

SIX PATHWAYS
TO THE GREAT
TRANSITION -
WHAT NEEDS
TO BE DONE



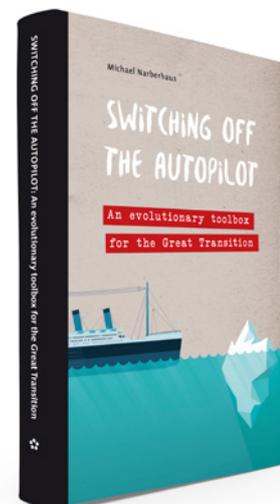
The Smart CSOs Lab is a think tank and social innovation lab working with civil society leaders, researchers and funders aiming to develop and put into practice strategies that embrace the cultural and systemic root causes lying behind the social and environmental crises of our times. More information at smart-csos.org.

This content of this publication is an adapted version of chapter 10 of the book *Switching off the autopilot: An evolutionary toolbox for the Great Transition*.

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Over the last few years, progressive activism has increasingly looked at the world through the lenses of identity, power and privilege. It has successfully placed its *oppression story* at the heart of the mainstream media and politics. But at the same time it has alienated its more moderate allies and has become more homogeneous and dogmatic in its thinking.

This is a divisive approach that contributes to further political polarisation and provides fertile ground for authoritarian and nationalist politics.

The situation is serious. The transition to a sustainable society cannot happen inside the progressive ideological bubble. Instead we need to break out of the current echo chambers and welcome a much broader set of ideas of good faith into our discussions.

This paper proposes a number of action areas and strategies that civil society organisations, activist networks and grantmaking organisations should pursue if they want to make a positive contribution to tackling the ecological crises and to creating a better society. They are based on the evolutionary insights and other findings that are explored in depth in the book [Switching off the autopilot: An evolutionary toolbox for the Great Transition](#).¹

1. **Reduce moral certainty**
2. **Build a transversal movement**
3. **Foster viewpoint diversity**
4. **Learn new ways of sensemaking**
5. **Design prototypes for cultural evolution**
6. **Tell stories grounded in truth**



1. REDUCE MORAL CERTAINTY

Most people with traditional values² in our Western societies are not per se rejecting the values of the open society. A study from 2019 across six European countries (France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Italy and Greece) explored people's views on the open society and its values.³ Only 9% of the respondents across all six countries rejected the values of the open society (e.g., freedom of religion, protection of minorities and equal treatment of immigrants). However, 59% of the respondents believe that a good society should incorporate the ideals of both the open society and also the closed society (e.g., protection of a country's borders and dominance of the traditional majority culture).⁴ In other words, only very few people reject the advances made with regard to women's and minorities' rights over the last decades, but an important segment of our societies feels threatened by the speed of change over recent years. They are not the enemies of progress, but they see certain trade-offs between further progress and the stability of their societies that are unresolved.



Why do you see the speck
in your neighbour's eye,
but do not notice the log
in your own eye?

You hypocrite, first take
the log out of your own
eye, and then you will
see clearly to take
the speck out of your
neighbour's eye.

(Matthew 7:3-5)



Progressive activists and others who believe that much more progress is needed to achieve full equality for women, gays, trans people and ethnic minorities will have to urgently reduce their moral certainty and cultivate generosity of spirit. They are too certain about the superiority of their moral worldview.

Jonathan Haidt notes: “The ancients knew that we don’t react to the world as it is; we react to the world as we construct it in our own minds. They also knew that in the process of construction we are overly judgmental and outrageously hypocritical: ‘Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ... You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour’s eye.’ (Matthew 7:3–5)”⁵

The liberal Western society and their morality, globally speaking, is the *weird*⁶ minority – Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic. The vast majority of the global population care about their religion, nation and the traditional family as much as they care about the rights of minorities and social justice. To dismiss traditional conservative values as illegitimate is a huge mistake.

The open society can only exist if everybody is capable of being tolerant – this has to include tolerance towards those who hold traditional values. If we are not tolerant towards this significant part of our societies, it will only lead to more resistance against liberal values and trigger more authoritarian dynamics. One of the characteristics of liberal societies is precisely that people with different ways of life and views can manage to live together without aiming to convert the other side.

