; the forces of regression and domination are way too powerful for this to happen with any ease or any time soon. I also do not doubt that we will see—indeed, are already seeing—various collapses. But let us recall that in the late nineteenth-century, Europe’s colonial nation-states seemed like they would continue to rule the earth for many more centuries; within the next few decades, most were overthrown as undercurrents and sporadic freedom movements coalesced into major eruptions. Let us also note how, within a century, the feminist movement has transformed situations of deeply entrenched patriarchy going back a few thousand years, into much greater freedom for women (and other persecuted sexes/genders), though of course there is a long way to go. If movements of resistance and alternative transformation can come together from the local to the global, to achieve the “scale” that individual movements cannot, we may yet follow in the footsteps of these inspiring movements to create macro-transformations in the five spheres of the Flower over the next few generations.

Grounded movements continue to struggle against the tide, but do not lose hope. The Kurds lose comrades every day to Turkish bombing, but continue to dream a just world and practice what they can to achieve it. Despairing and losing hope is, to my mind, a luxury only the urban Global North can afford. These grounded movements do not indulge in future scenario-building (which does not mean it is not important!); rather, they envision scenarios they want to head towards and act in the here and now to achieve what they can of these scenarios, modifying them along the way if necessary. Along with such movements, why not dare to hope that the ecological and social revolutions for which millions aspire, powerful signs of which already exist, will arise from amidst the crises and collapses?

Endnotes

1. See www.vikalpsangam.org, radicalecologicaldemocracy.org, and globaltapestryofalternatives.org.
2. Much is available on the Zapatista movement online; on the Kurdish movement, see Ashish Kothari, "The Flower of Transformation Blooms in Kurdistan," *Meer*, September 13, 2022, www.meer.com/en/70676-the-flower-of-transformation-blooms-in-kurdistan.
3. Neema Pathak Broome, Shrishtee Bajpai, and Mukesh Shende, "On the Cusp: Reframing Democracy and Well-Being in Korchi, India," *Beyond Development*, 2020, beyonddevelopment.net/on-the-cusp-reframing-democracy-and-well-being-in-korchi-india/.
4. See again Kothari, "The Flower of Transformation."
5. Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta, *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), radicalecologicaldemocracy.org/pluriverse.

About the Author



Ashish Kothari is a founder of the Indian environmental group Kalpavriksh. He has taught at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, coordinated India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan process, and served on Greenpeace International and Greenpeace India boards. He is active in such people's movements as Vikalp Sangam, Global Tapestry of Alternatives, and Radical Ecological Democracy. He is co-author of *Churning the Earth: Making of Global India* and co-editor of *Alternative Futures: India Unshackled* and *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*.



Seeds of Eco-communalism

Anitra Nelson

In the [*Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead*](#) (2002), Paul Raskin and his co-authors theorize three distinct types of [scenarios](#) for the twenty-first century as essentially more of the same (Conventional Worlds), socio-political and economic collapse (Barbarization), or just and sustainable social transformation (Great Transitions). [Eco-communalism](#) and a [New Paradigm](#) characterize the transformational route. The question, twenty years later, is whether we as a planetary species are clearly moving beyond market societies supported by capitalist states where production for trade and growth economies breach the limits of Earth's and people's regenerative capacities. In fact, in 2022, rather than fading, we see a deepening struggle between these three forces of continuity, despair, and a resistance pregnant with possibilities.

I have staked my life on the path of hope.¹ I see Eco-communalism as the underlying, if not explicit, thrust of a range of socio-ecological movements such as degrowth, eco-socialism, eco-feminism, food sovereignty, ecovillages, the social and solidarity movement, eco-anarchism, bioregionalism, decolonization, ecological justice, and commoning. I see activists and advocates in these substantially grassroots movements unifying around socio-political justice, the right for every single person's basic needs to be met (no more, no less) while respecting Earth as the source of life for the living planet, its limits, and our responsibilities to regenerate Earth as part of our own healing as a collective species. This is the content of the burgeoning green wedge in Raskin's most optimistic rendering of the world in 2042 in Figure 4 of his 2022 provocation ["Which Future Are We Living in?"](#)

However, the social and ecological values and activities of these movements are continuously

eroded by market forces. For a couple of centuries, these powerful forces have been identified as “capital” and “commodification” and, most recently, as “neoliberalism” and “financialization.” Yet minority sub-movements have been emerging within the social and environmental movements mentioned, sub-movements identifying “money,” i.e., monetary relations and activities, as the primary barrier to our great transformation to postcapitalism. Where transitions (such as the socialist experiments of the twentieth century) include markets and continue to use money as a tool in decision-making over production, social and ecological values—as well as direct forms of democratic decision-making—are subordinated, jeopardized, or marginalized.

