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Beyond Barbarization

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

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 know 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 Akin, 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).

About the Publication

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