

## **UNDERSTANDING POSSIBLE FUTURES IN AN INCREASINGLY INSECURE WORLD: REVIEW OF PAUL RASKIN'S *JOURNEY TO EARTH LAND: THE GREAT TRANSITION TO PLANETARY CIVILIZATION***

by Felix Dodds

*Editor's Note: Felix Dodds is one of the world's most informed writers on intergovernmental efforts toward sustainable development. He has written three books giving the history of the UN's sustainable development process, his latest (written with Ambassador David Donoghue) being "Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals: A Transformational Agenda for an Insecure World." Felix is a Senior Fellow at the Global Research Institute and a Senior Affiliate at the Water Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an Associate Fellow at the Tellus Institute. He was the Executive Director of Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future from 1992-2012. The following article was posted to his [blog](#) on December 30, 2016, and is republished here with permission. His website is [www.felixdodds.net](http://www.felixdodds.net)*

There is no question that 2016 has been a year of surprises whether it was Brexit, Leicester City winning the Premier League, or the Chicago Cubs winning the World Series. But perhaps the biggest surprise of all was a TV reality show host and property developer with no political experience winning the US Presidency.

Looking over the political landscape, there is a global trend towards nationalism and xenophobia—some would draw parallels with the rise of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s.

A year after the success of countries agreeing to the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Climate Agreement, we now have an incoming President who seems to be a climate denier. His nomination of the CEO of Exxon Mobile as his secretary of state doesn't just worry those who think his close ties to Russia are problematic, but the company that he runs knew that burning fossil fuels would contribute to climate change as early as the 1970s. With the recent release of company papers, it is clear they suppressed this knowledge and funded climate denying scientists just as the tobacco companies did on the health problems of smoking tobacco.

On my flight from California to New York before Christmas to facilitate the workshop on multi-stakeholder partnerships that the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) organized, I had the chance to read Paul Raskin's new book [Journey to Earthland: The Great Transition to Planetary Civilization](#).

As the end of year approaches it offers a great time to step back from this daily fray and reflect on the big questions: Where are going? Where do we want to be? How do we get there? We couldn't ask for a better primer on how to answer these questions.

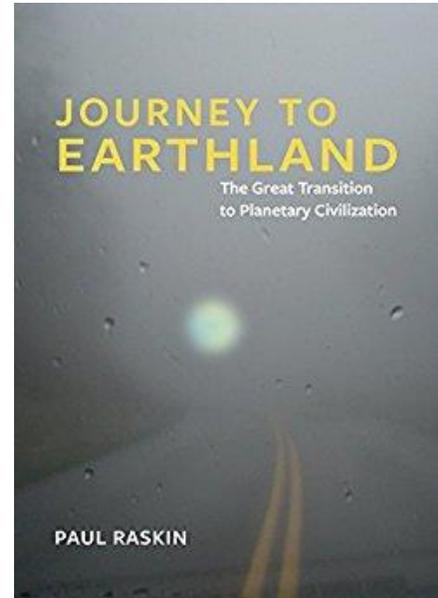
The book is a sequel to the [2002 Great Transition](#) essay, the culminating project of the [Global Scenarios Group](#), and a seminal contribution to the literature on sustainable development. As Raskin, President of the [Tellus Institute](#), well knows, much has changed in the intervening years, and he revisits the work with the rigor of a theoretical physicist and the sobriety of a realist, yet with the hope and sense of the possibility of an engaged visionary.

Raskin begins with an analysis of the historical moment, suggesting the emergence of a new interdependent era: the “planetary phase of civilization.” Money, people, goods, ideas, pollutants, and diseases traverse increasingly fluid borders at a rapid pace. Snowballing crises—from widening inequality to climate change—are global in scope and cannot be solved by any one nation alone. Humanity and the entire community of life have become a single community of fate, the overarching proto-country of “Earthland.” But given the current governance vacuum, Earthland today is a failed state. More troubling, if we fail to overcome the “zombie ideologies” of the twentieth century—nationalism, materialism, individualism, the domination of nature—her future prospects are dim. Of course, the reality is that the planet will survive us: The question has always been “Will we find a way to live sustainably for all of its people?” That must now be in question.