Moving beyond monetary relations and activities is a necessary but not sufficient step in releasing ourselves from the bonds of capital(ists), markets, and the states that support them. In my recent book [*Beyond Money: A Postcapitalist Strategy*](#), I outline why and how going beyond money will enable us to make the transformation necessary.² We know how to be sustainable by living modestly, using convivial tools and techniques, sharing and caring, and commoning, but the building blocks of making money as in private property and production for trade stymy us.

Production for trade and private property are key and entwined capitalist processes. Both can be replaced by processes structuring production on demand to directly fulfill basic needs, collective sharing, and commoning in a glocal future based on real social and ecological values.³ This implies a globe covered by small, relatively collectively sufficient, bioregional communities, not closed communities but rather open and interconnected communities, freely sharing their knowledge, skills, and cultures.⁴

In fact, the movements mentioned earlier have tended to grow and coalesce as globally networked nodes and communities of place, identifying bioregionally with their neighborhood in social-ecological ways, respecting Earth as their source of life. At the same time, breaching Earth’s limits has led to increasing “natural” disasters, including fires, floods, and pandemics, resilience to which centers on strengthening communities with their local landscapes as sources of life.⁵ In these ways there are push-and-pull forces hastening Eco-communalist transformation.

Endnotes

1. John Holloway, *Hope in Hopeless Times* (London: Pluto Press, 2022).
2. Anitra Nelson, *Beyond Money: A Postcapitalist Strategy* (London, Pluto Press, 2022).
3. *Beyond Money: Yenomon*, directed by Anitra Nelson (2022), 8 minutes.
4. See more at www.localfutures.org/.
5. Anitra Nelson, "Covid-19: Capitalist and Postcapitalist Perspectives," *Human Geography* 13(3): 305–309.

About the Author



Anitra Nelson is Honorary Principal Fellow at University of Melbourne, author of *Beyond Money: A Postcapitalist Strategy* and *Small is Necessary: Shared Living on a Shared Planet*, and co-author of *Exploring Degrowth*. She was the co-editor of *Housing for Degrowth: Principles, Models, Challenges and Opportunities* and *Food for Degrowth: Perspectives and Practices*. Her research focuses on affordability and sustainability in housing policy, and design of possible non-monetary economies. She holds a PhD from LaTrobe University.



From Vicious to Virtuous Cycles

Tom Oliver

With regards to flourishing of the human species and other life, the world in 2022 appears to be currently dominated by more worrying than hopeful trajectories. Since 2002, when the [Great Transition essay](#) was published, there has been a proliferation of global initiatives (such as the School Climate Strikes, Extinction Rebellion, Transition Towns movement, etc.) which perhaps begin to represent the [New Paradigm](#) or [Eco-communalism](#) trajectories so elegantly described by Paul Raskin et al., though we can appreciate the need for pragmatic realism in how these “niche” initiatives may struggle to flourish under dominant regimes. This is especially true given the almost inevitable near-term environmental and social shocks we face, which may lead to growing [barbarization](#). As just one example, mass human migration under climate change can prompt “knee-jerk” psycho-social reactions towards “survival mode” tribalism and xenophobia, which hamper progressive consciousness transformation. As the flow of climate refugees accelerates from a trickle to a flood, countries scramble to build walls more quickly.

Of course, change is also often nonlinear, and things can get worse very quickly (or better, though more on that shortly). “Vicious cycles” likely exist where we are locked into dynamics of decline, for example how political failure to address disaster risk is leading humanity into a “spiral of self-destruction,” as a United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction report has warned.¹ There is strong evidence for several negative feedback cycles, such as (1) how environmental degradation causes shocks that lead to less international cooperation and failure to make progress on transboundary environmental problems (e.g., pandemics, climate change, and water scarcity); (2) how the loss of nature in urban areas leads to lower levels of nature connectedness in citizens, which in turn means fewer pro-environmental behaviors; and (3) how financial and social insecurity leads to the election of right-wing leaders who promote

private benefits to select individuals and companies at the expense of wider society and the environment, thus creating yet more volatility.² Understanding how far different societies around the globe are along such vicious cycles (or whether any have managed to turn them around into “virtuous cycles”) is an outstanding empirical challenge.

