Review Paper

The Great Transition

Paul Raskin, ***Journey to Earthland. The Great Transition to Planetary Civilization,*** Tellus Institute: Cambridge, MA, 2017

Joan Cocks

Abstract

This review of Paul Raskin's Journey to Earthland highlights that book's rousing attempt to beat back the despair of progressives over the dystopic realities of our age, by offering an imaginary 2084 retrospective on the ultimately victorious struggle of a Global Citizens Movement to forge a future that is more socially equitable, culturally hospitable, and environmentally healthy than the future that appears to await us now. I explore the ingenious strategies Raskin uses to avoid the vices of utopian thinking while taking advantage of its galvanizing virtues. I argue that Raskin accurately details the various forces of darkness that a Global Citizens Movement is certain to confront—from market-enamored or fortress-minded politicians to elites who control most of the world's wealth in their own class interests to extraction industries that both exacerbate and deny the reality of climate change to warring sects, ethnicities, and nationalities around the world. Nevertheless, I conclude that we need, along with Raskin's optimism of the political will, a greater dose of pessimism of the intellect than he provides about the obstacles in the way of a humanly generous and politically united "Earthland."

An intelligent creature from outer space would surely be struck by three great perplexities about human society on earth. The first perplexity is that—regardless of whether, as Dipesh Chakrabarty recently put it, the finger of blame is properly aimed at Western colonialism, industrialization, capitalism, or the democratization of wealth—humanity seems to be hurtling down a path towards destroying the ecological conditions not only for actualizing the good life but also for continuing bare life, and not just for human beings but for almost every other species.[1]

The second perplexity is the widespread acceptance of, or resignation to, a parceling-out system that lavishes riches on the very few, provides modest or precarious habitats for a larger but still minority percentage of the world's population, and consigns everyone else to miserable conditions of existence. This is so even though the productive forces of earthly civilization seem sophisticated enough to be able to supply every individual with the means of basic physical comfort and a wide array of opportunities for self-enhancement.

The third perplexity for our outer-space alien is that the world's peoples are so entangled with one another that it is difficult to call them distinct, while those same peoples are politically divided against one another as members of territorially bounded and militarily fortified nation-states, and often are divided inside nation-states as members of warring races, ethnicities, and religious sects. More curious still, while citizens secure in their own nation-states are welcome to travel across borders as tourists or investors or cosmopolitan elites, desperate millions unable to sustain themselves at home can work abroad only by consenting to their own hyper-exploitation. Even worse, those fleeing dire circumstances in their own nation-states often find the doors to other nation-states locked shut by sovereign state laws, popular xenophobia, or both.

If our alien were visiting earth for any length of time, he/she/it could not help but notice that these perplexities are interrelated. Thus, for example, the deteriorating environment in perplexity #1 and the inequality in perplexity #2 serve as triggers for the transnational migrations, national hostilities, and civil wars in perplexity #3. In turn, the inequality in perplexity #2 and the hostilities in perplexity #3 make it almost impossible to reverse the environmental deterioration in perplexity #1. The difficulty of finding an exit from this maze is aggravated by the fact that, as Roy Scranton recently lamented, no one is "driving the car," and worse, "there is no car" capable of moving in one direction the "more than seven billion humans…200 countries, thousands of smaller sub-national states, territories, counties and municipalities…religious sects, ethnic identities, clans, tribes, gangs, clubs and families, each of which faces its own disunion and strife, all the way down to the individual human soul in conflict with itself."[2]

In the face of this vexing predicament, our alien might surmise that only a globally galvanizing utopian vision or a catastrophic ecological jolt could awaken humanity's will to corrective action to save itself. However, while preferable to ecological catastrophe as a motivating factor, utopian thinking has always had four strikes against it. The first strike is the impossibility of identifying any route that could run from a checkered reality to paradise on earth. The second strike is that different people have different ideas of what paradise is—and, in the approximate words of the British conservative Michael Oakeshott, "if it's boring to have to listen to someone else's dream, it's intolerable to be forced to live it." The third strike is the stasis that would occur if utopian dreams came true. After all, the only movement possible under perfect conditions is movement that would spoil that perfection—and, as Hegel and Nietzsche have insisted in their distinctive ways, without movement there is no interest, only death. But perhaps the most decisive strike is the record of human history, in which egotism, lust for domination, and pleasure in cruelty and destruction have played as great a part as altruism, reciprocity, empathy, and cooperation.

Against critics who would harp on these points, Paul Raskin's *Journey to Earthland* calls for reinvigorated utopian thinking on both general and historically specific grounds. The general grounds are that the limits of the actual impose the limits of what can be imagined to be possible, and utopian visions are useful tools for breaking those imaginative fetters. The specific grounds are that the modern disenchantment with all projects to actualize objective ideals has led to widespread cynicism, passivity, despair, or—at best—a retreat to micro-struggles against local injustices, at the very moment that a vigorous transnational political movement is needed to vanquish the forces that threaten the globe.

