



October 2014

A Great Transition? Where We Stand

Paul Raskin

The following was delivered as a keynote address at the biennial conference of the International Society for Ecological Economics (ISEE) in Reykjavik, Iceland, in August 2014.



The point of departure is the premise that, for better or worse, history has entered the Planetary Phase of Civilization

Today's presentation marks the second consecutive century that I have had the honor of addressing this body on the theme of a Great Transition. The first time was at the 1998 meeting in Chile, where I introduced the Global Scenario Group's then-new framework for thinking about long-range futures. This time, with our passage into the new millennium well behind us, I'd like to offer some reflections on where we are on the journey and what we need to do to reach a worthy destination.

Multiple Futures

To begin, let's go back to the future to revisit those scenarios. The point of departure was—and is—the premise that, for better or worse, history has entered the Planetary Phase of Civilization, a shift as significant perhaps as earlier great transitions to settled agriculture and the modern era. Circuits of almost everything—goods, money, people, information, ideas, conflict, pathogens, effluvia—are spiraling round the planet farther and faster. Threads of connectivity are lengthening, strengthening, and thickening, the ligature of an integrated social-ecological system now in formation.

Of course, the ultimate shape of that system lies beyond the ken of scientific prediction and social prophecy. Indeed, it is inherently indeterminate. Depending on how critical uncertainties are resolved, the trajectory of world development can branch in very different directions. The history of the future will be written by choices yet to be made and actions yet to be taken, under circumstances yet to exist.

To organize the possible scenarios, we pictured three broad channels fanning out from the unsettled present into the imagined future: worlds of incremental adjustment, worlds of calamitous discontinuity, and worlds of progressive transformation. This archetypal triad—evolution, decline, and progression—recurs throughout the history of ideas and in the contemporary scenario literature. We called them Conventional Worlds, Barbarization, and Great Transitions.

Conventional Worlds are futures that evolve gradually, governed by the dominant forces of globalization—economic interdependence deepens, dominant values spread, and developing regions converge toward rich-country patterns of production and consumption. Needless to say, we can spin endless variations around the Conventional Worlds theme. In Market Forces versions, for example, influential global actors are able to carry forward a policy agenda of free markets and deregulation, relying heavily on spontaneous economic responses to reconcile growth with nature's limits and inequality with social peace. Government-led Policy Reform variants instead envision strong international initiatives to constrain and steer the economy in pursuit of widely-held social and environmental goals.

Whatever their differences, all Conventional World permutations assume structural continuity. Core institutions are able to absorb disturbances and adapt to changing conditions. Such resilience is certainly a reasonable proposition for the near term, but becomes more difficult to maintain as the time horizon of interest stretches over

Both the push of
necessity and the pull
of desire propel a Great
Transition.

many decades. Gradualism makes the risky wager that stepwise responses will not be overwhelmed by destabilizing crises as the global system moves deeper into a terra incognita where tipping points may well lurk. In this kind of world, where progress is associated with economic growth and the good life with material consumption, it would take massive political will to counter the momentum of dangerous trends. Where would it come from? It's nowhere in sight.

But let us suspend disbelief for a moment, and accept that some form of Conventional World future is feasible. A different type of question would remain: is this a desirable vision? Or might the world come to resemble a well-engineered mall, where the environment continues to deliver services and few people starve, but not a place where people and nature thrive? This concern adds a normative dimension to the instrumental critique of the conventional paradigm. The twofold question becomes, can we get there, and would we want to live there? Correspondingly, the search for an alternative has the dual aim of preventing an impoverished future and creating an enriched one—both the push of necessity and the pull of desire propel a Great Transition.

Meanwhile, though, Barbarization scenarios, the evil cousins of Conventional Worlds, are feeding on unattended crises and threatening to steal the show. In these dark visions, a deluge of instability swamps society's adaptive capacity, leading to a general global crisis and the erosion of civilized norms. Again, many different Barbarization stories can be told—enough to stimulate the creative juices of an army of apocalyptic screenwriters and novelists. In one type, which we call Fortress Worlds, powerful international forces are able to impose social order and environmental controls, leaving elites in protected enclaves and an impoverished majority outside. In Breakdown variants, authoritarian interventions fail, chaos spirals out of control, and institutions collapse.

By contrast, Great Transitions imagine how the imperatives and opportunities of the Planetary Phase might advance more enlightened aspirations. These scenarios envision the ascendance of a new suite of values—human solidarity, quality-of-life, and an ecological sensibility—that counters the conventional trio of individualism, consumerism, and domination of nature. These values concern vastly different spheres of human experience. Solidarity applies to the level of the species, quality-of-life to the individual, and ecology to the biosphere. Still, they share a motive: the longing for wholeness in our bonds with others, in our own lives, and in our relationship to nature.

