

Big History and Great Transition

Reflections by Evelin Lindner

in contribution to the Great Transition Network (GTN) discussion of March 2023

in response to

“Big History and Great Transition,” opening essay by David Christian

<https://greattransition.org/images/Big-History-Christian.pdf>

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My gratitude goes to Paul Raskin and Jonathan Cohn for suggesting the important topic of *big history* and for inviting David Christian to attend to it in his foundational essay. I dedicate my entire life work to forging a big history narrative that captures the past in ways that open dignifying horizons for the future. The comments that have been submitted to Christian’s essay so far are as substantive as his essay and I highly appreciate each of them.

Where we stand

Having lived on all continents for the past decades, I can attest that people everywhere crave narratives that anchor them in the world. Religion often provides such narratives, as do family legends, or clan and national myths. Such narratives are sometimes so important that people are willing to die for them.

In his comment, Heikki Patomäki rightly points out that modern secular Western science does not usually provide equivalent long-term explanations of life’s meanings. This is also my observation. Physicists are unsure, they have several narratives on offer, as they are still looking for a grand unifying narrative (unifying theory) that connects their sub-narratives (theories of subsets of forces). Social scientists on their part wrestle with other uncertainties, for example, whether “man” is aggressive by nature or not, a question that holds great importance as we begin to realize our responsibility for managing our home planet.

So far, emotionally engaging and globally unifying and dignifying narratives are lacking. Through my work, I try to formulate such a narrative, a narrative that draws on newest scientific findings and at the same time describes not just the past, but also offers a dignifying compass into the future.

Four logics and three eras

I suggest a meta-narrative of *four basic logics* at the core of the human condition to help understand *Homo sapiens*’ history and to find a way into the future. Table 1 displays these four logics,¹ namely, the *pie of resources*, the *security dilemma*, the *future time horizon*, and *social identity*. Narratives need to be rather simple, and therefore I appreciate the historical analysis of anthropologist William Ury, who formulated a “simplified depiction of history” where he pulls together elements from anthropology, game theory, and conflict studies.² The

table suggests how my four logics manifest through the three major eras of human existence that Ury describes and that I re-label as, a) the era of *pristine pride*, b) the era of *honor*, and c) the era of *equal dignity in solidarity*.

I consider concepts such democracy, communism, capitalism, modernism, postmodernism, modern information age, and so forth, as epiphenomena or side effects of these logics.

- The first logic addresses the question as to whether and to what extent the *pie of resources* is expandable. Game theory is relevant here, as developed within the discipline of philosophy.
- The second logic concerns the *security dilemma* and whether it is weaker or stronger, drawing on international relations theory, as developed in the field of political science.
- The third logic asks whether a long-term or a short-term future *time horizon* dominates, as described in many academic disciplines, among others, in cross-cultural psychology. The Indigenous seven-generation sustainability rule is an important example.
- The fourth logic concerns the human capacity to tighten or loosen *identifications*, drawing on social identity theory, as developed in social psychology. The fourth logic sees emotions as history- and culture-dependent phenomena and addresses how psychological mind-sets such as *pride*, *honor*, *dignity*, *humiliation*, and *humility* inspire narratives — be they narratives of dignity that foster peaceful unity in diversity or narratives of humiliation that justify belligerent divisions without unity. Regarding humiliation, for instance, it is not just a matter of individual variance how people react to being “put down.” Some cultural narratives indicate that it is “right” to react to subjugation with *humiliated fury*,³ while others direct people to react with apathy or depression, or even to accept it as “honorable medicine.” Subordinates may go as far and create *cultures of subservience* and transmit them to their children. Sometimes being put down elicits genuine humility and acts as a source of “civilized” behavior.⁴

Most importantly, the fourth logic sounds the alarm that human rights ideal of equal dignity for all (in contrast to unequal honor for all) introduce a new form of humiliation, namely, *dignity humiliation*, which is a more hurtful violation than *honor humiliation* and thus can create fault lines of polarization and confrontation that are unprecedented and have the power to undermine, obliterate, and malign the most benign processes.⁵

The human condition					
		The future time horizon		Social identity	
		short	long	respect	humiliation
The pie of resources	fixed	(b)			(b, honor humiliation)
	expandable		(a, c)	(a, c)	(c, dignity humiliation)
The security dilemma	strong	(b)			(b, honor humiliation)
	weak		(a, c)	(a, c)	(c, dignity humiliation)