Progressives should realise that equality of outcome is not a good goal for achieving justice and in fact is often a very bad one. Unequal representation, for example, of women and ethnic minorities in business sectors, academia or leadership positions is not always an indicator of discrimination. It sometimes can be, but often such inequities are an expression of different interests. The introduction of a quota as a general instrument, as is now demanded almost everywhere, will certainly create new injustices. We know from experience with affirmative action in the United States that instead of providing better opportunities for everyone, only a few already relatively privileged individuals benefit from such a system.⁷ Moreover, well-prepared individuals who would have succeeded without the quota might be stigmatised for the perception of having been given an advantage, while others who are promoted into a leadership position (or similar) without having the right qualifications might suffer in trying to live up to the expectations and demands. Additionally, groups that are disadvantaged by the system might develop resentment because they perceive the system as unfair. Such unintended effects could be avoided if the focus were on creating better opportunities for everyone and investigating where potential real sources of discrimination lay, which could then be addressed more adequately.

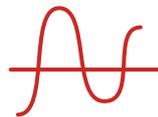
For example, one potential injustice might lie in the fact that many of the professions that are traditionally dominated by women are low-paid.⁸ This is especially the case with most care jobs, like nursing, childcare and care of the elderly. Instead of aiming at symmetry between women and men in their choice of profession, efforts could be concentrated on raising the pay in these traditionally female jobs.

In any case, it’s not wise to aim at achieving 100% social justice. Like with most things in life, too much of a good thing can become a bad thing. We have seen this in the case of the admission of trans women to women’s sports competitions. It meant that biological women didn’t have any chance of winning in some athletic disciplines due to the physical advantage trans women had.⁹ So the only way to keep fairness in women’s sports might be to exclude trans women from it.

This inevitably would have the effect of discriminating against a small share of the population. Campaigning for the elimination of all oppressions should not be the goal of social justice activists. Instead, such trade-offs should be considered by activists and be managed in a wise manner if they want to win the support of majorities for their objectives in the long run.

'Nuance' should become a core principle for activists in these polarised times. Failing to acknowledge the complexity of the issue at stake will only create resistance from those who in principle would be sympathetic to our goals. It is important that we not exaggerate the claims we make, that they be based on a fair and accurate assessment so that others who don't necessarily share the same passion can see the value of the call and can develop trust in our ideas and political proposals.

We're all journalists now, in this age of social media, and we need to do this job responsibly and with nuance. We need to develop a highly critical mind, especially in a world where highly skilled actors are continually trying to hack people's minds.



2. BUILD A TRANSVERSAL MOVEMENT

Tackling climate change is not a special interest issue. It's a question of the survival of our civilisation, and it should be of interest to all people. So it doesn't make sense to organise a movement for tackling climate change based on a narrow ideological basis, as is often the case with current climate justice activism. Instead, the big question has to be how to create a movement of enough people that support a political agenda that is radical enough to tackle the problems.

The political theorist Chantal Mouffe argues that the traditionalist working class voters who in the past used to vote for left-wing parties, but are now often a strong base for authoritarian parties, can be won back for a progressive project. But her stance that this can be achieved by using an intersectional frame seems unrealistic. Mouffe often cites the Spanish party Podemos as proof that a populist left-wing party could win over the rural working classes in addition to attracting a progressive urban voter base. She calls this "[drawing] the frontier in a 'transversal' way".¹⁰

Spain had indeed remained free from far-right authoritarianism, but since December 2018, this has changed. The far-right VOX party has since entered the national and a number of regional parliaments. In parallel, Podemos has lost a considerable share of its electorate. In the last few years, Podemos has increasingly used a strong intersectional lens in its communications and political programme. It is likely that this has contributed to its electoral decline among the working classes.¹¹

The traditionalist rural working classes have much to gain from a transition to a post-neoliberal economic model. The economic decline of the rural working classes due to globalisation and the effects of neoliberalism on their living environment is certainly one of the causes of the crisis of liberal democracy.¹² Therefore, to stop the trend towards right-wing authoritarianism, those problems that originate with the way the economy works have to be tackled as part of the portfolio of solutions.



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That doesn't mean that the progressive left should abandon its aspirations for social justice, but a better understanding of the moral foundations of many ordinary people will help create a more complete and more workable vision.

An important success factor for such a movement will be ceasing to praise the differences between the different identities in the movement.¹³ Instead, the movement should emphasise its own oneness and the factors that bind people together.