One of the fascinations of *Journey to Earthland* is the agility with which Raskin sidesteps most of utopianism's pitfalls listed above. By posing in Part III as a commentator looking at events from 2016 to 2084, he addresses the "inconceivable means to ideal ends" problem by charting how, through many struggles, defeats, and resurrections, a global citizens movement eventually beats back enemies of human solidarity, material equality, environmental restoration, and individual fulfillment freed from bondage to the pursuit of endless economic growth for the sake of endless profit-making. To avoid the totalitarian dangers of utopianism, Raskin designs three contemporaneous utopias instead of one (Agoria, Ecodemia, and Arcadia), which all consent to basic principles of natural and social justice but otherwise pursue disparate notions of the good life. Raskin also reduces the totalitarian dangers of utopianism by stipulating that authoritative decisions in Earthland be made at the lowest level possible level of social organization that affords political agency to all the people those decisions affect. Finally, he avoids the stasis pitfall of paradises by noting the periodic reappearance of anti-Earthland tendencies, hinting at the possibility of tensions among the three types of utopian societies, leaving the door open to new types of regional utopias that may emerge over time, remarking on the hard creative labor it will take to repair the earth, and celebrating space exploration (although that will *not* to go over well with Arcadians, I dare say). The only pitfall from which Raskin doesn't quite save himself is not

so much the romanticism as the rationalism built into his assumption that the objective benefits of peace, solidarity, and non-materialistic forms of happiness will win most subjective hearts and minds to Earthland's side.

Like a growing number of other social critics and scientists, Raskin sets our current crisis in both natural and human historical perspective. He rightly identifies the debilitating symptoms of that crisis as desperate poverty for many, obscene wealth and power for the few, national and ethnic conflict, forced migration, and spiritual and social alienation, all contributing to and exacerbated by mounting environmental catastrophes. He understands that, however much national and ethnic particulars might balk at their relations with other particulars, the world's population is re-combining into a single connected-if-differentiated social whole, although thus far it lacks the political institutions and leadership needed to tackle the problems affecting the whole in the interest of the whole. He wittily dubs the earth a failed state because of this political lack. Finally, Raskin has the requisite optimism to see, in local grassroots movements around the world, the shimmering signs of a world-historical collective actor—his culturally heterogeneous but politically united Global Citizens Movement—that can struggle to transform border-obsessed nation-states and predatory economic dynamics into a post-capitalist and cosmopolitan Earthland.

It would be counterproductive for anyone trying to rally partisans for Earthland's cause to shine too bright a spotlight on the obstacles that will be in their way. Yet at this political juncture, when Fortress World, one of Raskin's dystopic alternative futures, seems to be crystallizing as authoritarian nationalists trump liberal globalists around the world, we might remind ourselves of what the main obstacles are. Most obviously, there is the tremendous material asymmetry between the financial and military might of sovereign states and the people-power of a GCM, which is armed with ethical principles and ecological insights, not police forces, soldiers, counter-insurgency forces, drones, tanks, and bombs. Just as dispiriting is the likely consent to a ruling elite's repressive action against the GCM of alienated popular sectors, ranging from anti-internationalist working and middle classes in the Global North pulverized by global capital's penchant for "creative destruction," to peasants in the Global South impoverished by global capital yet left out of the political equation by liberal cosmopolitans. As recent election results attest, declining classes and anxious masses in the West now are demanding *more* national particularism, *more* racial and ethnic exclusions, *more* belligerent chauvinism, and *greater* opportunities to emulate the consumption habits of the rich. As for impoverished masses in the rest of the world, many long for the security and opportunity to enjoy the good life as capitalism depicts it, while their domestic intelligentsia is more incensed by Western colonialism and neo-imperialism (which don't feature much in JTE) than by capitalism per se.

These earthly realities might lead our alien from another planet to raise the following questions for Raskin and the rest of us.

First, what strategies can increase the chances for the victory of a nonviolent progressive citizens movement in the face of hypermilitarized states, grasping elites, and deprived and resentful masses—especially strategies that can widen the class base of that movement, and especially in time to prevent planetary collapse? Alternatively, if violent resistance against these formidable antagonists proves unavoidable, and if a GCM somehow could garner the requisite means for that resistance, what precautions, if any, can be taken to ensure that a peaceful new world will emerge out of the bloody clash of force and counterforce?

Second, nation-states may be decreasingly capable of solving the world's problems, but nationalism and muscular national leaders seem to fulfill a strong psychic function for their populations, and arguably a stronger psychic function the more illusory state sovereignty becomes. What is the political-institutional framework that progressives should work towards if

popular attachments to the nation-state cannot be expected to disappear a mere sixty years from now?

Third, is it possible to expand the range of utopic communities represented by the Agoria, Ecodemia, and Arcadia to include dreams of a better world that are dreamt in Ghana or Thailand or Turkey, or, for that matter, dreams that are dreamt by ordinary people, not just educated classes, from South Sudan to Appalachia?

Fourth, in its formula for nested political authorities, each right-sized to enable the participation in decision-making of all those who will be affected by those decisions, *Earthland* holds out a tantalizing new non-sovereign concept of political power diffused among different types of communities and different levels of institutional authority. At the same time, it argues for a global government to attend to worldwide problems such as climate change, nuclear weapons, regional inequality, and displaced populations. Raskin alludes to a representative World Assembly to take on that task, but we already have seen at the national level that representative bodies are not necessarily eco-intelligent, egalitarian, or hospitable to diverse racial, religious, and ethnic groups. Given the sheer cacophony of voices in any democratically elected World Assembly, one can't help suspecting that Earthland will require an elite group of ethicists, scientists, and conflict managers to function above the fray as a philosophically wise, environmentally knowledgeable, and politically dispassionate Sovereign Prince.

The specter of technocratic rule at the top that haunts JTE raises two last questions, neither of them startlingly new. Is it possible to hitch a model of diffused power to a model of global sovereign control? And if a technocratic world elite must guard the (inevitably) unruly demos of Earthland from its worst impulses and inclinations, who will guard the guardians from theirs?

Endnotes

1. Dipesh Chakrabarty, Remarks given at the 2015 American Political Science Association conference, San Francisco, CA, September 2015.
2. Roy Scranton, "Another Storm is Coming," *New York Times*, October 9, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/09/opinion/sunday/when-the-hurricane-hits-texas.html.