Using a typology developed by the Global Scenarios Group, Raskin charts out three scenario classes (and six scenarios) for how the future might unfold from our fiercely contested present.



*Conventional Worlds* present a continuation of the status quo—with *Market Forces* representing neoliberal globalization and *Policy Reform* representing the valiant efforts to tame it. As an optimist, I think the agreements on the SDGs and climate change mean there is still the chance of a Policy Reform approach IF and that is a big IF the world has enlightened leaders to take us on that path and implement these agreements. There is still the chance—but only just.



Less savory are the *Barbarization* scenarios, including the global apartheid of *Fortress Worlds* and the societal collapse of *Breakdown*. If I were a pessimist I would suggest this is the likely outcome.



The promise that “another world is possible” exists in the third class of scenarios, *Great Transitions*, with a pluralist ecotopian *New Sustainability Paradigm* and a localist *Eco-Communalism*. We can see all of these futures stirring in the present. Last year ended on a high note for the possibility of a *Policy Reform* route to sustainable development, with the rollout of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris climate deal.



In 2016, from Brexit to Trump, Temer’s Brazil, to Duterte’s Philippines, a *Fortress World* lurks on every corner. And one can see *Breakdown* in every tragic new story coming out of Syria and the failure to tame slow-moving train wrecks like climate change.

Raskin argues that the center—*Conventional Worlds*—cannot hold (“In immoderate times, moderation becomes imprudent—madness in reason’s mask”) and explains how to transcend it. The coming social transformation, he argues, must be propelled by the infusion of the triad of values—ecocentrism, solidarity, and well-being—into worldviews and institutions.

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Raskin puts his hope in the emergence of a “global citizens’ movement,” born out of the realization of interconnected struggles and leavened by these new values. Global citizenship, he argues, is the next step in citizenship’s evolution: “As connectivity globalizes in the external world, so might empathy globalize in the human heart.” We have seen with the recent election in the United States how social media can be used to promote ideas—unfortunately, the ‘false news’ ideas that are the dark side of a global citizens’ movement. There is also an assumption in the book that civil society is on the left and can be mobilized as a precursor to the ‘global citizens’ movement’. This is at the same time as we are seeing repressive laws introduced against civil society in places like Egypt and Russia. Some of the battle lines are being drawn. In the United States, the lack of any proper restrictions on guns means some of the ‘darker forces’ are also well armed.

In a section called “The Destination,” Raskin, writing from the perspective of someone living in post-Great Transition Earthland of 2084, lays out his vision of “another world.” He presents a

concise history of the coming decades and describes the systems of governance, trade, political economy, and social relations of the just and sustainable world humanity was able to achieve. Raskin's Earthland is no totalizing utopia. It allows for internal diversity and continuing political struggle. Befitting the "unity in diversity" mantra, Earthland comprises a motley assortment of regional types around three major archetypes: Agoria (an ecologically resilient social democracy), Ecodemia (a non-authoritarian socialism), and Arcadia (a rustic yet worldly localism). I have no personal problem with the three suggested archetypes but perhaps the assumption underneath is there is no space for the right in the new politics, and I'm not sure that will be the case.

What are the prospects for achieving this kind of Earthland in our turbulent century? Although Raskin criticizes the limitations of *Policy Reform* scenarios, he also acknowledges the importance of such approaches, particularly now, in beginning to bend the curve of history toward a Great Transition. The Sustainable Development Goals offer just such a possibility. Because of the hard work and advocacy of a diverse group of stakeholders, the SDGs embraced an aspirational and actionable vision for humanity in the coming decade. Citizens across the globe have a set of commitments, reflective in many ways of Raskin's triad of values, to which they can hold their governments accountable. And in spurring such grassroots mobilization, the SDGs can catalyze the thinking that will take humanity even further.



[Watch Great Transition Ideas on You Tube](#)

If you're like me, you've felt the cold winds of despair at your door during this unsettling year. Then we need to have hope and we need to articulate much better the future worlds we think are possible and see what the 'global citizen' thinks of these worlds. *Journey to Earthland* offers a primer for a dialogue, a lyrical and energizing antidote, and a companion as we reengage in the hard work to come for the better world we need—and deserve.