A transversal movement could also be seen as a coalition of pragmatism with nothing to lose and much to win. The more people currently attracted by right-wing authoritarianism that join such a movement, the more likely it is that the necessary democratic space for further social progress can be maintained.

Such a movement will not be easy to forge. At this moment in time the mistrust on both sides is arguably high. In the recent elections to the European Parliament, European far-right parties embraced climate change denial as one of their top issues.¹⁴ This shows how receptive their electorate is to anti-green messages.

Only by truly listening to the rural working-class people can trust be regained. The ecological transformation of our societies cannot continue to be an elite project, which it has been up until this moment in time.

Psychologist Renée Lertzman offers some advice on how to take climate change and the broader ecological crisis out of the trenches of political warfare and engage people to ultimately bring them on board and join the movement:

“As our work addressing climate change evolves to meet the pressing need for large-scale engagement, we would all be well served by tapping into the research and insights into how our minds work. [...] It requires building capacities for engagement that take into account the central role of ‘affect’ – how these issues make us feel, and how overwhelming they can be for many people. Pushing solutions is itself not the only solution. Helping people see themselves as empowered actors in changing our world, framing the issue as an opportunity not a burden, is where we can find our greatest headwind. Empathy is a critical ingredient in this mix, if we are to be effective.”¹⁵

Here it might be helpful that people who live in rural areas often still have a much closer connection with the natural environment than urban cosmopolites. This includes the many people who work in agriculture, forest management etc. It won't be an artificial exercise of empowerment, because their knowledge and experience will be very much in need when we have to transform our relationship with the natural environment. They are important actors in changing our world!



3. FOSTER VIEWPOINT DIVERSITY

One of the most passionate demands frequently made at progressive activist gatherings is full inclusion (at meetings) of all dimensions of society and especially of marginalised communities who often don't have a voice. The narrative goes that without representation of the oppressed and the marginalised, we are perpetuating oppressive power structures, and any discussion about systemic change is worthless.

The argument is compelling and often convinces many people. It looks like we're excluding important voices if, for instance, in Europe we organise activist gatherings where people of migrant background from Turkey or Africa lack representation.

But there are a number of issues that are usually left completely unconsidered.

It is not usually due to active exclusion that this diversity of representation is not achieved. One of the reasons certainly is that people are drawn towards projects according to their values, personalities and areas of interest. Among these ethnic minorities, which are to a large extent traditionalist and conservative¹⁶, there are just not that many people who are keen to join a gathering about the Great Transition.

There are, of course, some progressive / social justice activists in immigrant communities, and there are, of course, activist networks that make a special effort to achieve ethnic and cultural diversity in their gatherings.

But the diversity they achieve is often rather superficial. If these gatherings were representative of immigrant communities and non-elite social classes, the conversations at activist meetings would shift radically because of the reasons outlined above. The majority of people lean far more conservative and wouldn't share many of the unquestioned assumptions that progressive activists hold. Instead of attempting to reach equal representation of different minority groups, a more useful goal for any group that aims at discussing the future of our society on this planet, is to increase diversity of experience, cultural background and social class.

