

Pathways to the Great Transition?

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The Great Transition project raises the difficult question of how to avoid negative future scenarios. If one looks at the hopeful scenario of the Brundtland Report in 1987 in comparison with the quarter of a century of world history that followed, the lack of progress toward the vision of a democratic and socially fair politics of sustainable development is clear. Likewise, the histories of preindustrial civilizations that have faced ecological limits suggest that warfare and collapse are more likely outcomes than peaceful, planned transitions to life within adaptational limits. If the past is any guide to the future, the twenty-first century is likely to involve a combination of low-quality living conditions in urban shantytowns and ghettos combined with high levels of security and surveillance that protect the privileged upper classes. Furthermore, intense rivalry over limited water, mineral, and other natural resources will increase the levels of violence and warfare.

Although the world's scientists and social scientists have identified the natural and social problems with clarity, and they have articulated reasonable solutions, the "problem behind the problem" remains: stalemate and inaction. In most industrialized countries, existing political institutions are not sufficiently insulated from the financial power of the private sector. As a result, decisions that private-sector organizations view as restrictive tend to be blocked through the mechanisms of campaign financing, lobbying, and the intellectual work of think tanks. Given the paralysis of political institutions, the work of Paul Raskin and others associated with the Tellus Institute has suggested that a global citizens movement is necessary to provide a countervailing political force that might shift the historical trajectory away from scenarios of political systems based on high levels of inequality, surveillance, repression, and warfare. Basically sympathetic to his argument that social movements from below are one of the few rays of hope for the twenty-first century, I will argue that the concept of a global citizens movement needs to be disaggregated, and that careful attention should be given to the points of leverage that may exist for change so that limited mobilizational resources are not lost.

The first aspect of the disaggregation involves thinking about the goals of a global citizens movement. There are various ways to classify social change action. Much work in social movements studies involves a distinction between traditional, state-oriented movements and nontraditional movements that have other targets of social change, such as corporations or even social relations and lifestyles. However, for purposes of analysis and strategy for long-term historical transition, the familiar distinction is perhaps not the most helpful guide to the future. Instead, I suggest a categorization based on two fundamental goals: a transition that involves life within ecological limits and one that

involves a more just form of social organization. In turn, we might think of the two goals as constituting two primary axes of a field of social movement action, a sustainability and justice axis. The axes provide a scheme for thinking about categories of movements as ideal types or polar positions in a social movement field. Although I use the term “movements” here, more generally I prefer the concept of “alternative pathways,” so that a wide range of social action can be included, such as non-protest reform movements and even the broader sector of charitable and remedial work in civil society. (See Figure 1.)

For the sustainability access, we may distinguish two main tendencies among alternative pathways. First, there is the goal of stopping a particular practice and replacing it with something better. An example is the movement to stop highway construction in cities that was very prominent in many American cities during the 1960s and 1970s. Second, the “industrial opposition movements” usually coincide with a pro-alternative movement, such as movements in favor of public transportation, and there are two basic types of “alternative industrial movements.” The certification movements involve efforts to work with the private sector to develop alternative products that meet negotiated production requirements, such as dolphin-safe tuna or sustainably harvested wood. The technology- and product-oriented movements (TPMs) focus on developing alternative products, such as the early stages of the organic food movement.

For the justice axis, we may also distinguish between two types or poles of movements: those that remediate problems and those that innovate processes. The remedial movements are the classic access movements that advocate for the provision of basic services to the poor. They are “human rights”-based movements that demand access to housing, food, health care, and so on. In contrast, the processual movements focus more on the underlying systems of government and governance where the ideas of democratic participation are not realized in practice. These movements can address deficits in the functioning of existing political institutions, such as the democracy deficits of federal governments and international financial organizations, as well as ownership structure issues, such as the consolidation of industries.

