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The Coming Struggle

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

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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



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About the Publication

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