Reversing vicious cycles is, of course, hugely challenging due to the range of “lock-in” mechanisms that prevent system transformation.³ Systems may even turn out be “interlocked,” wherein the possible solution to one vicious cycle is constrained by the existence of others (this is analogous to how a group of divers would be unable to move if they were all stepping on each other’s flippers). For example, some ecosystems are known to have the potential to “tip” into unfavorable regimes that provide fewer benefits, such as food production, for humans. The Great Dust Bowl in 1930s America was caused by interactions between land management (e.g., vegetation removal) and drought, leading to degradation in food production potential from which recovery was challenging.⁴ Droughts are, of course, much more likely under climate change—a phenomenon that has its own vicious cycles. For example, climate change causes extreme events which erode the human and financial capital that enable climate mitigation. And, of course, the expansion of intensive land use for food production also contributes to climate change. Thus, food systems and climate systems may be “interlocked” as part of interacting vicious cycles. In terms of unpicking such a Gordian knot, the challenge is daunting, though perhaps there will be more leverage in non-material (psychological and cultural) factors than

in structural/institutional and biophysical factors. At the very least, complementary actions on all fronts are needed; hence, the value in new initiatives like that from the UN Development Programme aiming to transform food systems through consciousness-raising approaches, going beyond traditional economic or technological “fixes.”⁵

Some might gloomily suggest that with so many vicious cycles at play in our linked social and ecological systems, the game is up. There are indeed whole new online forums, such as the “deep adaptation” community, who seek to find meaningful ways to live as part of a “human endgame.”⁶ Personally, I am more agnostic. In addition to the vicious cycles that we are starting to understand, there are no doubt many hidden virtuous circles. With such complexity of system dynamics at play, and the inherent deep uncertainty in emergent outcomes, anticipating system

trajectories with any credibility is challenging. Of course, adopting an optimistic, as opposed to fatalistic, outlook, is also likely to be a prerequisite to create the necessary agency and motivation to steward the planetary system towards more positive outcomes for humanity and wider life.

I propose to be rationally agnostic while emotionally optimistic about our current and future situation. This includes recognizing the urgent need for much better empirical understanding of socio-ecological trajectories, which might hopefully shed light on the most fruitful intervention points for earth system stewardship.

Endnotes

1. United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, "Humanity's Broken Risk Perception Is Reversing Global Progress in a 'Spiral of Self-Destruction' Finds New UN report," press release, April 26, 2022, <https://www.undrr.org/news/humanitys-broken-risk-perception-reversing-global-progress-spiral-self-destruction-finds-new>.
2. Tom Oliver et al., "A Safe and Just Operating Space for Human Identity: A Systems Perspective," *The Lancet Planetary Health* 6, no. 11 (2022), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2542519622002170>; Tom Oliver, *The Self Delusion: The Surprising Science of Our Connection to Each Other and The Natural World* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2020).
3. André Dornelles et al., "Towards a Bridging Concept for Undesirable Resilience in Social-Ecological Systems," *Global Sustainability* 3 (2020): e20.
4. Richard Hornbeck, "The Enduring Impact of the American Dust Bowl: Short and Long-Run Adjustments to Environmental Catastrophe," *American Economic Review* 102 (2012): 1477–1507.
5. For more on the UNDP Conscious Food Systems Alliance, see <https://consciousfoodsystems.org/>.
6. The Deep Adaptation Forum can be accessed at <https://www.deepadaptation.info/>.

About the Author



Tom Oliver is a Professor of Applied Ecology at the University of Reading. He has advised the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Government Office for Science and Technology on building national resilience against long term trends. He has been a member of the European Environment Agency scientific committee and authored *The Self Delusion: The Surprising Science of Our Connection to Each Other and the Natural World*.



Short-Term Action for Long-Term Change

Gus Speth

Moving the telescope across the landscape, one sees today a mix of all [six futures](#) detailed in the 2002 [Great Transition essay](#) almost everywhere one looks, in varying degrees. But there does seem to be one dominant “present,” and that is [Market Forces](#). Certainly, that is true in the United States, where [Policy Reform](#) struggles to get a foothold. That foothold is present yet quite weak nationally, albeit stronger in some states like California and New York. With varying degrees of nation-state involvement around the globe, market capitalism is today’s dominant system of political economy. Conventional World rules the day. We have not escaped it.