Using this basic schema, it is then possible to break down the concept of a global citizens movement into a family of related movements that operate in distinct social fields. The second aspect of the disaggregation approach involves using the four main types as a way of thinking about specific alternative pathways that arise in distinct social fields. Following Bourdieu and a variety of other social theorists, my assumption here is that social fields have a degree of autonomy that requires successful social action to operate within the structures of the field, with its specific forms of capital and habitus. Of course, there are coalitions across fields and capacities of translation that can occur, but the basic argument here is that successful social mobilization requires acknowledgement of the field-specific logic of society. (See Figure 2.)

By disaggregating the category of a global citizens movement in this way, it is possible to define potentially highly effective roles for organizations with limited resources, such as the Tellus Institute. One crucial role is to track and connect the various alternative pathways. Thus, some organizations can play the important role of enhancing communication, integration, and connectivity among the diverse alternative pathways. But there is another, and perhaps even more important role, that social scientists, intellectuals, and analysts can play: to explore strategies, outcomes, and patterns of

success and failure across the wide range of alternative pathways that together could be thought of as the elements of a global citizens movement. For example, my work suggests that there is a tendency for an incorporation and transformation process to occur. In other words, at a certain point large corporations and political elites respond to demands for change, but they do so by incorporating some of the demands into mainstream politics and transforming them into reforms that are largely compatible with existing underlying power structures. The story does not end here; rather, the history of mobilization begins anew with a new ground that has changed as a result of the previous mobilizations.

Furthermore, the incorporation and transformation process varies by pathway type, and here one begins to see some of the advantages of a disaggregated approach to the concept of a global citizens movement. In the industrial opposition movements, the result is often a partial moratorium on a technology or industry that is far short of original aspirations. For example, the anti-nuclear energy movement managed to contribute to the end of new construction, but it did not achieve the goal of many movement leaders: to close all existing plants. For the alternative industrial movements, the alternatives are often incorporated but the design is transformed. For example, organic food goes from being a localized set of networks of farmers and consumers who share localist process goals to an industry that sells processed organic food and drops most aspirations of localism. For the process movements, which advocate underlying changes in the economic ownership and political power, we sometimes see incremental reforms, especially at the local level of scale, but we rarely see full-fledged transitions in underlying patterns of ownership and power. Finally, for the access movements, the aspirations of political change and empowerment are often broken off from service delivery demands, and we find that activist organizations are channeled into service-delivery functions through the mechanisms of devolution and public-private partnerships (Hess 2007).

Rather than view the incorporation and transformation process as one of compromise and failure, I suggest that it is better to view it as part of the dialectics of historical change that involves both compromise and change on a continually changing historical field. Tipping points may occur when more sudden changes take place, but those tipping points occur within social fields and are the product of the long, slow processes of mobilization and network growth. Exogenous crises to the system may become a factor in field transitions, but crises are always interpreted and contextualized by the structures and agents of the field. Crises, in this sense, are made, and it is a mistake to wait for them as the source of historical change.

A major advantage of a field-specific approach to the global citizens' movement is that it encourages a comparative analysis across alternative pathways that helps social change agents to identify pressure points where a limited mobilizational capacity can best be utilized. Grassroots social movements with aspirations of enhanced sustainability and social fairness cannot function as the mere inversions of reform movements led by elites. For example, if one looks at the history of global politics from the 1970s to the present, political and economic elites have sanctioned a transition from social liberalism (or "social democracy" in Europe) to a fundamentally altered mix of state intervention and market oriented policies that are influenced by neoliberal ideologies. The mechanism of the transition involved significant investment of financial resources by economic elites

into think tanks, the media, universities, and political campaigns in order to tilt political discourse away from the prevailing politics of social liberalism. Furthermore, control of international financial institutions (including the replacement of economists at the International Monetary Fund) enabled the policies to be exported under structural adjustment programs. Unfortunately, the global citizens movement lacks the same access to financial resources, and consequently its strategies of mobilization must be different. However, the strategies cannot rely on past histories of grassroots mobilizations as a model, because so much of the world has changed due to the increasing control of corporate power over the media, intellectuals, and the political system.