In a Great Transition, this subjective shift in consciousness would underpin a corresponding objective shift in society, bringing institutions that support democratic global governance, well-being for all, and environmental sustainability. A host of contemporary endeavors are addressing many aspects of this agenda. But a Great Transition strategy would go further, understanding these as strands of a unified project of political, economic, and cultural change.

Where are we?

So, here we are, living in yesterday's future. But which scenario are we living in? All of them to varying degrees. Rather than a pure state, the world system evolves as a superposition of all our idealized scenarios. Market Forces is strongly in evidence through corporate-driven globalization and the breathtaking economic growth in China and elsewhere. Policy Reform finds expression through governmental efforts to moderate the excesses of unfettered markets. The centripetal forces of Barbarization are actively in play through rising inequality, xenophobia, violence, and degradation.

Great Transition precursors announce themselves, as well, in a rising cosmopolitan consciousness, civil society campaigns, and expanding subcultures seeking more responsible and fulfilling lifestyles. Calls for a Great Transition—in those words—have been multiplying, invoked by a UN Secretary General and a Prime Minister, used as a catchphrase for civil society initiatives, featured in many a course syllabus, and headlined at the occasional scholarly conference.

The claim that a Great Transition path remains open needs to be defended on two major fronts, one technical and one political.

This volatile mash-up of different scenario tendencies was foreseeable (and foreseen), and consistent with the behavior of a complex system in the midst of a chaotic phase shift. To be sure, we have witnessed astonishing developments. Who knew that we would have powerful computers in our pockets and Big Data in our living rooms, falling towers and awful wars, financial bubbles and great recessions, Arab Springs and bitter falls, and climate impacts toward the extreme end of the uncertainty range? After all, surprise is the one certainty about the future.

Still, the big-picture takeaways from the old scenario analysis endure: the deepening peril of Conventional Worlds, the real risk of Barbarization, and the possibility nonetheless of a Great Transition to a future of enriched lives, social cohesion, and a healthy planet.

Hope in the Planetary Phase

Now, the claim that a Great Transition path remains open needs to be defended on two major fronts, one technical and one political. Technical feasibility is by far the more tractable problem. I doubt this audience needs much persuading that an abundance of technological and policy means are available for sharply bending the curve of development toward justice and sustainability. We have conducted enough studies to fill an athenaeum that show this to be the case—and new innovations are reported daily.

The big “if” is not whether the numbers can add up under Great Transition cultural and political assumptions—it is whether those assumptions can be made valid. Addressing this challenge takes us beyond the comfort zone of technical analysis into the less familiar and more amorphous terrain of human values and collective action.

In this regard, the plausibility of a Great Transition rests with what might be called “the

The antidote to dystopian despair is pragmatic hope, for it keeps alive the promise of the future.

hope hypothesis.” It states that the historical conditions driving toward calamity also are generating countervailing social forces with the potential for transcending those conditions. The corollary is that as the Planetary Phase further incubates these forces, they could mature and emerge to galvanize transformation.

I’m well aware that positing a basis for hope bucks against the headwinds of a Zeitgeist of despair blowing in the other direction. Ours has been called an Age of Apprehension with good reason. These days, one need not be a Cassandra to fear for the future. It’s enough to be alert to the drumbeat of bad news about an afflicted biosphere and a discordant world. Certainly, thoughtful analysts, armed with dire extrapolations, can make a strong case for pessimism. But this doesn’t settle the matter. Times can change, moods can swing, and depression can lift.

Only a quarter century ago, when the Brundtland Commission had its “yes we can” moment, optimism was in the air. The Commission’s manifesto eloquently expressed the moral basis for sustainable development and sounded a clarion call to harmonize economic growth, environmental protection, and poverty alleviation. But the resonant rhetoric masked a contradiction that continues to haunt mainstream sustainability practice: that between ambitious goals and timid means. We can, the report seemed to say, tack gently toward Our Common Future without rocking the boat of power structures or entrenched institutions or popular values.

Thus, sustainability was able to gain a foothold in policy and academic circles, while a neoliberal political-economic philosophy consolidated in centers of power, unleashing a highly unsustainable form of market-led globalization. The world became rich in sustainability action plans (I wrote a number myself), but poor in meaningful action. Science could illuminate the challenges and civil action could win this or that battle, but systemic deterioration outpaced piecemeal progress. By 2012, the Rio+20 Summit could muster only a constricted vision of a greener economy, bookending a quarter century of the decline of hope.