But where we are is, of course, not necessarily where we are headed. The “we” here becomes important. Blessed are those who can assess far-away developments, but even after a spell in the United Nations and visits to 115 countries, I cannot.

I will focus here on the United States. Here, we must look at the first and second derivatives: which futures are growing in likelihood and which are picking up speed.

One clear feature of the US landscape, as I have recounted [elsewhere](#), is the increasing probability of a combination of [Fortress World](#) and social, environmental, and political [Breakdowns](#). It would be straightforward to add the evidence for this—a catalogue of many dispiriting things happening in this country since, say, 1980.

[Naomi Klein](#), [Thomas Homer-Dixon](#), and others have urged us to get crisis-ready, given that big shocks are surely coming, but there is not much evidence that that preparation is happening. Even on one of the most visible of these crises, climate change, there is precious little real planning. The US has no national plan of action on either the mitigation or adaptation fronts. Forewarned certainly does not mean forearmed.

Another and more hopeful alternative gaining strength on the American ground is [Eco-communalism](#), at least if that label can be used for the remarkable array of neighborhood, community, city, state, and regional initiatives now underway across the country. Many of these initiatives are marching under the banner of the [Solidarity Economy](#). My [impression](#) is that this version of Eco-Communalism is more advanced in a number of places around the world than it is in the United States.

If this is correct, what seems to be emerging is a foot race: can Policy Reform (from the top) and Eco-communalism (from the bottom) move fast enough to head off the emerging crises and system failures leading to Fortress World and Breakdowns? Despite the ways in which fast-evolving crises like the climate emergency can severely curtail positive possibilities, I [believe](#) there is still hope for the prospect of system change to a New Paradigm future, but we must make huge greenhouse gas reductions now through Policy Reform for that to remain feasible.

About the Author



Gus Speth is an Associate Fellow at Tellus Institute and co-chair of the Next System Project at the Democracy Collaborative. He has served as a professor at Vermont Law School and Dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. From 1993 to 1999, Speth was Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme and chair of the UN Development Group. Previously, he was founder and president of the World Resources Institute, professor of law at Georgetown University, chairman of the US Council on Environmental Quality in the Carter Administration, and co-founder of and senior attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council. He currently serves on the boards of the New Economy Coalition, the Center for a New American Dream, and the Climate Reality Project. He is the author, co-author, or editor of seven books, including *America the Possible: Manifesto for a New Economy* and *Angels by the River*.



Beyond Barbarization

Martha Van Der Bly

Amidst the darkness that many contributors have observed, and rightly so, we might want to explore the “future that we are living” in the spirit of what Paul Raskin has so poignantly [called](#) “militant hope.” So much has been achieved. So much progress in Humanity’s Greatest Project has been made. And all of that in “two tumultuous decades,” a blink of eternity’s eye. No wonder the world is spinning out of control and, as some might fear, is on the brink of self-inflicted destruction.

Planetary Society

While we are impatient to see a better future happening, let us not forget where we are coming from. “The global transition has begun—a planetary society will take shape over the coming decades,” opened the [Great Transition essay](#) twenty years ago. Truer words have never been spoken. Today, with breathtaking speed, our global transition is birthing the “*planetary society*” or “*world society*” or “*global society*”—or something that I called the *Pananthropoi*, the Society of Earthlings.¹ Societies, commonly defined as a large group of interacting people in a defined territory, sharing a common culture, are becoming one society.

Over the last decades, the sense of one defined territory of Earth has rapidly evolved, whether pushed by dreams of a shared human destiny or by the disaster of the climate crisis. Global consciousness of humanity, of *One People, One Earth* has moved to mainstream (youth) culture. Fifty years after the 1972 Stockholm Conference, the urgency of its slogan “Only One Earth” is firmly imprinted in our global consciousness: “There is No Planet B.”

Global interactions have increased through the unprecedented rise and rise and rise of social media, fostering—for better or worse—cross-global connections. A common culture is

emerging and not just imposed by McDonaldization as we feared twenty years ago.² But from below, creating diversity and pushing for more equality, increasingly so with voices from beyond the dominant Western, male, and white narrative.

