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Beware of Dangerous Metaphors

Contribution to GTI Forum [Interrogating the Anthropocene: Truth and Fallacy](#)

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In a short volume published decades ago entitled *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson drew our attention to the fact that most of us, most of the time manage to make our way through life and make sense of the world around us with a relatively limited set of metaphors. As anthropologists have always emphasized, however, it is essential to understand that metaphors are not “instinctual,” but rather “cultural,” phenomena. They are not given to us in our DNA, but rather are learned very early on in life—usually as an aspect of learning the language and other rule-governed norms that we master while growing up in any given culture. So thoroughly are these cultural phenomena absorbed that humans come to regard them as “second nature.”

Because metaphors are so deeply inscribed in our existence, we do not really have control over them at first, any more than we have control, for example, over the “mother tongue” that we learn, or the physical environment that is our first “home.” Later in life, perhaps, we can reflect upon key metaphors that we internalized unconsciously as our eager and absorbent minds encountered life’s complexities, but, just as many people never learn a second language beyond their “mother tongue,” so, too, do many people—perhaps most—not learn to transcend the limits of the metaphors that came to govern their consciousness from their youngest years forward.

Herein lies much of our problem as a cultural species in the Anthropocene: we have evolved both as a physical species and a social species in a world whose governing physical parameters change on different time scales than our biophysical equipment as a mammal, on the one hand, or our cultural symbol systems as a social species, on the other. It is the relative “lag” time or

differential “acceleration” rates in these three simultaneous registers of our existence as a species (biophysical, genetic, and cultural) that causes the problems we must now confront.

At times it seems, for example, that the physical world in Earth’s ecosystems is so “fixed” in its seas, shores, and mountain ranges that these things clearly outlast the rise and fall of all known human civilizations with their complex but tragically transitory symbol systems. In other cases, however, it seems that whether or not civilizations come or go, humans have remained impressively stable as an interbreeding, bipedal mammalian omnivore for perhaps the last million years or so, enduring and witnessing numerous global changes of climate and sifts in their habitats. On another scale, it seems that symbol systems and metaphors born of commonly shared cultural experiences of an expanding agrarian frontier upon newly discovered fertile land can give rise to “frontier cultures” around the world that share enduring cultural metaphors, independent of language or other divergent, contingent features reflecting their particular historical experience.

It is in this manner that with the “discovery” of the Western Hemisphere by European maritime powers from roughly 1492 onwards the cultural metaphors of frontier societies have come to dominate much of the mindset of the modern world. The new energy resources that came under the control of “Western civilization” since 1492—first, in the form of fertile topsoil, then in terms of fossilized carbon reserves (coal, petroleum, natural gas), and eventually in the exploitation of radioactive sub-atomic particles—gave rise to the illusion in frontier cultures that expansion could be virtually limitless for anything that they proposed to undertake.

While across the globe the physical frontiers were relatively quickly invaded and occupied, the subsequent illusion that ever-expanding exchange could infinitely fuel economies of perpetual growth came to be a core cultural tenet of all modern civilizations. Growth came to be embraced as both inevitable and good. As anthropologists who study religion have noted, the unquestioning “belief in growth” has become the most widely shared form of publicly professed religious belief on the planet. The pauper, the peasant, the priest, the professor, and the politician in all “modern” cultures adhere to the fundamentalism of growthism.¹

The trouble for the human community comes, however—as Lakoff and Johnson pointed out—that all humans in all cultures can get into serious difficulty as a result of acting upon a misplaced

metaphor. Having expanded upon the things of nature, powerful “Western” cultures came to believe that “expansion” was in the nature of things. It is not. Indeed, it cannot be in any finite ecosystem.

As ecologists have pointed out, all stable ecosystems are dominated by negative feedback loops. Expansion in any continuously functioning living system (organism, population, or ecosystem) is a *phase*, not a perpetual *state*. If expansion persists for too long in any living population, it is an aberration. If it continues as a “state of affairs” unchecked, it can become a malignancy, a cancer—something that will cause the death of the entire living system of which it is a part.

Unfortunately, we are now witnessing the tragic *denouement* of a species-wide misplaced metaphor—that of the unshakable belief in “growthism” which now dominates the human enterprise in the Anthropocene. It is certainly the case that the fiction of continuous growth is a cultural phenomenon—part of the bundle of metaphors born of contingent human experience in “frontier cultures” since 1492. In this regard, it would seem to be subject to modification relatively quickly by our concerted human intentions to reform our past and reshape our future. On the surface, of course, cultures appear more malleable and nimble than the slow-changing features of our bio-geochemical environment of sea, shore, and rock. Furthermore, since cultures only exist by being “taught” and “learned,” it would seem that they would be more readily “adaptable” than our biological equipment constrained by our received genetic code.

The problem is that our cultures do not (and perhaps never can) change on the same time scale as these other two simultaneous registers of our existence. This becomes apparent when we realize that what seemed like the most “rock-solid” parameters of our existence—i.e, the geophysical world in which we evolved genetically as a biological and socio-cultural species—has now altered the pace of its continuous evolution precisely because of the metaphorical delusions we have nurtured and perpetuated in our species-wide religious devotion to growthism.²

We are engaged collectively as a species in oxidizing terrestrial carbon—transforming it from its subterranean forms into gaseous forms—which we are now spewing into Earth’s atmosphere at a rate we can barely document, let alone halt or reverse. Modern global civilization will not be able to survive this slavish addiction to growthism, even if it might be able to engineer a transition to more “sustainable” sources of energy like solar, wind, geothermal, or “safe” [sic] nuclear.

With “globalization,” the parochial cultural delusions of Western colonial empires have been embraced in recent centuries and decades by former colonial subject populations in India, China, Brazil, and beyond. Indeed, they each regard growth as an essential “right,” won in achieving “independence” from former colonial regimes that had come to dominate them in the past.

In effect, the species-wide metaphors that we have now come to live by in the Anthropocene will no doubt prove to be far more tragic than the personal *hubris* we long ago recognized as fatal. Our own cultural metaphors have led us astray in the Anthropocene. With all our impressive cultural achievements and technological cleverness, we are on the verge of becoming the engineers of the collapse of our civilization.

Notes

1. Tim Weiskel, “Rubbish and Racism: Problems of Boundary in an Ecosystem,” *Transition Studies*, February 19, 2019, <https://environmentaljusticetv.wordpress.com/2019/02/19/rubbish-and-racism-problems-of-boundary-in-an-ecosystem-the-yale-review-1983/>.
2. Tim Weiskel, “Overcoming the Multiple Legacies of European Colonialism: Can The West Survive Its Most Cherished Historical Myths?,” *Transition Studies*, September 9, 2019, <https://environmentaljusticetv.wordpress.com/2019/09/09/part-1-overcoming-the-multiple-legacies-of-european-colonialism-can-the-west-survive-its-most-cherished-historical-myths/> and “Just Take the Case of Agriculture...,” *Transition Studies*, May 6, 2020, <https://environmentaljusticetv.wordpress.com/2020/05/06/just-take-the-case-of-agriculture/>.

About the Author



Tim Weiskel is the founder of Cambridge Climate Research Associates and Transition Studies, an online video blog devoted to assisting organizations and individuals in understanding the transitions that must now be undertaken to enable the human community to move to a post-carbon world. Previously, he taught anthropology and history at Williams College, Yale University, and Harvard University. His principal field work was among the Baule peoples of the central Ivory Coast, focusing on the ecology of colonialism and post-colonial agriculture. A social anthropologist and historian by training, he holds a PhD from Oxford University, where he was a Rhodes Scholar.

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