Now we must ask, does hope have a future? Those who confidently answer “no” miss a critical point. The Planetary Phase, by unraveling old patterns and mindsets and urging new ones, opens opportunities for creative social transformation—if we seize them. In this sense, pessimism is not so much wrong as disempowering, robbing us of the motive to make change, and therefore self-fulfilling. The antidote to dystopian despair—or for that matter naïve optimism—is pragmatic hope, for it keeps alive the promise of the future.

That promise will be found in the unfolding dynamics of the Planetary Phase—or not at all. Heretofore, the world could be reasonably approximated as a set of semi-autonomous entities—states, ecosystems, cultures, territories—subject to external interactions. But with global-scale processes increasingly influencing the operation of subsystems, such reductionist partitioning becomes inaccurate and misleading. There’s something fundamentally new on the face of the earth: a superordinate

The cosmopolitan ideal has become anchored in the objective circumstance of history.

planetary place circumscribing a world of many places.

This supranational layer becomes an arena of contestation, encouraging modes of association and thought better attuned to contemporary challenges than the fractious political arrangements and truncated social vision inherited from the Modern Era. Even as some countries still struggle to complete their modern revolution, history is moving at warp speed beyond modernity.

Global Citizenship

Most significantly for the politics of transition, the expanding nexus of connectivity fosters the idea of global citizenship. Over eons, the sphere of community has embraced larger and more complex groups: families, clans, tribes, villages, cities, and nations. The widening circle of interdependence stretched the institutional fabric of social structures and the emotional fabric of identity and loyalty. Each of us stands at the center of concentric circles of communities, balancing commitments and negotiating tensions among them.

Cosmopolitan philosophers have long dreamed of a time when the ring of community would encircle the entire human family. The Planetary Phase may be that time. Rather than a distant vision, the cosmopolitan ideal has become anchored in the objective circumstance of history. As humanity and earth become a single community of fate, the ethos of one world becomes embedded in the conditions for survival and flourishing.

What, then, does it mean to be a global citizen? As with all aspects of society, the meaning of citizenship has changed in the course of history. Modern citizenship formed in three waves. In the eighteenth century, civil citizenship conferred economic opportunity and property rights. In the nineteenth, political citizenship spread democracy and the right to vote. In the twentieth, social citizenship brought entitlement to minimum standards of welfare. Each new wave of rights followed a corresponding wave of popular mobilization against traditional privilege.

Now, a fourth wave may be gathering. Like other forms of citizenship, global citizenship carries both psychological and juridical meanings. In one sense, people become “citizens of the world” when their awareness, concerns, and actions extend to the whole of humanity. Almost certainly, the ranks of this kind of global citizen are swelling as people awaken to their place within a globalizing society and the wider community of life.

However, the full expression of global citizenship awaits the establishment of formal processes for collective engagement and democratic global governance. Here, existing international bodies and movements can offer lessons and, in some cases, building blocks. But a centerpiece of a transformational strategy will be fashioning institutions beholden to the whole body politic, rather than merely balancing the interests of competing states and elite actors.

Now, from the vantage point of the antagonistic present, the formation of a global demos may seem far-fetched. But to dismiss the possibility out-of-hand would be a failure of historical imagination. It would be rather like an eighteenth century skeptic dismissing the idea of nationalism as a quixotic fantasy, little knowing that a world map of 200,000 territories would soon be transformed into one with a mere 200 nation-states.

When historical conditions were ripe, national citizenship began to dissolve barriers within states. In the Planetary Phase, global citizenship might dissolve—or at least radically reduce—divisions between states. After all, the integral earth offers a more natural boundary for the imagined global community than did the often arbitrary boundaries of imagined national communities. A rising spirit of cosmopolitanism, though by no means inevitable, is now possible. Likely or not, it is essential for bridging the dangerous chasm between a twentieth-century state-centric order and twenty-first century realities.

An old question
demands a fresh answer:
Who will change the
world?

Change Agents

But possibility is not probability. Grievances and good intentions alone will not bring systemic change, as the lost opportunities of the past will painfully attest. That takes harnessing discontent and aspiration to a social agent capable of overcoming the resistance of entrenched mindsets and interests. An old question demands a fresh answer: Who will change the world?

The principal characters now on the global stage—intergovernmental institutions, transnational corporations, and big civil society organizations—are unlikely candidates for the role of change agent. We can hardly expect these creatures of the old order to be at the forefront of efforts to transcend it—in different ways, they express concerns too narrow, and outlooks too myopic, for the task. Thus, we need to look elsewhere for a leading actor.

