DOES THE UNITED STATES PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION MATTER IN THE BIG PICTURE?
By Herman Greene

Ecozoans operate out of a big history.

Thomas Berry said that our present situation is not like any other period in human history because, for the first time, the human species is undergoing a transition in geo-biological eras—from the terminal Cenozoic to the emerging Ecozoic era. This, he said, is not like a disturbance in merely human affairs, like a great depression or even a world war, it’s a change in the way the planet functions. When Berry wrote of the Ecozoic era, he was writing of a contingent promise. He was writing of what could be, not what was destined to be or necessarily would be.

The framework he gave for understanding our times is so broad it is difficult to relate to everyday events. So we might actually have two questions. First: In this ecozoic big picture framework, does what happens in the US Presidential campaign really matter? Second: Does this ecozoic big picture framework really matter to the US Presidential campaign?

I’ll begin with the first question.

One of the finest documents written on the “great transition” to sustainability, is Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead.¹ In it the authors envisioned six potential scenarios for the future. While the scenarios do not exhaust the possibilities, I continue to find them quite helpful:

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In Conventional Worlds, the future proceeds without major interruptions. Some focus on Market Forces as driving world development, and others focus on Policy Reform to address issues such as poverty and environmental issues in the process of development. This is business as usual with ongoing improvements. These are the scenarios out of which business and governments operate as, to some extent, do each of us in our daily lives and in our places of work.

Barbarization anticipates that Conventional Worlds will not be able to manage the problems of the future. Economic and social institutions will be disrupted leading either to Breakdown and conflict and crisis, or Fortress World where authoritarian control and defensive measures are applied to establish security and stability.

¹Paul Raskin et al., Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead (Boston, MA: Stockholm Environment Institute – Boston, 2002), 14-16.
In the *Great Transition* scenarios, there are two variants, *Eco-Communalism* and *New Sustainability Paradigm*. *Eco-Communalism* focuses on localism, bioregionalism, participatory democracy, organic agriculture, crafts, and autarky. In *Eco-Communalism* hierarchical structures and globalism greatly diminish. In the *New Sustainability Paradigm*, the complexity and globalism of Conventional Worlds continues, but the character of civilization is changed by transformative new values and there is a greater role for civil society. The authors of the *Great Transition* favor the *New Sustainability Paradigm* and do not see *Eco-Communalism* on a large scale without first passing through some form of Barbarization.²

Elements of the *New Sustainability Paradigm* are given in numerous documents. Moving into this paradigm requires transforming energy production to make energy available in greater quantities and on a wider scale and yet without greenhouse gas emissions. It also requires a new transportation system and redesign of cities, suburbs, and even rural areas. It requires greatly increased resource efficiency and greatly reduced toxicity. Goods need to be more durable, repairable and recyclable. Other species need protection and in a way that augments and is coherent with the functioning of natural systems. Further, this paradigm calls for increased social equity and reduced conflict and operating within planetary boundaries.

The *New Sustainability Paradigm* has an appeal because it preserves the benefits of modernity while extending them to more people and, by definition, it operates within planetary boundaries. It has a Utopian aspect to it, however, and it is relatively easy for a broad range of people to be for it, without any real agreement on what it entails or on the scope and scale of change needed to actually achieve sustainability.

I see Trump operating out of three of these scenarios. In terms of everyday affairs, he has faith in business, i.e. *market forces*. He even sees running government like a business deal. Where he is primarily, however, is in *breakdown* and wanting to construct a *fortress world*. Instead of gated communities we would have a gated country. He has visions of mongrel hoards invading America and taking advantage of us. He wants citizens to stop being stupid and put America first. He is not the only leader in the world acting out of such impulses and American citizens are not the only ones rallying around such leaders.

I see Clinton operating out of *policy reform* with a vision of the *new sustainability paradigm*. Many find her uninspiring, but she is a highly committed public servant. Her lifelong devotion to women’s issues and her notion that “it takes a village,” not just individuals, to improve things are guides to what is important to her.