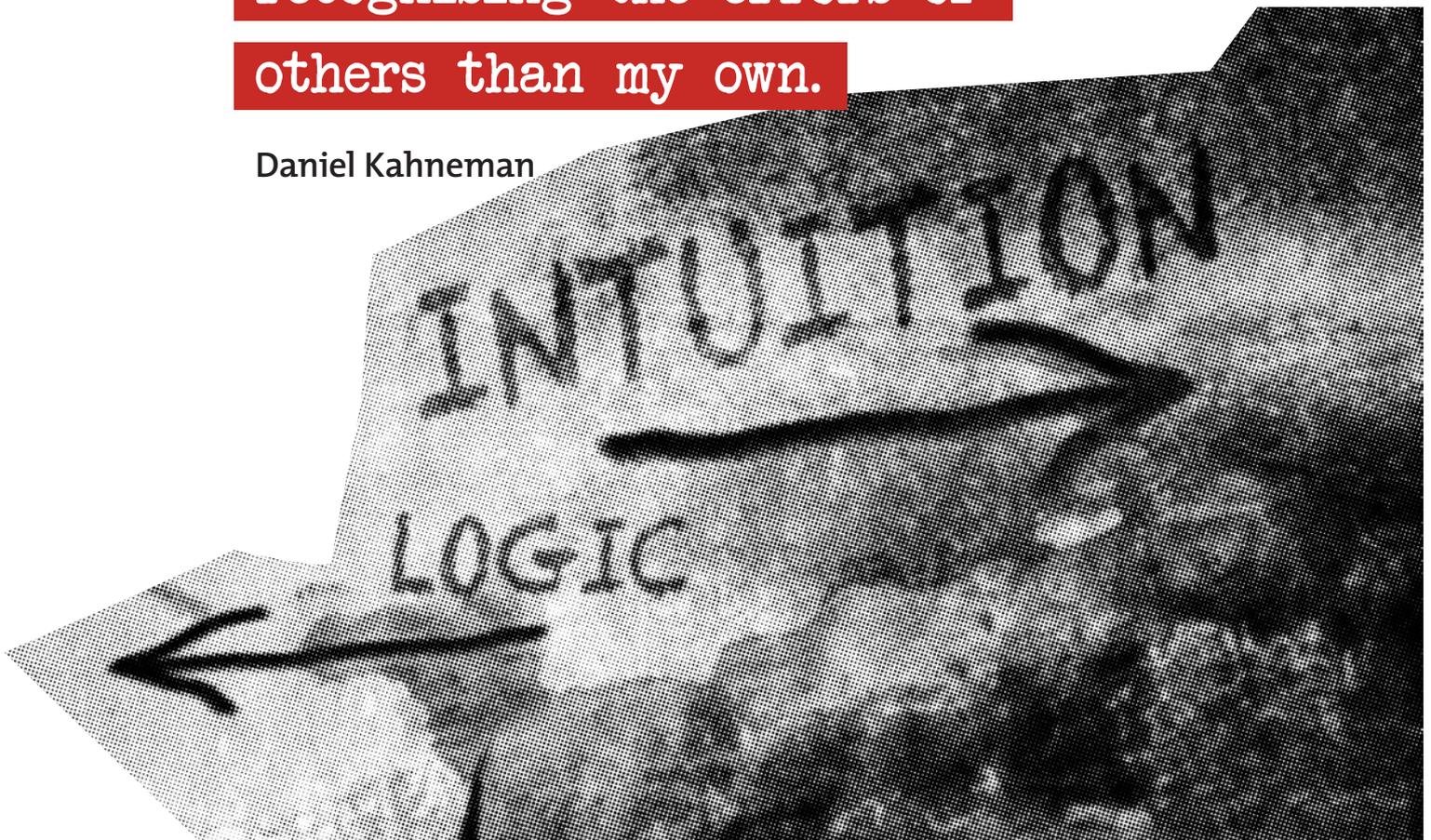
However, a much more important goal would be to increase viewpoint diversity.

In order to find solutions to our most systemic problems and in order to become *wise managers of our cultural evolution*, we cannot continue looking at the world from a narrow ideologically constrained perspective. We need to take our ideological glasses off and exit the echo chamber.

This is easier said than done, because we cannot easily escape our innate confirmation biases and will always be prone to motivated reasoning, in spite of our best intentions. Nobel Prize winner in economics Daniel Kahneman writes in his famous book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*:

How can we improve judgement and decisions, both our own and those of institutions that serve us? The short answer is that little can be achieved without considerable investment of effort. As I know from experience System 1 [the intuitive mind] is not readily educable. I have made much more progress in recognising the errors of others than my own.

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All perspectives on reality are a reduction of reality. Each of them contains blind spots that are unavoidable. The best way to improve the thinking of our groups then is to increase the diversity of thought among its members, and especially to avoid systematic biases of the kind found when most group members share the same ideology. This is of course not a new idea, but in fact was the foundational principle of the university. Scientific progress is the result of scholars continuously challenging each other and identifying errors in thought and judgement, slowly approaching truth over time. In groups that want to advance thinking about the Great Transition we need a similar approach to that of the Heterodox Academy, an organisation that was founded to increase viewpoint diversity among faculty at U.S. universities following the analysis done by Jonathan Haidt a few years ago about the extreme liberal/left bias, especially in the social sciences.¹⁸

In the current culture in spaces of activism and academia, this will not be easy to achieve because the dogmatic version of intersectional ideology is still spreading, and many important ideas now lie outside the acceptable narrowly defined boundaries of what is allowed to be said (safe space culture).

However, and crucially, this is exactly why everybody who believes that the free exchange of ideas is fundamental to saving our open societies must courageously counter the current zeitgeist in favour of new spaces where legitimate ideas of good faith can be discussed freely.

