

The Great Transition Today

A Report from the Future

Paul D. Raskin



GTI Paper Series

Frontiers of a Great Transition

2

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GTI is a global network of engaged thinkers and thoughtful activists who are committed to rigorously assessing and creatively imagining a *great transition* to a future of enriched lives, human solidarity, and a healthy planet. GTI's message of hope aims to counter resignation and pessimism, and help spark a citizens movement for carrying the transition forward. This paper series elaborates the global challenge, future visions, and strategic directions.

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Table of Contents

What Matters-----	1
One World-----	2
Many Regions-----	3
Constrained Pluralism-----	5
A Birds-Eye View-----	7

The Great Transition Today: A Report from the Future

Dateline: Mandela City, 2084

Our treatise of 2068—*Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead*—portrayed the astonishing transformations that had occurred during the twenty-first century. It is gratifying that scholars and citizens alike continue to find value in our capsule history, even as research continues to fill in details and add analytic insight. Our primary focus in the earlier volume was on historical antecedents and critical twenty-first century developments on the path to what has come to be called the *Great Transition*.

In this belated postscript, our attention turns to a sketch of the contemporary world. We give an introductory picture, highlighting important aspects of today's society, while referring to a companion series of papers that elaborate key themes. This is no easy task. We are witnessing a complex process of planetary transition that is still unfolding. The wheel of history is still in spin. The real story of our times is one of dynamism, vitality, and change. The process of cultural invention shows little sign of abating. So it should be kept in mind that this survey of the cultural, political, economic, and social landscape describes but one momentary scene in an unfolding global drama.

What Matters

The emergence of a new suite of values is the foundation of the entire edifice of our planetary society. Consumerism, individualism, and domination of nature—the dominant values of yesteryear—have given way to a new triad: quality of life, human solidarity, and ecological sensibility. Naturally, these are expressed with varying weights and meaning across the spectrum of our diverse regions, but they are the *sine qua non* nearly everywhere. We review the three value categories in the paragraphs below.

That the enhancement of the “quality of life” should be the basis for development is now so self-evident, it must be remembered that, over the eons, the problem of scarcity and survival—what Keynes called the “economic problem”—dominated existence. In Keynes' day, the industrial cornucopia, while unleashing an orgy of consumption among the privileged and desperation among the excluded, opened the historical possibility for our post-scarcity planetary civilization. People are as ambitious as ever. But fulfillment, not wealth, has become the primary measure of success and source of well-being.

The second value—“human solidarity”—expresses a sense of connectedness with people who live in distant places and with the unborn who will live in a distant future. It is a manifestation of the capacity for reciprocity and empathy that lies deep in the human spirit and psyche, the “golden rule” that is a common thread across many of the world's great religious traditions. As a secular doctrine, it is the basis for the democratic ideal and the great social struggles for tolerance, respect, equality, and rights.

With their highly evolved “ecological sensibility”, people today are both mystified and horrified by the feckless indifference of earlier generations to the natural world. Where the right to dominate nature was once sacrosanct, people today hold a deep reverence for the natural world, finding in it endless wonder and enjoyment. Love of nature is complemented by the humility that comes with a deep appreciation of humanity's place

in the web of life, and dependence on its bounty. Sustainability is a core part of the contemporary worldview, which would deem any compromise of the integrity of our planetary home both laughably idiotic and morally wrong.

One World

The ambit of interpersonal affiliation has expanded throughout history, along an increasingly complex chain of identity—family, clan, tribe, city, and nation. Now, this sequence of historically constructed communities has scaled up again. Identity and citizenship has reached the level of the planet. We are one human family with one common fate.

At the turn of this century, the idea of a thorough-going globalism was mocked by august scholars and pragmatic politicians alike. This is not surprising. Looking forward, historical transitions seem highly improbable, while looking back they may come to seem inevitable.* From the vantage point of a few hundred years ago, a future world based on nation-states may have seemed an unlikely idea. Then, with the triumph of nationalist struggles, nations came to be viewed as the natural building blocks of the political order for several centuries.

Now, globalism is as deep-rooted as nationalism once was. Perhaps more so. One sees our blue planet from outer space in its integral wholeness, not imaginary state boundaries. By the turn of this century, the vision of a global civilization had become anchored in objective realities—a threatened biosphere, interdependent economies, common cultural experiences, and the long reach of war. Humanity as a whole had become a community of fate.