Table 1: The human condition

If we inscribe these four logics into the chronology of human history on planet Earth — the era of *pristine pride*, the era of *honor*, and the era of *equal dignity in solidarity* — then we can hypothesize that for the longest period of our history, roughly until the so-called Neolithic Revolution, our forebears enjoyed pristine pride in small egalitarian groups that followed wild food that was abundant and represented an expandable pie of resources for them (a). Then came the Neolithic Revolution, it was the time when our species had completed what we could call the first round of globalization (*Homo sapiens* had populated all continents). In a rather brief historical time span, resources that previously seemed abundant became bounded, a win-win situation turned into a win-lose situation, and circumscription spawned the security dilemma and the commons dilemma. Our forebears responded with a new ethos and emotional coinage, the era of honor began, which legitimized the vertical ranking of human worth into “higher” and “lesser” beings (b). Presently, we are participating in yet another radical shift (c), with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the year 1948 as one of its most prominent markers, aspiring to an ethos and emotional coinage of equal dignity in freedom and solidarity, a shift that is as significant as the one twelve thousand years ago.

The most important problem we, as humanity, face at this point, is that we risk going back to (b) if we overlook that our planet is finite and globally interconnected, and if we fail to integrate also solidarity with equal dignity and freedom, that is, if we fail to include *fraternité* into *égalité* and *liberté*. Riane Eisler’s comment has its place here — it would need to be heard much louder all around the world that humans are *not* “hard-wired for selfishness, war, rape, and greed.”

The most destructive scenario, one that would better be avoided, combines a short future time horizon in a context where the pie of resources is fixed or even decreasing, where a strong security dilemma reigns or is even willfully ignited, where *fraternité* is missing from *égalité* and *liberté*, where individuals and groups are exposed to humiliating systems and treatments, and where they retaliate with counter-humiliation that deepens rifts rather than healing and preventing them. Particularly when the transition from unequal to equal worthiness is promised but betrayed, feelings of humiliation can become so strong that they fuel revenge in the name of honor (see Lindner, 2023, on *cross back*) and divide society with fault lines that are so deep that forward-looking co-creation of dignity becomes impossible. This is what the fourth logic warns against. Unfortunately, the world we live in now seems to veer into precisely this malign direction.⁶

The most constructive and benign scenario, the one I work for, is a global knowledge society that treats knowledge as an expandable pie everyone has free access to, while remaining mindful of the finitude of the pie of all ecological resources except solar energy. I work for a world where all people conceive of themselves as part of one single global in-group, as one-planet-one-humanity, where systems and practices of humiliation no longer have legitimacy, where we transcend the security dilemma by building global trust so that we can unite in solidarity in an atmosphere of respect for diversity in equal dignity. I work for a world where we draw appropriate lessons from long past time horizons for the sake of future time horizons that reach far beyond seven generations, so we can protect and replenish the planet as humanity’s commons in the long term.

The usefulness of the four logics narrative for the Great Transition

Clearly, these narratives are highly simplified, they follow sociologist Max Weber’s *ideal-type* approach that differentiates between distinct levels of abstraction.⁷ Evidently, the

chronology of human history is not as clear-cut as described here, and we see expressions of all three eras concurrently in present day's world. For instance, uncontacted tribes (a) in the Amazonian Rainforest live in a national context where the dominator model of society is presently resuscitated (b). It is entirely possible that all of humankind will travel backwards again, that we will fail to continue our journey towards more dialogical partnership in the world — the human rights revolution may join all the other unfinished revolutions in our history. Indeed, this seems to be happening now in a world of worn-down commons that bring experiences of humiliation to ever more people, where authoritarian humiliation entrepreneurs provide “relief” that deepens downward spirals by dividing the world ever more rather than bringing it together.

Even though this is such a simplified model of the human condition, I think it can help us analyze social change over long time stretches and in different world regions, as well as help us with future strategy planning. It offers an overarching meta-narrative for a dignified course into the future in times of crisis, and it does so, first, by highlighting the promise entailed in our historical transition towards ideals of equal dignity in solidarity, and second, by informing us of the dangers and pitfalls to be avoided. It offers the important warning that dynamics of humiliation become more significant in their destructiveness the more the other parameters veer to the benign side.⁸ It warns that even the most benign scenario is vulnerable to turning malign when feelings of humiliation are allowed to grow, because cycles of humiliation have the potency to malign all otherwise benign trends.