I see Sanders operating out of *breakdown*. Policy reform is not enough, a revolution is needed. He says climate change is the greatest single challenge facing humanity, and social inequality and the influence of money, especially large financial institutions, in politics as paramount issues. Commentators question whether he has a realistic budget plan to put in place the

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²*Great Transition*, 15
policies he advocates, but his supporters are undeterred. Socialism, once anathema, he proudly advocates—we can do this if we all work together and support each other. His vision of the Great Transition seems to me to be more eco-communalism than new sustainability paradigm. He sees the issues of the United States as internal to it and gives little attention to the global dynamics and realities that shape our lives. Still it is difficult for me to place him either eco-communalism or new sustainability paradigm. I see little in his proposals that suggests a reduction in scale of enterprise, and rather see a massive state apparatus collecting and distributing benefits. Also, I do not see the fractiousness of our present politics being transformed into a great period of cooperation as Sanders would have it.

Sanders further appears to be a “true believer.” After decades in Congress, he now has his moment in the public eye. He feels it is time to realize what he has fought for his whole life and believes this can be accomplished. He will not, however, win the Democratic nomination. While he will not run a third party campaign, he threatens to be the Ralph Nader of the 2016 election and hand the victory to Trump by withholding his support from, or moderating his support of, Clinton. Nate Cohn, the pollster’s pollster, makes an interesting observation in a May 23, 2016, article in the New York Times, regarding recent polls that show Sanders beating Trump by higher numbers than Clinton. In his view it is the Sanders supporters who are holding down Clinton’s numbers, Trump receives about 40% of the vote against both Sanders and Clinton. A similar point is made in a May 24, 2016, politico.com article. Both articles state that while almost all Clinton supporters would vote for Sanders over Trump, only around two-thirds of Sanders supporters would favor Clinton over Trump (the remainder either voting for Trump or for a third party candidate or not voting at all).

The next President of the United States will either be Trump or Clinton. This is not true because these two are the best candidates. It is true because this is political reality. But does it really matter?

Yes, I think it does matter even in the very broad historical context of a change in geo-biological eras. There is a historical necessity that humans deal with the change in the functioning of Earth, but there is no historical necessity that there be a benign outcome. Trump’s efforts to build a fortress world is a frightful thought.

If the largest context for understanding our times is geo-biological change, in terms of human history the largest context is civilizational change. The global stresses to which Trump and Sanders are a response are the breakdown of the economic-industrial age. Commentators who say Trump is no ordinary candidate are right. While there are barbarian threats to US citizens (and others) from outside the United States, Trump is an uncivilized (especially as regards an ecological-cultural age) threat from within.

And now the second question: Will the big picture framework really matter in the US Presidential campaign? “Yes,” again. We are facing and will face increasingly difficult circumstances. For example, people are not migrating for no reason at all. The crucible of this Presidential campaign is the microcosm of the macrocosmic events that are upon us.
These are the areas that need transformative leadership:

(i) creating a new theoretical, practical, historical and philosophical framework for the world of the future;
(ii) dealing with the intimate relationship between people and the natural environment;
(iii) providing uncommon clarity about our best economic and energy options;
(iv) helping people understand and face what will be increasingly difficult circumstances; and
(v) fostering a vision of a humane and decent future.

All will not be lost if Trump becomes President, but for ecozoans carrying out the Great Work, things will be discernibly more difficult. In the above five areas, in my view Trump offers nothing.

And if Clinton becomes President? In this case, Ecozoans will see a lot more of the dysfunctional politics of the last, at least, eight years. The US has been described as a vetocracy, there are so many checks and balances and so many ways to prevent change from happening. I believe that if Clinton is President, we will have someone who understands the world and its people and its environmental challenges. She will be limited in what she can accomplish, but will not herself be an impediment.