So globalism draws its energy from both idealism and pragmatism. The ancient ideal of a world civilization, as captured in Aristophanes dream of “mingling the kindred of nations in the alchemy of love”, is finally shaping an authentic global community. But it needs its partner, an unsentimental pragmatism that understands the practical need for planetary cooperation. Both the “pull of hope” and the “push of fear” forge the global citizen.

The set of universal principles that underpins global society did not fall from the sky. They were shaped by our forebears in the great historical projects for human rights, peace, development, and environment. In the last half of the twentieth century, the principles for a sustainable and just world were codified in a series of international agreements and declarations. While it would take a global transition in the twenty-first century to fulfill them, these were our indispensable preconditions and inspiration.

The point of departure of our Consolidated Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities, the opening section of the World Constitution of 2032, is the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Indeed, in one sense, the *Great Transition* can be understood as a project to make good on the long unfulfilled Article 28 of the Universal Declaration: “Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized”. In addition, the *Great Transition* draws

* This irony may be repeating today in the debate around space colonization. For activists of the so-called Post-Mundial Movement, globalism is a rather quaint and uninspiring notion, while the graying generation of the *Great Transition* is, uncomfortably, the skeptic.

its environmental framework from the Earth Summit of 1992 and the stream of conventions that followed; its ethical compass from the Earth Charter, drafted in 2000 and adopted as international law in 2018; its framework for corporate responsibilities from the United Nations Global Compact of 2000; and its social covenants from the declarations of the global meetings of the 1990s.

These unifying principles are powerful expressions of the global commonwealth. But they would be little more than ephemeral good intentions were they not rooted in the commitment of living human beings. Ultimately, it is the keenly felt sense of global solidarity that binds and sustains our planetary society. The global citizens of today have refuted the old skeptics, who could not see beyond nationalism, and absolved the visionaries of a new global consciousness: “The age of nations is past; the task before us now, if we are to survive is to shake off our ancient prejudices, and build the Earth” (Teilhard de Chardin).

Many Regions

A century ago, it was common to speak of a unitary project of “modernity”, a process of convergent development in which nations everywhere replicate the institutions, norms, and even values of the most advanced industrial societies. Late twentieth century scholars even proclaimed that the collapse of the Soviet Union heralded the “end of history”, the final phase of the modernist project. The kernel of truth in all this was the logic of capitalist expansion that progressively brought country sides, nations, and continents into its nexus.

The idea of diverse and plural paths to modernity, long posited by oppositional thinkers, has been demonstrated on the ground in the *Great Transition*. Modernist ideals—equality, tolerance, reason, rule-of-law, and citizenship—have been expressed in an array of economic, political, and cultural forms. The global citizens movement of the early decades of this century was based on a “politics of trust” that respected these differences; that spirit is captured in our slogan “one world, many places”. Global citizenship and regional pluralism, rather than antagonistic, have proved to be political preconditions for one another.

Today, the fabric of our planetary society is woven with hundreds of regions* that are astonishingly diverse in character and size. Some correspond to the national boundaries of a century ago and others are federations of earlier states. Still others are parts of former states, forging a common identity around the boundaries of river basins and other ecosystems (so-called “bio-regions”), around urban centers, and around cultural traditions. Some regions are relatively small and homogenous, while the larger regions have evolved complex governance structures of subregions and communities. While the crystallization of new regions was not always without conflict, and some tensions remain, the regional structure has largely stabilized with the support and protection of a vibrant world community.

* After much discussion, the term “regions”, rather than “nations”, was officially adopted for these subglobal demarcations. While some argued that this was a mere linguistic change, others saw a significant political point in underscoring the deep transformation of the role of nation-states in the *Great Transition* and the muting of nationalist ideologies. The aim was to signal that the era of inter-state wars, colonialism, domination, and nativism was drawing to a close.

An exhaustive survey of regions is beyond the remit of this brief monograph. However, a crude taxonomy can help illuminate the immense diversity across regions. Most regions can be clustered into one of three major types, which we shall refer to as *Agoria*, *Ecodemia*, and *Arcadia*.^{*} The following describes some of the key features that distinguish each of these. But it should be borne in mind that few regions are pure cases, and some large regions have entire subregions that deviate from the dominant form.

Agoria

These regions would be most recognizable to a visitor from the year 2000. Relative to other regions, they tend to be more conventional in consumer patterns, lifestyles and institutions. Their economies are dominated by large shareholder corporations, and investment capital is privately held. Some critics call *Agoria* “Sweden Supreme”. However, when compared to even the most outstanding examples of social democratic models of the last century, the commitment to social equality, the environment, and democratic engagement from the level of the firm to the globe is of a different order. The key is a vast array of policies and regulations, supported by popular values, that align corporate behavior with social goals, stimulate sustainable technology, and moderate material consumption in order to maintain highly equitable, responsible, and environmental societies.