Here is a great list of problematic phenomena that can often be found in activist spaces, put together by Inclusion 2.0.¹⁹ They are well intended and aim to make these spaces more inclusive, but instead they create highly unhealthy and unproductive atmospheres:

- Oppressive rules around speech and ‘political correctness’. There can seem to be a hypersensitivity to language and behaviour that can create a culture of fear.
- Endless processes of blame and accusation that don’t seem to ever resolve.
- A victim–oppressor framework that doesn’t allow any other narratives to come forth.
- The inversion of power hierarchies instead of their transformation (with a new group of oppressors at the top instead of no oppressors there).
- Devaluing of assertiveness and aggressiveness that can breed innovation, both inside a team and with competitors.
- Creating a talent drain as some leave rather than speak out.
- A monoculture that only values a narrow range of attitudes, politics, personality types, and communication styles.
- The demonization of those with differing views.
- A focus on internal politics and policies which draws too much attention away from action and movement forward.

Get yourself into places where your consensus reality and your habits are wilfully destroyed and get as far away from ideology as you can. Your job is not to know what the fuck is going on. Your job is to be absolutely certain that you have no idea what the fuck is going on and learn how to feel from raw chaos, from raw uncertainty.

Then and only then are you finally able to begin the journey of beginning to form a collective intelligence in this new environment.

Jordan Hall





4. LEARN NEW WAYS OF SENSEMAKING

Allowing different views to be heard is important, but on its own it won't be enough.

According to futurist Jordan Hall, we need to recognise that our way of making sense in the world used to work, but doesn't anymore, and that we need to set ourselves free to begin learning anew. Hall notes:

“This by nature must in fact be exploratory – so learn to swim. Do not make sense prematurely, in spite of the fact the world feels dangerous – in spite of the fact you may want to protect yourself. Doing so too quickly will not allow your natural exploratory approach to do what it needs to do. [...] Get yourself into places where your consensus reality and your habits are wilfully destroyed and get as far away from ideology as you can. Your job is not to know what the fuck is going on. Your job is to be absolutely certain that you have no idea what the fuck is going on and learn how to feel from raw chaos, from raw uncertainty. Then and only then are you finally able to begin the journey of beginning to form a collective intelligence in this new environment.”²⁰

We have to learn to truly listen to other people's ideas and learn the skill of critical thinking to parse what is true and what isn't. We will also have to learn synthetic thinking, to make sense of what seems true but seems quite different from another truth. How do these different truths or realities actually fit together?

The need to improve our sensemaking apparatus very much relates to the question of consciousness and the need for an upgrade to human consciousness.

As our social systems on this planet have become ever more complex, so our human consciousness has increased. Integral theory, proposed by thinkers such as Ken Wilber and Don Beck, maintains that the collective consciousness of humankind has evolved through premodern, modern and postmodern structures and is emerging into a new structure of consciousness, the integral stage, which is characterized by an ability to think and act from multiple worldviews.²¹ Our current Western culture is still dominated by a postmodern worldview, which includes a strong focus on social justice. Its ethics have given birth to the civil rights, feminist and gay rights movements, as well as environmentalism. But people who hold this worldview often reject the modern (science and reason) and traditional values. In contrast, the integral worldview recognises the importance of all preceding stages of development and holds a systemic understanding of human interconnectedness.

The activist-scientist Daniel Schmachtenberger argues that the type of shift in consciousness that humanity has to go through now is towards a win-win worldview that we have never had before. “The level at which we can affect each other, because of exponential technology, requires that we take full consideration for making sure that we're not externalising harm at that effect, on a planet that can't handle the externalisation load anymore.”²² Win-lose games are not an option any more. It will be either lose-lose, which would be the collapse of civilisation, or it will be win-win, the

upgrade to our consciousness that will allow us to create what Schmachtenberger calls 'civilisation 2.0', where the incentive of every agent (every person or group) in the system will be aligned with the wellbeing of every other agent.

What level of consciousness will be required from all eight billion people on this planet who shall be participants of the Great Transition, and how fast the consciousness upgrade can happen, is difficult to know. But it seems clear that those of us who want to become *wise managers of evolutionary processes* need to develop a high level of awareness of reality and an integral worldview.

