

Reflections on A Great Ethics Transition: The Earth Charter At Twenty

Reflections on Brendan Mackey's essay
Toward A Great Ethics Transition: The Earth Charter At Twenty
(<https://greattransition.org/images/Mackey-Toward-a-Great-Ethics-Transition.pdf>)
by Evelin Lindner
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First, let me join everyone else in thanking Paul Raskin and Jonathan Cohn for bringing the issue of ethics to us through Brendan Mackey's great opening reflections.

I highly appreciate this essay and the other contributions in this discussion and would like to avoid duplicating what others have formulated much better than I could.

Allow me to add the dynamic of humiliation to Richard Falk's insightful list of "obstacles to the deep change that is needed". Falk enumerates short-termism, special interests, ideological and religious dogma, emergency diversions, and technophilia. Tim Weiskel offers the great formulation of "techno-scientific salvationism," and Stephen Purdey and Tim Weiskel are so right in pointing at the arrogance of "hominid exceptionalism."

Jeremy Lent spells out that earlier humans were able to "collaboratively restrain the occasional dangerously aggressive male driven by the atavistic impulse for domination that we see in other primates", and that "our initial impulse is to cooperate." Then he asks: "So why do we live in a world filled with endless examples of outrageous immorality, where dangerous aggressive males still wield power? With the rise of agriculture and sedentism, the power balance shifted to those who succeeded in establishing hierarchical dominance, leading eventually to the rise of patriarchal societies that rewarded machismo and violence—what Riane Eisler has termed 'domination systems.'"

During the 45 years of my global research, I have observed on all continents the "initial impulse to cooperate" that Jeremy Lent cogently notes, whereby it is important to note that the dialogical cooperation in partnership is profoundly different from the streamlined cooperation in hierarchical dominance structures.

Allow me to come to the dynamic of humiliation. It has many facets and many expressions, and I will touch only upon a few here. Last August and September, I spent time in the Brazilian Amazon, a prime location of "timber extraction, agricultural conversion, hydroelectric impoundment, and mining" as Ian Angus cogently lists. Wherever I turned, the dynamic of humiliation was to be seen in myriad expressions. I call this dynamic "the nuclear bomb of the emotions," among others, because of its force to cloud and undermine reasonable reality testing. I grew up in Germany amidst stories about the last days of WWII, I have then researched this topic for decades, and I am writing from Germany now. Many Germans were so caught in the Nazi narrative of national humiliation and the purported need to resurrect honor through war that they still believed in the Endsieg, or final victory, when its impossibility was already utterly obvious. At the end, the dynamic of humiliation had effects that were not only homicidal but also suicidal. Today, it is Homo economicus who still believes in the possibility of final victory over nature, and denies, for instance, the looming reality of homicidal and suicidal ecocide.

In the book that I am finalizing just now, titled *From Humiliation to Dignity: For a Future of Global Solidarity*, I speak to "hominid exceptionalism": "It is humiliating to face the fact that we, species Homo, might be much less sapiens or 'wise' than we like to think, that we might have given

ourselves the name sapiens somewhat haughtily and prematurely, and that civilisation might be much less of 'progress' than we fancy. It is humiliating to consider that we might have settled for sub-optimal solutions throughout the past millennia, for solutions that undervalued our ingenuity, such as war on each other and war on nature."

"Hominid exceptionalism" is not new and has had many versions. We live in times where it has largely been poured into the Homo economicus model of human nature. All around the world, I see humiliating effects flowing from this model. I have warned already more than a decade ago that the lingering feelings of humiliation resulting from this kind of globalization only wait for Hitler-like figures to channel these feelings towards scapegoats, among others. [1 + 2] The authoritarian leaders rising in many world regions now fulfill many of my predictions and we see an ever closer link between the dominator mindset and the Homo economicus mindset when we hear leaders promise "victory" through "making deals".

Men and women who identify with the script of dominator masculinity use feminism as one of their scapegoats, and this has a deep link to Mother Earth. "Climate hysteria" is a term used to discredit environmental protection efforts, whereby the word hysteria originates from the Greek word for uterus. "Klimahysterie" has been named Germany's derogatory catchword of the year 2019. DOMINATOR is written in large letters on an agricultural harvesting machine made in Germany.

Yes, as Aaron Karp rightly notes, elites have the most to lose and "will wage a cultural battle around our understanding of liberty". Yes, they "subject the population to addictions to drugs, alcohol, tobacco, mindless entertainment, and cellphones," as Roger S. Gottlieb warns. There is more. There are also strong feelings of humiliation at work when representatives of dominator masculinity feel that their significance is devalued, trampled on, and stolen from them. They see "hysterical women" trying to undermine the heroic efforts of real men. And thus, they pay back by humiliating women, nature, caring work—in short, everything that appears to be "female."

The emotional force of these feelings awaits to be reckoned with and be offered dignifying answers.

I very much appreciate Michael Karlberg's call that it is time to "roll up our sleeves to do the difficult work of constructing this new social reality" that manifests truths "that humanity is one; that all human beings are worthy of dignity, respect, and compassion; that human well-being depends on ever-expanding spheres of solidary and cooperation..."

I coined the term dignism, and I find that Arthur Dahl summarizes its spirit perfectly when he says that it is "our collective interest in achieving the well-being of all as a single human race united in our diversity, with everyone fulfilling their potential while leaving no one behind." Yes, what we need, as Richard Falk says it, is a "civilizational rupture," the "break with the expansionary vision of modernity, and its replacement by an ecologically crafted civilization that is sensitive to the ecological limits and positive potentialities of the Anthropocene."

As it looks now, this civilizational rupture might only be possible after a catastrophic tipping point (Thomas Kuhn has been mentioned several times). This is precisely what I do, together with my colleague Linda Hartling and others in our Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies fellowship (www.humiliationstudies.org): we prepare for that tipping point, for what we call "an Eleanor Roosevelt window of opportunity." We keep in mind Margaret Mead's saying, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that

ever has," and we also heed Sandra Waddock's important reminder that it takes only about 3.5 per cent of a population to adopt a new perspective and coordinate their actions for a social movement to be successful.

The moment the next collapse will come, the members of this group might be turned to and asked: "You, who thought about how to organize a better world for the past decades, now you have to deliver!" I say with Richard Mochelle: "My hope is that GTN members will be among the first to show a lead, accept this first responsibility, ascend to basecamp. and embark on the dialogical learning journey to agree on the specific system-transforming responsibilities we will commit to – in other words, to participate in a world constitutional assembly."

References:

1. Making Enemies: Humiliation and International Conflict, 2006, Foreword by Morton Deutsch (translated into Chinese in 2019)
2. A Dignity Economy: Creating an Economy That Serves Human Dignity and Preserves Our Planet, 2012, Foreword by Linda Hartling and Uli Spalthoff (translated into Brazilian-Portuguese in 2016)

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