Ecodemia

The distinguishing feature of *Ecodemia* is its fundamental departure from the capitalist economic system. The new system, often referred to as “economic democracy”, banishes the capitalist from two key arenas of economic life. First, the conventional model of the firm based on private owners and hired workers has been replaced by worker ownership in large-scale enterprises, complemented by non-profits and highly regulated small businesses. Second, private capital markets have given way to socialized investment processes. Worker ownership and workplace democracy have reduced the expansionary tendency of the traditional capitalist firm. Firms in *Ecodemia* instead focus on profit per worker (rather than absolute profit) and the popular goal of “time affluence”, which has shortened the work week. Publicly controlled regional and community investment banks, supported by participatory regulatory processes, re-cycle social savings and tax-generated capital funds. Their mandate is to ensure that successful applications from capital-seeking entrepreneurs satisfy social and environmental criteria, as well as traditional financial criteria.

Arcadia

Relative to other regions, the bias in *Arcadia* is toward self-reliant economies, small enterprises, face-to-face democracy (at least in cyberspace), community engagement, and love of nature. Lifestyles tend to emphasize material sufficiency, folk crafts, and reverence for tradition. While the local is emphasized, most people are highly connected with cosmopolitan culture and world affairs through advanced communication

^{*} The use of Greek roots is intended to evoke the classical ideal of a political community—active citizens, shared purpose, and just social relations. In Athens, the Agora served as both marketplace and center of political life; thus, commerce and consumption figure prominently in *Agoria*. The neologism *Ecodemia* combines the word roots of economy and democracy; thus, economic democracy is a priority in these regions. *Arcadia* was the bucolic place of Greek myth; thus, local community and simple lifestyles are particularly significant here.

technology and transportation systems. *Arcadia* has centers of innovation in some technologies (organic agriculture, modular solar devices, human-scale transport devices, etc.) and arts (new music, craft products, etc.). Exports of these products and services, along with eco-tourism, support the modest trade requirements of these relatively time-rich and slow-moving societies.

It has been argued that these three regional types are the late twenty-first descendants of the three great political “isms” of the past—capitalism, socialism, and anarchism. While we find this claim to be facile (not to mention provocative), it must be admitted that it has at least some superficial basis. After all, *Agoria*’s free market emphasis does give it a capitalist orientation. *Ecodemia*’s insistence on the primacy of social ownership was the essence of classical socialism. *Arcadia*’s stress on small scale endeavors and identification with local places was a drumbeat theme of the humanistic anarchist tradition. But these putative connections mask as much as they reveal. Despite its social democratic features, *Agoria* is as different from the old Sweden as Sweden then was from the United States. *Ecodemia*’s commitment to democracy, rights, and environmentalism bears little resemblance to the autocratic socialist experiments of the twentieth century. *Arcadia* is not the innocent Utopia of the old anarchist dreamers, but a sophisticated society and enthusiastic participant in world affairs.

The discussion above has emphasized regional differences. This should be balanced by a reminder that the regions also have much in common. Relative to the nations of a century ago, contemporary regions enjoy a high degree of political participation, healthy environments, universal education and healthcare, high social cohesion, no absolute poverty, and more fulfilling lives for their populations. Finally, people the world over share the historically novel attribute of citizenship in a world community. To indulge one more classical reference: “I am a citizen, not of Athens, or Greece, but of the world” (Socrates).

Constrained Pluralism

One of our greatest challenges has been fashioning a workable balance between the competing imperatives of global responsibility and regional autonomy. Adherents to one side or the other of the old dualities—cosmopolitanism versus parochialism, statism versus anarchism, and top-down versus bottom-up—polarized debate for a time. But eventually these stale dichotomies were transcended as a planetary political culture surged for the formation of a new global compact. The solution was remarkably simple. Indeed, it had been germinating since the mid-twentieth century, although it was hard to see through the nationalist mystifications of the Cold War and the Era of the Hegemon.