On the individual level, the right practices of meditation can help raise one's consciousness and level of attention, and so can psychedelics create an experience of profound connection with life and the world, when administered carefully.²³

Most importantly, we need to develop and practice our skills of sensemaking and holding complexity in meaningful conversations with others who share this purpose. We need to figure out how to talk to each other with generosity and enough precision to convey something important and to understand the other person's cognitive model. This is how we can reach a shared cognitive model and reach increasing depth and insight in our conversations.

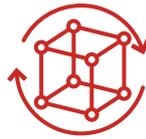
There are not yet many groups and spaces that have freed themselves from ideological boundaries and have moved towards new ways of sensemaking.

One of these few groups is the so-called Intellectual Dark Web that consists of mostly U.S. academics and thinkers whose political beliefs span the spectrum. They hold regular exploratory online conversations where they often reach a level of depth about difficult topics that is impossible to find in the mainstream media. Their podcasts and YouTube videos often reach an audience in the seven-digit range.

The British journalist and filmmaker David Fuller believes that the Intellectual Dark Web "is an early, but significant evolutionary leap in public thought and discussion, that has been facilitated by the medium of the internet – and that the spread of the name is the coming to public consciousness (and self-consciousness) of a conversation that is existentially important".²⁴

Fuller himself co-founded the Rebel Wisdom media platform, which amplifies voices from the Intellectual Dark Web and from other thinkers to foster deep conversations about transformative ideas.²⁵ Rebel Wisdom also organises workshops and events to open up this conversation and learning experiment to a wider public.

We need more spaces similar to Rebel Wisdom and to expand them to other European countries and beyond.



5. DESIGN PROTOTYPES FOR CULTURAL EVOLUTION

Bret Weinstein notes: “Evolution gets you here and it almost certainly will end in a self-extinguishing event if you keep playing the evolutionary game. You can’t continue to dance with the one that brought you.”²⁶

How can we switch off the autopilot and take evolution into our own hands? How can civil society leaders and system change agents more systematically put the ideas from intentional cultural evolution into practice? How can we become designers of evolutionary processes that can effectively upgrade our civilisation and help prevent its collapse?

Dave Snowden invented the *Cynefin framework for decision-making* that became famous as a practical tool to help identify and work with complex systems. He argues: “Leaders who try to impose order in a complex context will fail, but those who set the stage, step back a bit, allow patterns to emerge, and determine which ones are desirable, will succeed.”²⁷

Design thinking works well in this domain, where we can explore multiple prototyping and experiments.

The philosopher, scientist and software developer Forrest Landry has some important advice on how to go about the design process and what is fundamental to consider.²⁸

He believes that nature can teach us important lessons about how to create better design (for cultural evolution). For example, in nature, solutions and systems are self-healing. They also tend to solve a whole constellation of problems simultaneously, which is exactly what we need when looking for better solutions for our civilisational problems. We don’t get to the kinds of solutions that we need by optimizing for any single metric, or even a finite set of metrics. Instead we need to know what principles and characteristics a good solution needs to have. Does a potential solution meet the necessary and sufficient criteria in order for it to actually be a solution in this space that it’s supposed to be a part of?

For example, system solutions should help restore the earth’s ecosystems and re-align human activity with the evolution of ecosystems and become partners in that evolution. They should also support fairness in our social systems and increase human wellbeing and reduce suffering where possible.

Bret Weinstein offered a list of criteria against which prototypes for what he calls Game B²⁹ should be measured. According to Weinstein, solutions should be sustainable, antifragile, fair, upgradable, rewarding, humane, capture resistant, attainable and scalable.³⁰

Antifragility is a system condition that is similar to but goes further than resilience. The resilient resist shocks and stay the same; the antifragile get stronger. Natural complex systems are antifragile. It’s the property behind evolution. It’s important not to suppress randomness and volatility. It’s better to create an antifragile structure and learn from trial and error than to try to get everything right in a fragile ecosystem. Overprotection makes systems and people fragile.³¹



The prototyping design process is not about fighting the existing system, but building new ones that are fundamentally more adequate and meet needs better than the old systems.

The new systems will then outcompete the old systems because they have a selective advantage (in evolutionary terms).



As its title suggests, the book *Switching off the autopilot: An evolutionary toolbox for the Great Transition*³² presents an evolutionary toolkit that would be useful for designing prototypes for the Great Transition. One important criterium would be to build structures that are designed for abundance as a way to prevent tribal outbursts that tend to occur when humans run out of positive-sum opportunities for growth.