Upon first inspection, this line of analysis leads to the identification of two specific sites of reform that are important direct levers of change: media reform and electoral reform. For media reform, I have tracked some of the various alternative pathways in the field. The most direct would be federal government policy that restricts the consolidation of the media into large conglomerates, as in the reform movement of the Free Press. However, political opportunities are largely blocked on this count, and consequently there are some benefits in following out some of the other alternative pathways in the media field. The transition of some print media organizations to nonprofit status and the convergence with community media offer some models that, due to the nonprofit organizational status, resist the consolidation process that can be found across the media industries. The greatest hope lies in new technologies that escape control by political elites or have not yet been brought under their control.

With respect to electoral reform, there are some interesting experiments at the state-government level in nonpartisan run-off elections and campaign finance reform. The former has shown some promise to favor candidates who are less linked to extreme partisan politics and more willing to develop bipartisan consensus legislation. Clearly, it is not going to be possible to get significant political reform in the United States until there is more autonomy for the political field. The need is as widely recognized as reform proposals are as widely blocked.

Media reform and electoral reform are crucial sites of intervention because they are the gateways to building increased autonomy for the political field from the economic field. However, they are difficult sites of intervention because elites understand their importance and are likely to resist challenges. In other words, political opportunities for media and electoral reform in the United States at the federal government level are generally blocked, although they are more open at the state and local government levels. This insight brings up the important issue of scale and the need to think about the global citizens movement as operating at various levels of scale. As I have suggested elsewhere (Hess 2011), political opportunities shift historically, and frequently those shifts vary by scale. For example, electricity regulation originally occurred at the city then state government levels, but after regulatory capture it shifted to the federal government level during the New Deal era, and the restructuring of the industry since the 1970s has again created opportunities at the local level. Likewise, the clean-energy and green jobs coalitions operate at a variety of scales, and some of their greatest victories have been at the state and local government levels. Those victories can create a patchwork of reforms that both serve as laboratories of policy innovation and pressure points on industry that may seek federal-government reform to simplify compliance.

A second-order strategy focuses less on the directly evident sites of intervention and more on sites of intervention that could shift the underlying terrain of economic and political power that are the precondition of processual changes for the media and electoral system. Here, I have explored three basic strategies. The first is the capacity of the combination of industrial opposition movements and alternative industrial movements to change the political opportunity structure for major industries. Industrial opposition movements are most successful when they can postulate a clear threat and mobilize diverse constituencies around a moratorium campaign. Alternative industrial movements serve as laboratories of innovation, but they can also provoke divisions within mainstream industries that in turn lead to access to resources for the alternatives. In the process, new industries are created, and to the extent that those industries are aligned with sustainability politics, they can provide the financial resources to shape public opinion.

A related strategy that I am currently studying is the work of labor-environmental coalitions that have partnered with the green business sector under the banner of “green jobs.” To some degree these coalitions represent the second-generation of the earlier generation of alternative industrial movements, such as the early phases of the solar industry in the U.S. Among the policies advocated by the green-jobs and clean-tech coalitions are a national price on carbon, a national renewable electricity standard, support for research and development in the clean-energy sector, and various other forms of government support for clean technologies, such as rail, batteries, and renewable energy manufacturing. Many scholars and reformers criticize the incrementalism of the “policy reforms” scenario as unable to bring about the significant levels of transition that are desired or needed, and the criticisms are arguably justified. However, from the perspective of political and economic power shifts, the incremental reforms begin to create new constituencies and political coalitions that can open political opportunities that have been blocked by the high levels of political spending by the fossil-fuel industries. An example is the lobbying that is emerging from the solar, wind, biofuels, and geothermal industries and the divisions that have emerged over climate-change policy on the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. In other words, although one might categorize such efforts as mere “policy reform,” they may open political opportunities that enable more significant or “greater” transitions to take place.