The *Great Transition* political philosophy rests on what has come to be called the principle of *constrained pluralism*. It includes three complementary ideas: *irreducibility*, *subsidiarity*, and *heterogeneity*. The *irreducibility principle* states that the adjudication of certain issues is necessarily and properly retained at the global level of governance. Global society has the responsibility for ensuring universal rights, the integrity of the biosphere, the fair use of common planetary resources, and for the conduct of cultural and economic endeavors that cannot be effectively delegated to regions. The *subsidiarity principle* dictates that the scope of irreducible global authority be sharply limited. To promote effectiveness, transparency, and public participation, decision-making should be

guided to the most local feasible level of government. The *heterogeneity principle* validates the rights of regions to pursue diverse forms of development and democratic decision-making constrained only by their obligations to conform to global responsibilities and principles.

These principles are enshrined in the world constitution and it would be difficult to find anyone who finds them objectionable. However, their implementation in practice is a matter for the political arena. What should be considered irreducibly global is a tug-of-war between advocates for a more comprehensive world civilization and those for a more regionally-based commonwealth. Nevertheless, the consensus is strong on a set of universal concerns that define the core responsibility for global governance (see box).

Spheres of Global Responsibility

Human rights—including life, liberty, democracy, non-discrimination, equality before the law, freedom of thought and speech, political participation, adequate standard of living, right to work, education, and health.

Biosphere—including shared atmospheric, oceanic, and terrestrial resources; climate stabilization; ecological and biodiversity rehabilitation; and world refuges, territories, and parks.

Peace, security, and justice—including disarmament, dispute resolution, peace-making, anti-terrorism, disaster relief, emergency planning, and water and food security.

Commerce and finance—including rules for interregional trade and financial transactions, global communications and transportation infrastructure, development assistance, and consumer protection.

Science, education, and culture—including globally relevant research and development, space exploration, global infrastructure, world heritage, cultural exchange, the world university system, and intellectual property rights.

To summarize, regional autonomy is *constrained* by the need to conform to global principles and agreements. At the same time, a commitment to *pluralism* implies that, in meeting global responsibilities, regions may adopt diverse strategies and institutions that embrace cultural traditions, value preferences, and local resources. Aggregate global concerns set the agenda for planetary governance which places “boundary conditions” on regions, but does not dictate the strategies and policies for meeting these conditions. Constrained pluralism is the concrete political expression of the old slogan “unity in diversity”.

Our discussion has focused on the relationship between global and regional levels. Sitting below the global level and above subregions and communities, the region is a critical locus of democratic decision-making. Regions have responsibility for aligning aggregate regional outcomes with global-level policy. But it should be borne in mind that, like a fractal, constrained pluralism applies all along our nested governance chain, from region to subregion, community, and hamlet. So, issues that are irreducibly regional place conditions and constraints on subregional governance entities, but those entities satisfy such responsibilities in diverse ways.

Several examples may help illustrate how constrained pluralism works in practice. From the environmental sphere: greenhouse gas emissions are capped globally and emission rights are allocated to regions in proportion to population; regions meet their emission constraints in plural ways, some emphasizing market mechanisms, others accentuating law and regulation, and still others relying on local energy sources and de-

materialized lifestyles. From the social sphere: a universal right codified in the world constitution entitles all to “a decent standard of living”; regions operationalize this in different ways, e.g., ensured employment, welfare programs, and guaranteed minimum incomes. From the economic sphere: world trade rules bar regional actions that unfairly advantage local enterprises, but they permit barriers designed to preserve regional cultural, environmental, and institutional integrity. Finally, a subglobal example: water quality and quantity goals are set at the river basin level, while affected communities meet these obligations in different ways.

A Birds-eye View

The discussion so far has sketched the values and principles guiding the world system today and introduced a typology of regions. Now we turn to a thematic survey of important dimensions of the planetary scene—politics, demography, economy, trade, equity, environment, spirituality and religion, and lifestyle. To aid the discussion, a dozen summary indicators have been collected in the figure at the end of this essay. Of course, the average values shown in the graphs should be taken as merely suggestive since there is significant variation within each regional category (*Agoria*, *Ecodemia*, and *Arcadia*). The figures are indicative of typical places, but definitive of none.

Politics

Core governance principles are democracy, participation, and constrained pluralism. All political processes are highly transparent with decision-makers held accountable by a vigilant public. This essay is not the place for a detailed description of the governance philosophy, structure, and procedures of our Earth commonwealth. Here, we touch on some highlights.