In an analogy to software development, Landry argues that we shouldn't "trash" the old system and start the new system from scratch.³³ We shouldn't "[throw] out the baby with the bathwater" because "all of the problems that the old system effectively was a solution for have to be addressed again from scratch. And half the time we don't even know what those problems are, what those solutions and the techniques of solving those problems actually were." Instead he suggests we first analyse what problems the current system does indeed solve as well as identify previous assumptions, both those that might no longer be valid and those that still apply and need to be preserved. Landry says:

"When you have clarity about those kinds of things, then you can start replacing components one at a time. You can start basically going through the system and using the components of the old one to build the new one. Having a clear sense of what a successful architecture looks like means that to some extent you understood the old architecture – and understood it well enough to understand what problems it was a solution for, and what things it was not a solution for – so that when you're designing the new thing, you're in a sense encompassing and incorporating all of the learning and all of the knowledge of the thousands of programmers that came before you."³⁴

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All systems become feeble over time and then it becomes relatively easy to compete against them, especially when most people are dissatisfied with the old system. Complexity researcher Orit Gal argues that when complex systems become dominant "a different set of dynamics begins to set in – systemic tensions. A tension is a dynamic by which emerging patterns seem to be putting opposing pressures on individual actions and opportunities. [...] Systemically, it seems every dominant trend seems to emerge with its own 'anti-trend' in tandem."³⁵ Gal argues that 'rival systems' cannot be destroyed, but they can be transformed by enhancing and disrupting the dynamics flowing within them.

Prototyping is an adaptive approach: probe, sense, respond. How do we take civilisation-wide dynamics and make iterative shifts on them that move the whole system forward?

The Dutch school of *transition governance* has about ten years of experience on how to organise similar processes. Transition governance provides a structure to support a prototyping process with many simultaneous experiments.³⁶ From the practice of transition governance we can draw the conclusion that for prototyping cultural evolution we need three activities:

- Developing a vision for a world of planetary welfare (or Game B)
- Seeding and supporting a pool of cultural evolution experiments
- Maintaining an infrastructure that extracts the learning from these experiments and feeds them back into the vision

Greater efforts need to be put into setting up multidisciplinary teams with the capacity, skills and energy to get involved in prototyping processes for intentional cultural evolution.



6. TELL STORIES GROUNDED IN TRUTH

A powerful way of transmitting and intentionally changing culture is through narrative and stories. The way new narratives emerge is that stories are told and retold many times by many people and converge into bigger, coherent narratives.

Stories are so effective because they affect people on an emotional level. Stories reach both people's emotional and rational brain, which is critical to galvanising action (in contrast to pure rational information and facts, which don't reach the emotional brain and are therefore often ineffective).³⁷

Most importantly, stories can create deep cultural meaning and impact. In his book *Winning the Story Wars* acclaimed storyteller Jonah Sachs writes about the stories that have been told for generations, across centuries and even millennia. These stories that make sense of the world he calls myths. Sachs argues that "myths are the glue that hold society together, providing an indispensable meaning-making function. [...] They allow us to see the world through powerful symbols that stand in for and remind us of deep truths."³⁸ Alex Evans, author of the book *The Myth Gap*, states:

"Once upon a time, our society was rich in these kinds of stories, and we called them myths. Today, though, we have a 'myth gap'. Religious observance is declining steadily, leaving instead a focus on literal, scientific truth. Almost unnoticed, the old stories that used to bind us together – stories about meaning, identity, and what matters in life – have disappeared. Yet new ones have not emerged to take their place – creating the perfect environment in which the Trumps and Farages, Putins and Le Pens can flourish."³⁹

The Brexit campaign that convinced a majority of UK voters in the referendum used a story of 'taking back control' to tap into the myth gap with a story of a proud nation that only had to free itself from its shackles to regain its former glory and strength on the world stage. It was a way to make meaning, provide identity and a sense of direction. It was a powerful story because it correctly addressed the discontent with liberalism that was bubbling under the surface. But it is also a fatal story because the solutions and pathway it provides will only create more misery.

Similarly, the *oppression story*, with its popular memes like *white male privilege and toxic masculinity*, falls on fertile ground in a postmodern and individualistic society that has social and psychological needs which in the absence of religious beliefs and community are often unmet.⁴⁰ The frame of social justice provides meaning, identity, community and moral guidance for what is right and wrong – it plays a similar role to a religion. But ultimately, identity politics and the

oppression story turn people against each other and instead of resolving grievances, they create a greater sense of unfairness and new injustices.