The combination of industrial opposition movements, alternative industrial movements, and blue-green coalitions tend to create shifts of economic power among economic elites that favor sustainability policies. As their power increases, we see a shift along the horizontal access in Figure 1 from remedial approaches to environmental policies to processual approaches. The strategies result in shifts of economic power, but more within an existing private-sector system. The strategies help to create new resources based on the participation of new industrial groups, but they only address “vertical” access issues of social fairness and political process reform in a tangential and incremental way.

Of the approaches to processual reform of the political system, the traditional approach has been policies that operate along a continuum from increased government regulation (such as policies that put a price on carbon and pollution) to national public ownership of the fossil-fuel industries. Ideally, public ownership would prevent the flow of funds to think tanks, the media, climate-change skeptics, and political campaigns that deny climate change or oppose sustainability reforms. However, the huge investment of

resources since the 1970s by the private sector in the diffusion of neoliberal ideology has made public ownership and even more modest regulatory interventions in markets an unpopular political topic in the United States. The situation is different in other countries, and the experience there also indicates that even public ownership of the fossil-fuel industries does not necessarily speed up the greening of the economy.

My other work has focused on a second approach to process-oriented alternative pathways, and within that realm, localism. I understand localist movement as social change linked by the goal of bringing about increased local ownership, especially by privately held, small businesses. It is fairly easy to mobilize people based on place-based loyalties, and the protection of “our” small businesses against the global corporations can be included under the umbrella of local identities. Furthermore, there is even relatively low resistance to public ownership at a local level. In the United States we can find instances of public ownership of electricity generation (including some of the greenest utilities in the country) and even public ownership of banks, such as the state-owned bank in North Dakota. We can also find a class base for localist mobilizations in the small-business and nonprofit sectors of the regional economy, as can be found in the growing national localist efforts associated with the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies. As I have argued, localism is not inherently green or fair, but I have suggested a wide range of points of convergence: community gardens and urban agriculture, local finance, community media, green public transit, local renewable energy, and the reuse sector. Furthermore, localism can also be defined as a global proposition for building an economy based on cooperatives, employee-owned businesses, and privately held small businesses, such as in the fair trade model. In other words, a global localism is possible (Hess 2009).

One of the great problems of localism is that it has focused so far on consumption and not investment. As a result, a business, government, or household may localize some purchasing, but its retirement funds may go into companies that subvert the goals. Even the socially responsible investment (SRI) field is not responsive to these concerns, because some of the SRI funds identify investment choices that include companies that have destroyed locally owned, independent businesses (such as retail chains, large banks, and media conglomerates). But there are tremendous opportunities here to open up the investment frontier for the small business sector. The change might occur through new investment models, such as peer-to-peer lending, but there are also opportunities for regulatory reform. The Securities and Exchange Commission’s policies that restrict the flow of investments to the small business sector therefore may be an untapped lever of change, as are the socially responsible mutual fund companies that have yet to connect their definitions of social responsibility with scale and ownership.

I think that investment is probably the greatest and most accessible lever of change. However, the whole field of social change action associated with investment needs to be conceptualized as requiring a second-order strategy above and beyond shareholder activism and socially responsible investment screens on funds. One needs instead to look for opportunities to shift the tremendous levels of financial power aggregated in pension funds and mutual funds back toward the public sector and socially responsible small business sector. Opportunities for retirement investments are highly limited in this field, mostly to low-return, low-risk investments via community banks, credit unions, and loan funds. There is a need to break down the regulatory hurdles that

have been put in place to prevent investment in communities. Here, the Securities and Exchange Commission and socially responsible mutual funds appear as potentially significant levers of change.