Governance is conducted through a decentralized web of government, civil society, and business nodes, often acting in partnership. Formal government structures at all levels are organized into a tripartite system of parliamentary, executive, and judiciary branches. Civil society networks are active on all issues, working to educate fellow citizens, influence policies, and monitor business and governmental behaviors, and, where they deem necessary, mobilize protests. The forms of democracy are many, ranging from the structured representational systems typical of *Agoria*, to the vigorous work-place nodes of political activity in *Ecodemia*, to the emphasis on direct face-to-face engagement found in many *Arcadian* communities. The high levels of political participation and social cohesion (see corresponding indicators in the figure) are rooted in a strong culture of tolerance and interpersonal trust that bind political communities.

The world assembly has both regional representatives and at-large members selected by popular vote in worldwide elections. The inclusion of at-large representatives was highly disputed at first. But it offers an important political counterweight to regional parochialism and creates a healthy arena for global political participation. The at-large representation, and the world political parties it has stimulated, ensures voices for “one world” politics, while the strong regional representation ensures that the “many places” are not forgotten. This balance safeguards against tyranny from above or below, and is reasonably reflective of the popular will.

All citizens can engage in political activity, not just those with direct access to forums of decision-making. This is true at any level of political engagement, from the local to the

global, through the use of advanced communications technology that allow dispersed associations to simulate direct interaction. Thus, while representative forms dominate politics at larger scales, there is unprecedented scope for authentic popular participation throughout the multi-scale governance structure.

At the local level, each community adopts its own form of participatory democracy: in some instances, the Greek model of representatives selected by “lot” is preferred; in others, a multi-party representative form with public financing of campaigns and term limits seems most appropriate; in still others, a “functional” form of government is chosen, with emphasis on skilled civil servants in specific roles selected through open and competitive examinations. In all cases, face-to-face or electronic town-hall meetings are the norm, procedures are transparent, an ombudsman’s office mediates disputes, and full judiciary review is available in cases of serious conflict.

Demographics

World population has stabilized at 8 billion, about a billion below turn-of-the-century projections. This is all the more remarkable since average life expectancy has increased to about 100 years. The rapid decline in world fertility rates was the result of three related factors—the empowerment of women, universal access to birth control, and the crash poverty elimination program. About half of today’s population lives in *Agorian* regions, and about a quarter each in *Ecodemia* and *Arcadia*. Interregional migration was significant (perhaps 5 percent of world population) during the years when the regional structure was taking shape, as people were drawn to simpatico places. While the level has abated, people continue to exercise the right of relocation. Meanwhile, the old dislocations fueled by poverty, ecological disruption, and conflict have largely vanished.

Agoria tends to be highly urbanized. In the more rural *Arcadia*, people tend to cluster around smaller towns. *Ecodemia* exhibits a mixed pattern. The “new metropolitan vision” guides the redesign of urban neighborhoods into integrated mixed-use settlement patterns that place home, work, shops, and leisure activity in proximity. This establishes a strong sense of community within cities, and, along with our sophisticated public transportation networks, has radically reduced automobile dependence. For many people, the town-within-the-city provides the ideal balance of a human scale with cosmopolitan cultural intensity.

Nearly everywhere, but particularly in *Arcadia*, more rural lives are attractive to those seeking reduced stress and greater contact with nature. Universal access to advanced communication and information technology allows for the decentralization of work and politics. Community spirit is reinforced through collective efforts for greater food and energy self-reliance, and pride in local environments.

Economy

In all regions, the economy is understood as the means to social, environmental, and cultural ends, rather than an end in itself. Even in *Agoria*, where competitive markets are given the most free reign, they are highly fettered markets that are tamed to support non-market goals. Sustainable business practices are the norm, codified in law, made transparent in reporting, and monitored and enforced by regulatory processes and a vigilant public acting through a dense network of civil society organizations. Investment decisions carefully weigh the costs of indirect and long-term environmental impacts, either directly through the social investment decisions of *Ecodemia*, or indirectly through

the participatory regulatory and legal mechanisms of *Agoria* and *Arcadia*. With environmental costs fully internalized, the polluter pays principle is applied universally, expressed through eco-taxes, tradable permits, standards, and subsidies.

From the figure we see that the world economy has grown by a factor of four since 2000 and that average income has increased by a factor of three.* With our tighter income distributions both between and within regions, the material well-being of the average world citizen is far higher than in 2000. Indeed, while many elect a basic lifestyle of material sufficiency (particularly popular in *Arcadia*), others seek higher levels of consumption. Except for a few nagging pockets, poverty has been eradicated.