Jordan Hall notes: “This is how delusions fall apart. Try as we might, our desire to interpret reality to mean what we want it to, at the end of the day, will always be checked against what reality actually is. It may take some time because we’re pretty good at making things up and pretending, but eventually reality is reality.”⁴¹

The problem with all these stories, be it the *oppression story* or the *take back control story*, is that they might seem true at a superficial level, but they fail to be grounded in real truth.

In these times of disorientation and pessimism, we need to come together around powerful emotional stories about who we are, where we’re coming from and where we’re heading. But instead of preaching ideological wishful thinking, effective stories have to be grounded in reality and truth. They should be honest about difficult and uncomfortable truths and provide a sense of direction for a better future.

A truthful account of our evolved nature should be part of the story of where we’re coming from and who we are, taking the good along with the bad. How the evolutionary toolkit empowers us to create a better society should be an essential part of the story of where we’re heading.

An important part is the human story of ever increasing human cooperation – and how we’re heading towards the whole earth becoming a superorganism. Alex Evans writes: “While history is by no means predetermined, it does have a basic direction – one that tends towards more and more non-zero-sum cooperation and higher and higher levels of social complexity.”⁴² But, as Evans says, “this could still go either way. The collapsitarians’ predictions of catastrophe – an outcome of extreme zero-sumness [...] might yet be vindicated. Equally we could be about to tip decisively towards seeing us part of a 7 billion us. This is the extraordinary drama of the moment in history that we inhabit. And the single factor that will do most to decide how we fare, as we face the test, may ultimately be which stories – myths – we reach for to explain the transition we’re facing.”⁴³

George Marshall, the author of the important book *Don’t Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, suggests that climate change “lends itself to multiple interpretations of causality, timing and impact. This leaves it extremely vulnerable to our innate disposition to select or adapt information so that it confirms our pre-existing assumptions – biased assimilation and confirmation bias. If climate change can be interpreted in any number of ways it is therefore prone to being interpreted in the way that we choose. These constructed narratives therefore contain the final reason why we can ignore climate change: they become so culturally specific that people who don’t identify with their values can reject the issues they explain.”⁴⁴

Marshall argues that we should make explicit our psychological biases and recognise that many may be subconscious. He offers some important advice for how to frame stories with real potential to bring people on board and take action⁴⁵:

- To address that our evolved danger triggers fail because we perceive climate change as a distant threat, we need to emphasise that climate change is happening here and now.
- Our sense of loss looks backwards rather than forward. We should express climate change as an opportunity to restore past losses: lost community, lost values, lost ecosystems, lost species, lost beauty. (Possibly, therein lies a real opportunity to get away from the apocalypse spirit of environmentalism. The restoration of the earth’s ecosystems offers immense opportunities for a large movement where millions of people can become active in a useful way.)
- We interpret the ecological crises through frames, which focus our attention but limit our

understanding. We should resist simple framings and be open to new meanings in order to avoid limited frames that exclude meanings that lie outside the frame.

- Because the ecological crises are wicked problems, they're in danger of becoming entirely defined by a frame or a solution that is proposed. We need to ensure that we constantly discuss a wide range of solutions that are under review, and be honest about the fact that nobody has the definite answers to the problems.
- We need to avoid enemy narratives that fuel division. Campaigns should create alternative narratives where the enemy might be our 'internal weaknesses' rather than an outside group. We need narratives of cooperation that bring people together around a common cause.
- Stories can help shift social norms, but people will only trust the message if they hear it from trusted communicators (people with status of prestige). If it comes from someone they don't trust, the opposite effect is possible: it can increase resistance.
- The stories should be honest about the danger, but (again) this will only motivate people if they hear it from trusted communicators.
- Importantly, stories should start with affirming wider values. This makes people far more willing to accept information that challenges their worldview. This includes respect for authority, personal responsibility and loyalty to one's community and nation.

Marshall states: "I warn environmental liberals that the measure of success will inevitably be the emergence of some new ways of talking that you may find unpleasant. Similarly, never assume that what works for you will work for others. Indeed the fact that you strongly like something, may well be an indication that people with other values will hate it."⁴⁶

References and Notes

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