The tragedy of the pandemic could be seen as a first truly global collective experience, while the response—sometimes qualified as a “massive global failure”—reminds us that our successes unite us as much as our failures.³ So yes, planetary society is rapidly emerging, and this, from a sociological point of view, is the greatest transition of all: the transition of a system of societies of “us” and “them” to one society that encompasses all. But it is no Utopia.

Fortress World

Connectivity does not necessarily foster solidarity: connectivity is a prerequisite for conflict. Global connectivity creates global relative deprivation, leading to widespread anger and frustration, and rightly so: as the One World Society advances, its deep economic inequalities are increasingly exposed. In spring 2006, I wrote, “For those...acting from a cosmopolitan belief system, the all-encompassing society might seem the desirable outcome of individual choice...but for others, the awareness of the world as a whole comes as a shock, as an imperative that is felt as something that is imposed, even as a conspiracy, rather than as a chosen belief system.”⁴ Today, behind the walls of [Fortress World](#) erected from Sweden to Italy, conspiracy theories flourish.

Breakdown

Many national societies were established after some sort of a civil war: the nearby future of world society looks bleak. In September, after the Ukrainian city of Izyum was liberated from the Russians, a mass burial site containing 440 graves was found. Some of the bodies were showing signs of mutilation and torture. War is the ultimate breakdown, the collapse of all hope for cooperation into the abyss of destruction. Is this the future that we are living today? In September 1941 (a time when our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents were alive), Dina Pronicheva, an actress at the Kiev Puppet Theatre, jumped in a ravine in Kiev before she was shot. She kept impeccably still on top of dead bodies below her, as Nazi boots were checking if she was killed. On September 29 and 30 of that year, 33,771 in Babi Yar people were shot manually, almost all Jewish. Only 28 survived.

Yes, we might be heading for Barbarization, but we are coming from Barbarization too.

A Global Collective Transformation

As world society advances, barbarism becomes internal. Almost literally: the onomatopoeic *bárbaros* was used by the Greeks to describe foreigners—but who is foreign in world society?

The global transformation of a system of societies to one society asks from us essentially a collective moral transformation: to overcome the barbarism within ourselves. Not as a noble option, but as a condition *sine qua non* for our collective survival.

Where to start, in a world in pain? Life is in the struggle, or, as Paul Raskin says, a “visionary struggle.” Over the last decades, planetary society advanced technically; the next decades, I argue, require a global collective transformation of the heart: a shift of focus on Self to a focus on the Other—and the Other does not necessarily have to be a Person or a Community. It could be Earth. The task is daunting—especially as technology has given us a new existential motto: *Selfie, Ergo Sum*—but not impossible.

All dreams start with the belief that something is possible. Somehow, we have resigned ourselves to the idea that human beings can achieve the most implausible technical things, but that we can never progress ethically or morally. That we always will kill, rape, go to war, destroy. That that is who we are, as a species. We are not. We must commit to bold, moral ambition. To the belief that our past does not define who we are as a people. That we can do better, be better.

Who Will Save the World?

After the war, Dina Pronicheva was the only survivor to testify at the 1946 Kiev-based war-crimes trial, delivering a calm and collected eye-witness statement integral to documenting the horrors that happened at Babi Yar.⁵ Perhaps we pin our hopes too much on movements, organizations, on the creation of World Society from Above. Perhaps we must trust the creation of world society from below. Often through unexpected agents. The course of history can be changed through a black woman who refuses to give up her seat in a bus.⁶ We never known when history calls us. We are all individual agents of change. Be ready.

What Can We Do?

We, who worked tirelessly for decades for a better future for our planet, for a global consciousness, for an awareness of humanity-as-a whole, for a better world for future generations—let us carry forward the torch, with militant hope, into a brighter future, illuminating the seeds of our fragile future in the world today. Destructive forces do not need a spotlight or a speaker; they speak for themselves. Fear and anger are loud political forces, but joy, love, trust, and solidarity are much harder to be heard or seen on the competitive global stage.

Let us shine a light on the unconventional, the magical, the unexpected, the unbelievable, the fantastical, that is all around us every day quietly forging the unforeseeable but brighter future we dream of.

For it has to be seen to be believed.