The forms of economic enterprise are much more varied than the time when large corporations dominated the economic landscape. First, the number and significance of non-profit entities continues to surge (particularly in *Ecodemia* and *Arcadia*, but in *Agoria*, as well) as people find it increasingly appealing to frame their work and “corporate culture” in terms of a “social mission”. Second, businesses take diverse forms, including the large corporations of *Arcadia* (long ago re-chartered to ensure social purpose and worker participation in governance), the worker-owned cooperatives of *Ecodemia*, and the small private operations typical of *Arcadia*. Third, a labor-intensive secondary economy, expanding alongside the high-technology base, produces a breathtaking array of esthetic goods and skilled services, giving producers an outlet for creative expression, a sense of purpose, and a supplementary income. This “people’s economy” is encouraged by shorter work weeks (see Time Affluence indicator), material security, and enabling policies.

The regional focus should not leave the impression that the global economy is nothing more than the sum of its parts. We note again the important economic role played by global institutions in ensuring the flow of “solidarity funds” to needy areas, implementing trans-regional infrastructure, space exploration, and so on. Moreover, trade remains an important feature of our world economy, a topic to which we now turn.

Trade

World trade continues to be a controversial area. But with the exception of small regional parties that advocate extreme autarky, the consensus is strong that rule-governed interregional trade is a legitimate and important feature of our planetary society. That legitimacy does not rest, however, on discredited neo-classical arguments that equate free trade with efficiency and development. Rather, trade is seen as having a role in binding a world culture, countering anachronistic nationalisms, and allowing access to resources and products that are not locally available. In other words, our trade regime is designed to advance the larger social goals of sustainability, solidarity, equity, and human well-being.

Nevertheless, the debate is sometimes fierce on how to set rules. The conundrum is balancing the competing goals of open markets, on the one hand, and the rights of regions to shield their societies from the transformative power of unbridled markets, on the other. This tension is not surprising as the trade negotiations are at the age-old political fault

* The Income indicator in the figure shows today’s average regional incomes to be lower than those in the U.S.A. and Sweden at the turn of the century. This is potentially misleading. First, the average values mask the income differences among the many regions within *Arcadia*, *Ecodemia*, and *Arcadia*. Second, the 2000 GDP/capita figures embody a great deal more waste than today. Third, the super-rich, who once elevated average incomes, have vanished.

line between aggregate political entities and their constituent communities, between unity and pluralism. The tilt today is toward a circumscribed trade regime. It does strongly curtail “perverse” protectionism by barring restrictive regional actions with no other purpose than to enhance the competitive position of home-based enterprises. But it permits “virtuous” constraints that support legitimate and well-documented social and environmental goals. Our dispute resolution system is busy, indeed, mediating this boundary.

The Interdependence Indicator (see figure) shows that world trade as a share of economic activity is lower than it was at the turn of the century. In part this is due to the emphasis on regionally based strategies and rights. Additional moderating factors are the world levy on trade, the tax on financial transactions, and high transport costs. Naturally, regions exhibit great variation in their interest in and promotion of trade. At one extreme, some *Agorian* regions are virtually free trade zones, while at the other extreme, certain *Arcadian* regions, which place high value on local production and heritage preservation, have only a trickle of trade. Most fall somewhere in between.

Social justice

Our societies are far more egalitarian than either hierarchical traditional systems or the class systems of the capitalist era. The spread of income is maintained within rather narrow bounds through redistributive tax structures and sharp limits on inheritance. Typically, the income of the wealthiest 10 percent in a region is three to five times the income of the poorest 10 percent; this can be compared to national figures that ranged from six to twenty in the year 2000 (see Income Distribution indicator). At the same time, extreme disparities between rich and poor regions are being gradually erased. Everyone, in all parts of the world, has the right to a basic standard of living that is provided through a guaranteed minimum income, a full employment policy, or a more traditional welfare system, depending on the regional approach.

The principle that each individual is the subject of equal moral concern and rights has deep roots in the history of ideas. Over recent centuries, it was expressed in numerous national constitutions and international declarations. However, the realization of such noble intentions in social practice was slow and arduous as entrenched elites clung to their privilege. It took generations of struggle, but the dream of equality for women and minorities is now close at hand (see Gender Equality indicator). The strong egalitarian values of our time, in the context of muted class distinctions and universal social security, have opened new opportunities for completing the long journey to equality. But it would not have happened—and would remain vulnerable to stagnation or even reversal—in the absence of the persistence, vigilance, and mobilization of our vibrant women’s, indigenous peoples, and human rights movements.

A key to securing equality of opportunity was making education universal and ensuring that everyone had the resources to make use of it. Today, almost everyone avails themselves of post-secondary education (see indicator), and for a good number, learning is a life-long pursuit, an integral component of a culture of well-being. But whatever the metric—health, longevity, achievement—blatant disparities rooted in privilege, power, and wealth have dramatically diminished. Prejudice, that old nemesis of justice, is on the run.