The four logics model offers even more advantages. It opens space for compassion with our challenged species *Homo sapiens* and it can therefore relieve us from having to despair at ourselves or turn on each other in rage. Throughout the past millennia, many were proud of the human ability to compete for domination and control, male identity became associated with valor in battle, predicated on the assumption that human nature is aggressive, unaware that this strategy was suboptimal at best — never bringing lasting peace, only ceasefires — and that it will bring us all down in the end if we keep at it. It is by now common knowledge that we live in times of polycrisis, in times of *ecocide* and *sociocide*, risking *omnicide*, all of which could have been avoided if we had disallowed our dominators to continue with outdated short-term mindsets of competition for domination in the first place. Reality visits a sobering lesson on self-important humans now, and for many, it is difficult to learn dignified humility. Some even cry “humiliation!” when asked to let go of hubris. Here the four logics model can help. It shows that only global trust building and cooperation can forge a dignified future, that courage and valor can no longer be sought in competition for domination between “villages” but in bringing the human capability for loving care to the fore in one single global village. It shows that much of recent centuries’ Eurocentric “progress” was regress and that it is time to bring to the fore some of our age-old Indigenous wisdoms. It also shows that human history does not necessarily go in circles, planet Earth may rejoice if liberated of *Homo sapiens*.

The concept of dignity has unifying power at this point, at least if it is not taken hostage by dominator spirit. As soon as dignity is defined as equal dignity for all in mutual solidarity rather than as the autonomy of lone heroes competing for domination and control, the concept of dignity can unify all religions of the world, all faiths, all life-giving ideologies, it can bring the *sustainability* community together with the *consciousness* community, it can merge all of them into one overarching meta-narrative.⁹ Many faiths have a definition of religion at their core that coincides with how I define my personal religion. My religion is *love, humility, and awe for a universe too large for us to fathom*.¹⁰

I have coined the term *dignism* (“dignity” + “ism”) to describe a world where every newborn — human and nonhuman — finds space and is nurtured to unfold their highest and best potential, embedded in a social context of loving appreciation and connection. It is a

world, where the carrying capacity of the planet guides the ways in which all basic needs are met. It is a world of unity in diversity, where we prevent unity from devolving into oppressive uniformity and keep diversity from sliding into hostile division. It is a world where we unite in respecting every individual's dignity while celebrating their diversity.

We have to be fast, though. We have only a few years to outgrow the past millennia's straitjackets that limited and distorted our thinking and behavior. We have entered what Paul Raskin calls the *planetary phase of civilization*, where strands of interdependence weave humanity and Earth into a single community of fate on its way to sharing one single *Earthland*.¹¹

It might seem an impossible task to unlearn what we learned throughout the past millennia. Yet, our time also brings important novelties, namely, that we can appreciate our place in the cosmos. Unlike our ancestors, we can see pictures of our Blue Marble from the perspective of an astronaut. Unlike our forebears, we have the privilege of experiencing the *overview effect* with respect to our planet¹² — we can see it from outside. This makes our horizon large enough to understand that we humans are only one species among many species who all share the same small planet and that only global cooperation can save us. We *earthlings* can feel “the ecology of the living” taking place within *one* circumscribed space that is shared between all beings. We can embrace *biophilia*,¹³ and a creative ecology of the living — a *biopoetics* — where mind and life are coextensive.¹⁴

For the first time, humanity has the power not just to extinguish all forms of life on the planet, but also to do the opposite and protect all forms of life. Never before were we as equipped to build the trust needed for solidarity at a global scale. We have all the resources required to reap the benefits that the global ingathering of humanity provides. We can draw on all experiences, past and present, from the oldest Indigenous wisdom to the newest scientific knowledge.¹⁵ Short, the co-creation of a decent global village is within the reach of our present possibilities.

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¹ Adapted from Lindner, 2000, p. 437. This model has been developed further since 2000, see, among others, Lindner, 2023.

² See Ury, 1999.

³ Lewis, 1971.

⁴ See the work by Norbert Elias.

⁵ Lindner, 2006, p. 45. See also Tajfel and Turner, 1979.

⁶ Lindner, 2006, pp. 45–48, and Lindner, 2000, p. 437.

⁷ Max Weber, 1904/1949.

⁸ Lindner, 2006, pp. 45–48, and Lindner, 2000, p. 437.

⁹ See also Lindner, 2020.

¹⁰ See Lindner and Desmond Tutu (Foreword), 2010.

¹¹ Raskin, 2016. See also Lindner, 2016.

¹² See White, 2014.

¹³ Anderson, 2016.

¹⁴ Philosopher and biologist Andreas Weber, 2016, explains why mind and life are coextensive.

¹⁵ For “harvesting” from all cultural traditions and achievements, see, among others, Lindner, 2007. Cognitive scientist Bruce Schuman as well advises “to look for and revive all ancient wisdom ever accrued,” in his contribution to the Great Transition Initiative (GTI) Forum on the topic of “Journey to Earthland: Making the Great Transition to Planetary Civilization”, September 24, 2016, in response to Raskin, 2016.