Endnotes

1. Martha C. E. Van der Bly, "Pananthropoi – Towards a Society of All-Humanity," *Globality Studies Journal* 37, no. 8 (September 2013).
2. Martha C. E. Van Der Bly, "The Universal Surname: A Theoretical-Empirical Enquiry into the Relationship between Globalization and Sameness," PhD dissertation, Trinity College Department of Sociology, Dublin, Ireland, 2007.
3. Jeffrey D. Sachs, Salim S. Abdool Karim, Lara Aknin, Joseph Allen, Kirsten Brosbøl, Francesca Colombo, et al., "The Lancet Commission on Lessons for the Future from the COVID-19 Pandemic," *The Lancet* 400, no. 10359 (2022), [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(22\)01585-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(22)01585-9/fulltext).
4. Van der Bly, "Pananthropoi."
5. *Babi Yar: Context* (Ukraine, 2021), documentary directed by Sergey Loznitsa, features Pronicheva's full witness-statement.
6. *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (USA, 2022), documentary directed by Johanna Hamilton and Yoruba Richen, reveals the story of Park's activism, radical politics beyond the Montgomery bus Boycott.

About the Author



Martha C.E. Van Der Bly is a sociologist specializing in globalization, world society, and national identity. Currently, she is working on a sociological documentary that explores the theme of global solidarity and an imagination of possible pathways towards peaceful relations. She has been a Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics, Honorary Visiting Fellow of City University London, Research Fellow at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, and a Research Associate at the Amsterdam Centre for Globalisation Studies (ACGS). She holds a PhD in Sociology from Trinity College Dublin at the Institute for International Integration Studies (IIS).



Weaving Diverse Strategies

Selvi Adaikkalam Zabihi

The forces and processes associated with the [scenarios](#) outlined in the 2002 [Great Transition essay](#) are playing out in ways that are complex and variegated, that look different from different perspectives, and that are certainly alarming but, in some views (including my own), still hopeful. Chaos and breakdown are increasing, sometimes in places we might not have expected. Fortresses are being built. Steps forward in policy or in efforts to reshape capitalism occur but are insufficient to address the crises we face. Learning and movement for empowerment at the local level, and a broader awareness of the needs of the age (backlash notwithstanding), offer signs of hope but have not turned the tide. The relative prevalence and impact, or summative upshot, of these developments will likely be clear only in hindsight.

But, as stated in the original essay, the purpose of considering the six scenarios was not to predict but to “support informed and rational action by providing insight into the scope of the possible.” At this point, twenty years later, we can hope that as it becomes more and more clear that the Conventional Worlds scenarios are not viable paths in and of themselves, and as the specter of [Breakdown](#) and [Fortress World](#) loom, a Great Transition will increasingly be recognized as a necessity rather than a utopian fancy.

Perhaps in this moment of flux and great complexity it is helpful to view destructive and constructive forces as interacting. We experience how advances in discourse or action of certain kinds are met with backlash. But the crises we are experiencing increase receptivity to new ideas and the will to pursue them. Similarly, with respect to strategy, perhaps efforts to work within the system, to dismantle it, and to build anew amidst the wreckage are not mutually exclusive alternatives amongst which we must choose. There are synergies between them that we could reinforce by understanding how they relate to each other.

Learning generated within current systems could be applied to building new ones. Dismantling creates space for the new. Useful elements of the old can be carried forward into the new in ways that make the distinction between evolution and rupture unclear. Multiple strategies, multiple fronts of the battle can advance at the same time.

That said, when the failure of Conventional Worlds and the threat of Breakdown and Fortress World do bring us to a tipping point, the greatest need is to have the range of alternatives developed to the greatest extent possible. The more learning that has accrued, the more viable the alternatives have become, the greater the possibility that we can pull ourselves back up over the edge of the cliff that we are toppling over. So if our analysis of scenarios is to inform strategy, I would argue in favor of emphasizing the building of the new: new processes of empowerment, new practices of commoning, new ways of organizing local collaboration and mutual advancement, new technologies (or recovered traditional ones made newly valued and viable), new ways of conceiving our identity, new stories, all of which draw on our collective inheritance as a species but recast and refine and build upon them with a new intention. It does not matter that some of these explorations might be at odds or even incompatible with each other. The approaches discussed here express a common desire for justice broadly understood, and a sense of solidarity that encircles the planet. We will have to discover over time which solutions are most viable. How to build the capacity to make such decisions at a collective level, and to implement them, seems a more pressing question now than which particular vision is the right one.

About the Author



Selvi Adaikkalam Zabihi is the Economic Justice Officer at the US Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs. She has taught courses on inequality and social justice at Western Washington University and Whatcom Community College and holds a master's degree in International Development Studies and Education Studies from Roskilde University, in Denmark.