Environment

Although the scale of the world economy is much greater than in 2000, the flow of material resources is far less. Fossil fuel use has dwindled, and water use is finally sustainable. Two types of factors—structural and environmental—have driven this remarkable shrinkage of the human ecological footprint. Structural shifts in *Great Transition* economies have several sources. Changing consumption patterns have decreased the share of tangible goods in the world economy in favor of dematerialized sectors such as services, arts, knowledge, and crafts production. Meanwhile, anachronistic sectors of the old industrial economies that produced little use value (e.g., the military, the security industry, high-priced litigators) have largely disappeared. At the same time, materials research, particularly nanotechnology, has reduced the necessary material content of products. Finally, the end of cheap oil would have made fossil energy alternatives more competitive even in the absence of the climate crisis.

The second driver of dematerialization was the great global mobilization to save the environment. The heedlessness of the past left the twenty-first century with the terrible bequest of degraded ecosystems, threatened species, and a destabilized climate. The environmental emergency was nearly catastrophic. But it had the salutary effect of reinforcing emerging values and triggering a powerful environmental movement, leading to major changes in behavior, greater accountability in enterprises, and an explosion of local restoration and sustainability campaigns. These spontaneous efforts were complemented by the machinery of government through comprehensive policies, regulatory mandates, and eco-taxation. Now, our economies are virtually closed loops of recycled material, our energy transition from waste and fossil fuels to efficiency and renewables is nearly complete, and our ecological agricultural practices rarely require chemical inputs. Cradle-to-cradle has displaced cradle-to-grave as the prevailing philosophy of our industrial ecology.

Participation in healing the planet is a great source of pride for the global citizenry. Indicators of climate stabilization and ecosystem health (see figure) are monitored as closely as local weather reports. The world now has a reasonable chance of stabilizing atmospheric carbon emissions at 400 ppm in the course of this century (a target once scoffed at by turn-of-the-century “realists”), and visionaries are already laying plans for launching a 100-year campaign to return to the pre-industrial figure of 260 ppm. Most ecosystems are recovering and, one-by-one, species are being removed from the endangered list. Population stabilization, low-meat diets, and compact settlements have spared land for nature.

The restoration of the biosphere in all its facets is one of the major collective enterprises of our global community. Much work remains to finally heal the bitter scars from the past. But there is much reason for hope, for at last humanity understands the moral responsibility and biophysical necessity of ecological preservation.

Spirituality and Religion

The decades of global transition have left no aspect of culture untouched, including the forms of spiritual practice. This should not be surprising. After all, dramatic transformations of belief systems have been both cause and effect of earlier historical transitions. One need only recall the displacement of paganism by the great world religions as early civilization emerged and matured. The new religious formations came

to permeate culture, politics, and the understanding of nature and human purpose in most pre-modern societies. Then, after bitter struggle, these powerful institutions themselves were transformed and their domain of authority diminished as they adapted to the imperatives of an ascendant modernity—separation of church and state, the scientific worldview, minority rights, libertarian social mores, and the centrality of free markets in an increasingly secular culture.

But the accommodation and assimilation of religion to modern society was always contested from within. Indeed, as late as the turn of the twentieth century a decidedly illiberal fundamentalism was resurgent in most world religions. With the luxury of historical perspective, we can grasp this phenomenon, which was rather a conundrum at the time, as a reaction to the anomie, disruption, and predation of a globalizing capitalist order. The transformative tentacles of the world system reached to the four corners of the Earth, dissolving the consolations of tradition for the dubious promise of a purse of gold. In that vacuum, religious absolutism offered psychological, political, and social solace for the displaced, the lost, and the disappointed—and a banner of resistance for the zealous.

Even today, small fundamentalist religious subcultures still persist. With their rigid customs and literal interpretation of ancient holy texts, they stand as vivid testimony to the age-old longing for received certainty. They reject many of the core principles of our planetary civilization, such as tolerance, pluralism, and universal solidarity. But their own rights are strictly protected, of course, and their actions are constrained only by the general prohibition on coercively imposing one's beliefs on others. Such fundamentalist faiths are widely viewed with great curiosity as fascinating throwbacks to a less enlightened time.