History offers a clue. In normal periods, societies change gradually within resilient boundaries of norms and values. However, when historical continuity is interrupted, old social structures weaken and cultural strictures loosen, and the scope for human choice and freedom expands. The interregnum, as the old society fades and before a new one solidifies, can be a time of great confusion, fear, and polarization. The crisis spawns counter-hegemonic groups, some of which may emerge to spearhead the consolidation of a new social formation. (Indeed, when such revolutionary forces do not materialize, the exhausted society can collapse and vanish, as many have.)

For example, the priestly and royal castes, the progenitors of the first civilizations, were the offspring of the early agricultural societies they superseded. Much later, the entrepreneurial classes, which were the motive force of early capitalism, germinated in the mercantile interstices of the European feudalism they eventually buried. Nearer our own time, the socialist upheavals of the past two centuries expressed the

The task of building the global movement now beckons all of us who care about the quality of the future.

egalitarian impulse of a working class aspiring to surpass the industrial system that created it.

Now it is we who live in the interregnum between a familiar world that was and a different one in the making. Is the crisis of modernity nurturing a protagonist capable of galvanizing the progressive potential of our epoch? The signature feature of the Planetary Phase—the enmeshment of all in the overarching proto-country, Earth—suggests an answer. The natural change agent for a Great Transition would be a vast and inclusive movement of global citizens. The world now needs citizens without borders to come together for a planetary community.

This “global citizens movement” is the missing actor in the drama of transition. But it’s stirring in the wings and could move toward center stage as crises intensify and consciousness shifts. In one narrative, it would begin to coalesce as a network of networks, attracting adherents through local, national, and global nodes. It would connect the full spectrum of issues within an integrated strategic and intellectual framework. It would seek to bridge divisions of culture, class, and place, honoring diversity and pluralism within an umbrella of common principles and goals. It would practice a “politics of trust” that tolerates proximate differences in order to sustain the ultimate basis for unity.

Such a movement would be a fitting answer to the poignant question heard from concerned citizens everywhere: “What can I do?” But bringing it to life at the requisite speed and scale will not be easy. The challenge is extraordinary, but so are the times. In transformative moments, small actions can have large consequences. The efforts of an active minority can ripple through the cultural field and release latent potential for social change.

But we need a coherent planetary praxis that, at once, advances relevant knowledge, presses for strong policy, and articulates rigorous and inspiring visions of another world. All this is necessary, but not sufficient. The additional task of building the global movement now beckons all of us who care about the quality of the future.

Concluding Remarks

Will we succeed? My crystal ball is as cloudy as yours, but I’ll share with you a rather vivid pipe dream I had recently. It’s the year 2101, and we have reconvened for ISEE’s 56th biennial conference on the theme *Reconsidering the Twenty-first Century: Foresight and Hindsight*. (Remarkably, I’m there to deliver the third in this series of once-a-century presentations.) So, the bad news is that I found it all too easy to imagine a world of sorrow, where we are looking back on a disastrous century, ruefully recalling “what could have been.”

The good news is that a little effort could summon a happier scene, where we are retracing the twists and turns of what has come to be called the Great Transition. We marvel at how far we have travelled toward a planetary civilization worthy of

the name, but also take note of the lingering problems from the past and the new challenges ahead. Before departing, we pause to salute the generations of the transition who rose up for the future when the century was still young.

That's my vision. What's yours? To quote Bob Dylan, "I'll let you be in my dream if I can be in yours." So, 2101. Pencil in the date. Meanwhile, we have work to do.

About the Author



Paul Raskin is the founding President of the Tellus Institute. The overarching theme of Dr. Raskin's work has been the development of visions and strategies for a transformation to more resilient and equitable forms of social development. Toward this larger aim, his research has spanned issues (energy, water, climate change, ecosystems, and sustainable development) and spatial scales (local, national, and global). He has conceived and built widely-used models for integrated scenario planning for energy (LEAP), freshwater (WEAP), and sustainability (PoleStar). Dr. Raskin has published widely, and served as a lead author for the U.S. National Academy of Science's Board on Sustainability, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, the Earth Charter, and UNEP's Global Environment Outlook. In 1995, he convened the Global Scenario Group to explore the requirements for a transition to a sustainable and just global civilization. The Group's 2002 valedictory essay – Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead – became the point of departure for the Great Transition Initiative that Dr. Raskin launched in 2003 and continues to direct. Earlier in his career, Dr. Raskin received a Ph.D. in Theoretical Physics from Columbia University in 1970.

About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#) by the Tellus Institute.



Cite as Paul Raskin, "A Great Transition? Where We Stand," Great Transition Initiative (October 2014).

Available at <http://greattransition.org/publication/a-great-transition-where-we-stand>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

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