

GTI 2.0

Reflections by Evelin Lindner

in contribution to the Great Transition Network (GTN) discussion of July 2024,
answering Paul Raskin's concept note *GTI 2.0: Ideas into Action*
(https://greattransition.org/images/GTI_2.0-Concept_Note.pdf)

Dear Paul, dear GTN Colleagues,

I am deeply grateful for your purposeful thinking about a possible GTI 2.0. Indeed, times of crisis cry out for whatever action might be fruitful. I am equally thankful for all the comments that came in and were supportive, as much as for all the comments that offered caveats.

The year 2003 was an important date for the Great Transition Initiative (GTI), as it emerged from the work of the Global Scenario Group, which was convened in 1995. Paul's pivotal 2002 essay "Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead" served as the foundational document for the launch of the GTI the following year.

Now, in 2024, the state of global affairs presents itself in ways that another strategic turning point seems unavoidable.

Windows of Opportunity

During the past months, I have given lectures on the question 'Is a world without war possible?' whereby "war" was meant to include war among us as much as war on our shared planetary habitat. I was astonished by my own conclusion. If looking carefully, it may be true that humanity has never faced as large a window of opportunity for devising positive change as now. Even though this window risks closing before being used, it is still there. If my analysis is correct, any initiative that envisions using this window, must be welcomed.

After WWII, a historic window of opportunity for humanity stood open. Eleanor Roosevelt and her team stepped up to the challenge. Not only did they devise the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but representatives of most nations adopted it. Eleanor Roosevelt could have

missed a great window of opportunity had she not been able to draw on thinkers from all corners of the world who could contribute.

Would the members of the GTI initiative be able to use a similar window of opportunity now, were it to open? Could GTI members help paradigms be implemented and tested, so they could take root, paradigms that would move the world toward a more dignified future for all living beings on this planet? I am often asked: Where is a joint and unequivocal declaration issued by the best thinkers of the world concerning the need to radically change human affairs on planet Earth? Would GTI 2.0 be a place to look for?

The Present Window of Opportunity

It is intriguing to note that several factors are unprecedented now. For instance, even Eleanor Roosevelt could not yet see planet Earth from outside, the astronaut's overview, which makes visible that we are one species on one small planet without borders. Up until last year, some of my friends in places like Norway welcomed climate change ("Then we can cultivate wine!"), only to have to experience extreme weather events spiraling out of control this year. Such events make the limits and interconnectedness of our habitat not only visible, but palpable. Then, for thousands of years, our forebears believed that military campaigns were feasible paths to "victory." It was not yet possible to annihilate all life on Earth through nuclear weapons, nor through species extinction, as we increasingly become aware now. Compared to previous generations, current generations have access to a much vaster wealth of scientific knowledge and technological capabilities that, if properly applied, could significantly improve the prospects for sustainable and ethical coexistence of all life on Earth. Current generations, furthermore, have unprecedented technical means to engage in people-to-people diplomacy and thus they have the capability to build global trust — for example, "unsocial" media could be transformed into truly social media and extractivist tourism transformed into global trust-building efforts. In that way, people-to-people diplomacy could harness the global ingathering of the human family to help overcome the collective action dilemma that stands in the way of effective global action, as

would be needed, for example, to protect the planet as our commons and leave behind exploitative globalization.

Challenges and Considerations

While there are indeed many networks around the world that focus on systemic change, away from extractivist practices, organizational diversity represents both a strength and a challenge. The key lies in fostering collaboration among these networks to create a more unified and effective movement for change, rather than continuing the practice of operating in separate silos. The urgency of addressing the socio-ecological crises linked to extractivist strategies of all sorts indeed necessitates concerted efforts to harness the potential of existing networks collectively.

In this context, advice seems useful, among others by Tim Hollo, namely, to learn from “Elinor Ostrom, Murray Bookchin, Indigenous wisdom, and other deep historic traditions,” with “horizontalist structure,” thus “avoiding the perils of centralization and colonization,” avoiding “directing predetermined actions from on high.” This leads me to the relevance of humiliation, as “actions from on high” can indeed be felt to be humiliating.

The Role of Humiliation Dynamics

Most people are familiar with the intricacies of paradigm change — we all remember Thomas Kuhn. Incumbents are to be expected to stand in the way of changes to the status quo, given that change would be contrary to their immediate short-term self-interest (even if it were in their long-term self-interest). Allow me to draw attention to another dynamic, one that may slow down or even turn back the most necessary and well-thought-through transformations, and this even with disregard for self-interest. What I refer to is the much-underestimated dynamic of humiliation.

More relevant than incumbents standing in the way of change may be people who feel humiliated, or, even more relevant, humiliation-entrepreneurs who use any opportunity to whip up feelings of humiliation in their followership for the sake of their own power strategies. In the

U.S.A., followers of a former president proudly wave their fists, brandishing rings that combine the phrase “deplorables” with the fierce face of a warrior, in other words, these people are ready to take revenge for perceived humiliations. In Germany, where I am spending a few days just now, the Green Party is in power and thus could drive important improvements, yet, the party is being punished ruthlessly for communicating their otherwise most well-intended ideas in ways that feed such backlashes.

The currently observable descent into war and denial of environmental challenges may largely be fed by such dynamics. Typically, “humilitors” are unaware of their deeds or forget about them, or they disparage the humiliatees’ feelings. As long as humiliatees remain too weak to stand up, everything seems stable. It requires leaders of the caliber of a Mandela to rise from humiliation in constructive ways, otherwise, violent power-over domination may ensue.

In the case of GTI 2.0, if it were a highly financed institutionalized hierarchical endeavor, it would be more vulnerable to such dynamics than GTI 1.0, and in the worst case, this could undermine GTI’s very own aims. Not only are incumbents known for offering funds to critics with the aim to exhaust them as a way of “deferred elimination” (Bourdieu’s terminology), funds also easily prompt suspicion, both internal and external. Humiliation-entrepreneurs are known for using suspicion as a powerful resource.

I thank Ingeborg Breines for pointing to the importance of the United Nations. If this organization had received the necessary support, the world may well be in a better place now.