But these antiquated sects, thankfully, remain a minor factor in cultural affairs. The insecurity of an unsustainable civilization forced the wealthy to question their values and assumptions, while greater economic security for the poor freed them from the brutal struggle for existence. Now, the search continues for a better balance between the material and the spiritual than either hedonistic materialism or religious orthodoxy could offer. Three central tendencies in the late twenty-first century are: *secularization*, *experimentation*, and *reinvention*.

First, people increasingly reject organized spiritual practice altogether. Rather, they seek sources of meaning, wonder, and transcendence in the exhilarating marvels of art, life, and nature. The trend toward diminished interest in institutionalized religion, first observed in Western Europe at the turn of the century, accelerated in the decades of transition. Scholars debate the reasons, but we can at least say with confidence that the secularization of spiritual life correlates with the extension of education, greater economic security, the resurgence of community, and the expanding explanatory power of natural science.

The second major development is the proliferation of spiritual experimentation of staggering variety and novelty. Some of these alternative religions are entirely new, while others are syncretic creations that draw facets from modern and ancient spiritual traditions. Each offers its adherents a unique blend of mythology, metaphysics, cosmology, collective rituals, and a node of social connectivity. Some groups worship sacred objects or pay obeisance to spiritual leaders, while others favor a more diffuse

pantheism and egalitarian experience of the divine. These groups come and go, blend and evolve, assuming new manifestations as they take form in different regions.

Third, all the major religions have evolved into strong bearers of our core planetary values. The transition was also a struggle for the soul of the church, mosque, temple, and synagogue. The chorus of voices within each religion arguing that the bases for tolerance, equality, and sustainability lay deep in traditional doctrine grew and ultimately prevailed. Growing inter-faith activities reinforced the convergence toward these common ideas. This renaissance was more than a response to the larger social and cultural changes that threatened to make reactionary theologies obsolete; the religious renewal was itself an active force in forging the consensus for a *Great Transition*. One shudders to imagine the counterfactual—the dismal world we might live in had religious particularism, prejudice, and patriarchy prevailed. But in the event, the old religions survive as healthy institutions, albeit of reduced size, attending to spiritual and social well-being of their members.

Lifestyle

Among the affluent, the search for more meaningful and fulfilling lifestyles than the work-and-buy culture offered has long been a driver of the *Great Transition*. At the same time, many in developing countries came to the conviction that they did not need to attempt the impossible and the undesirable—the replication of the patterns of production and consumption of the wealthy countries. Instead, development was redefined to mean meeting material and psychological needs, providing opportunity, and building on the richness of cultural traditions. Today, many people, if not most, prefer lifestyles that combine material sufficiency with qualitative fulfillment. Indeed, those still enthralled by conspicuous consumption are generally considered rather vulgar, and esthetically and spiritually unevolved.

These profound cultural and psychological changes were only possible because of the surfeit of a once scarce commodity: time. Relative to their forebears, our citizens are more and more “time affluent”, as the work week declines (see indicator). Several factors have driven the social labor budget down—moderate living standards, productivity increases, the dramatic reduction of wasteful practices and sectors (such as military expenditures), and participation in the work force of all who can.

Work weeks would be even lower, if it were not for the thriving “people’s economy” of devoted craftspeople and service providers. Still, most people use at least some of the liberated time for non-market activities. The pursuit of money is giving way to the cultivation of skills, relationships, communities, and the life of the mind and spirit.

Another contributor to time affluence (not to speak of to a clean environment) is the end of the era of long commutes, as integrated settlement patterns place home and work in convenient proximity. Virtual workplaces, networked via advanced telecommunications, abound. While private automobiles are still popular, they are quite compact and pollution free, and many are maintained by various types of car-sharing enterprises. Mostly, though, the late twenty-first century has witnessed an exponential increase in people walking, biking, and utilizing public modes of transportation, while advanced mass transport systems link communities to local hubs, and those hubs to one another and to large cities.

The extension of life expectancy and smaller family size have led to adjustments in family structures. While the traditional nuclear family is still common in most regions,

and prevalent in *Agoria*, alternative living arrangements have also proliferated. In particular, collective living communities, often built around workplace collectives, are popular in *Ecodemia* and communal experiments abound in *Arcadia*. Diversity in family structure, lifestyle, and living choices is part and parcel of the age of tolerance and pluralism.

The cynics, who once feared that the masses would squander abundant free time, were wrong. The humanists, who spoke of the great untapped potential for people to cultivate the art of living, were on point. Our era has demonstrated that human goals, potentials, and capacities are quite elastic. If there are limits, we are not yet near them.

Political, Economic, Environmental, and Social Indicators