The increasing instability of the financial system has created new political opportunities for creative new policy interventions. Although the first wave of policy responses to the mortgage crisis of 2007 and 2008 revealed that the political system in the United States only had the capacity for limited, incremental reform, it is probably a good idea to be ready with plans should a second systemic crisis appear. In late 2010 there seems to be some likelihood that the “fraudclosure” problem could lead to a new systemic crisis, where Congress is told to act immediately under the threat of systemic meltdown. Anticipating and preparing for such crises with “Plan B” options would also make a great deal of sense as a mobilizing strategy, because in situations of crisis it may be possible to extract systemic changes. Underlying goals of a “Plan B” strategy would include reduction of the size of large financial institutions, stronger regulation, and policies that favor state-government banks, credit unions, and community banks that hold mortgages until repayment.

In summary, my argument is that attention to a global citizens movement as an agent of historical change could benefit from several next steps. First, it is helpful to disaggregate the concept in terms of underlying goals and explore what it means as a family of alternative pathways for change. I have provided a framework for doing so that is consistent with the sustainability and social fairness goals that I share with the Great Transitions approach. Second, a field-specific orientation to the disaggregation begins to develop an analysis of the comparative differences of the multiple points of change. Third, the field-specific approach then enables the comparative analysis of levers of change as potential strategic sites where mobilizational efforts could be concentrated. Although it is beneficial to weave connections among the various alternative pathways for change, it is also beneficial to analyze the political opportunity structures and potential pressure points in the system. I have suggested some possibilities here for the United States in 2010, but clearly the possibilities will vary by country and over time.

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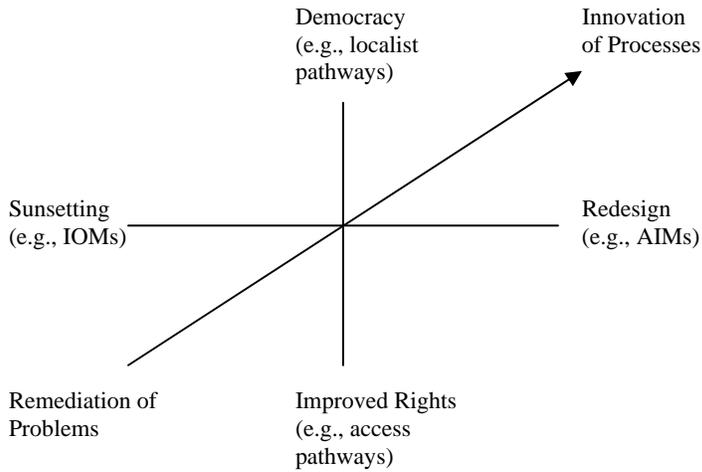


Figure 1

Justice and Sustainability as a Field of Contestation
(From Hess 2007).

<i>Fields of Action:</i>	<i>Industrial Opposition Movements:</i>	<i>Alternative Industrial Movements:</i>	<i>Process-oriented movements</i>	<i>Access movements</i>
Food and agriculture	Pesticides, GMO food, factory farms	Organic	Local agricultural networks	Anti-hunger, community gardens
Energy	Nuclear energy, fossil fuels	Renewable, energy efficiency	Public power, comm. choice	Fuel banks
Health	Medicalization, medical risks	Complementary & alternative medicine	Healthy cities	Free clinics, health-care reform
Waste and manufacturing	Pollution, local toxic exposure	Recycling, zero waste	Reuse	Thrift
Infrastructure	Highways, malls	New urbanism, public transit, green building	Cohousing, ride sharing, relocation	CDCs, transit justice, fair housing
Investment	Treadmill investments, Financial concentration	Responsible investing	Credit unions, comm. banks, public banks	Microenterprise, time banks
Media	Corporate consolidation (Free Press)	Alternative media	Community, nonprofit, public	Ethnic minority media
Government	War, Globalization	Demarchy, deliberative mechanisms	Election & lobbying reform	Voter registration

Figure 2. Alternative Pathways and Industrial Fields