

“2050”

30 Years of Change and Yet No New Beginning

Frank Adloff

Looking back from the year 2050, we can see that many opportunities and shifts were missed to shape coexistence on Earth peacefully, justly, and ecologically within planetary boundaries.¹ A convivial genesis did not take place. Instead we can observe a strong social change full of contradictions, abrupt tipping points, and harsh conflicts. While the 20th century (despite disruptive humanitarian catastrophes in the form of world wars and the Holocaust) still proceeded in the mode of steady social change, it was already apparent at the beginning of the new century that disruption would henceforth characterize social change: The historic upheavals of the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, the economic and financial crisis of 2008, or the coronavirus pandemic of 2020–21 can be mentioned here like ciphers. With particular regard to the pandemic period, the impression arose in parts of the population around the world that the previously hegemonic project of Western modernity with its narrative of progress had come to an end.

¹ This report was commissioned by the International Convivialist Association (ICA) in 2050 to determine which processes of social change have been significant over the last 30 years. It is the executive summary.

1. Social, Economic, and Political Divisions

At that time, a rift ran through the imaginary spaces of societies, and it became clear that existing certainties can collapse rapidly. Since then, contingency awareness and the loss of certainties have been hallmarks of the era. New forms of peaceful, fair, and ecologically compatible co-existence seemed to be within reach and have been increasingly implemented in practice in recent decades. But a true, proper new beginning was prevented by increasingly powerful counter-movements that rely on the curtailment of contingencies, defense of privilege, and protection against fear. Fear of the future is the affect of the present in 2050, which many governments and social movements instrumentalize and channel into a quest for power, control, and certainty.

In all fields of social change—economic, political, cultural, technological, and last but not least ecological change, which can no longer be separated from social change—we observe, on the one hand, developments based on path dependencies that have existed for some 50 years or more and, on the other hand, paths that have been disrupted and radical path changes. But rarely for the better.

Since 2020, the structure of economic globalization has changed significantly compared to previous decades. A large number of sectors, above all the financial industry, have been able to maintain and in some cases expand global interdependencies. In contrast, other sectors, dubbed key industries by states, have come under the curatorship of national governments. Capitalism is still susceptible to crises (we recall here the major global economic crises of 2022, 2032, and 2044) but its often predicted end with a post-capitalist new beginning has not yet arrived.

The basic patterns of the global division of labor have remained untouched. Global inequalities between nations persist, and a multitude of negative social and ecological consequences of the imperial way of life of the North continue to be externalized to economically weak and vulnerable countries. Yet, economic alternatives have been steadily gaining ground worldwide. In many social niches around the world, a convivial economy has become established that is regionally oriented,

critical of growth (pursuing degrowth instead), oriented towards the common good, and resilient in the face of external economic shocks. However, the potential for the macro-economic transformation of these economic practices is, on the whole, very low, not only because antagonistic economic interests continue to exercise great political influence but also because the alternative economic movement has lacked an intellectually and politically effective network, as was characteristic of neoliberalism in the second half of the 20th century with the Mont Pellerin Society to name but one among many others.

This is accompanied by the continuation of social divisions along the dimensions of income and wealth. Although income inequality has stopped increasing, it has not been possible to effectively combat wealth inequality worldwide. The voices that grew louder after the financial crisis of 2008, calling for effectively fighting wealth inequality, were not able to gain global acceptance in the years that followed. Wealth inequality in Europe as well as in the USA and BRICS states (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) has increased steadily, due among other things to tax evasion and new tax havens. There are only a few exceptions: The Scandinavian countries, for example, returned to their egalitarian welfare model in the late 2020s but are pursuing a national strategy of homogenizing their populations and only allowing migration very selectively.

As predicted decades ago, global migration has increased rapidly. Many millions of people are fleeing wars and environmental disasters every year. While there were initially attempts to allow orderly migration to the Global North through asylum procedures, the countries of the North have now completely switched to an approach of containing migration through security policies. The number of refugee camps has increased exponentially since 2026, the year of the great global drought. One reaction to this was the founding of the Mediterranean Union in 2029, the main goal of which has been to fortify Europe's borders to the outside world and to prevent migration to Europe—with more than questionable human rights consequences, as NGOs regularly point out.

2. Societies Confronted with an Upending Earth System

The issue of migration is intertwined with the massive ecological changes on Earth and leads us to the biggest change of the last 30 years. While it was long believed that Earth system science was exaggerating its warnings about anthropogenic global warming, it has become clearer with each passing year that the Earth has left the safe operating space for humanity. Three systems in particular have exceeded the planetary thresholds so clearly that the theory of tipping points was also confirmed empirically about 15 years ago. The loss of biodiversity, global warming, and disruptions of the nitrogen cycle have unleashed a dynamic of a magnitude that was not predicted by science. Tipping points, which unfolded abruptly as relatively sudden shifts after a long period of latency, have now fundamentally changed the Earth system. The previously prevailing idea that human societies write their history independently of natural history against the relatively stable backdrop of nature has become completely obsolete. However, the social sciences still struggle to reconfigure their analytical tools so that the entanglements of non-human ('natural') and human temporalities can be examined from a general ecological perspective. Accordingly, natural-scientific Earth-system research has long since advanced to become the leading scientific discipline.

CO₂ emissions were gradually reduced in the Global North. After the coronavirus crisis, the states regained their power to act, and a Green Deal reduced emissions in several countries in the Global North starting in 2022. Nevertheless, the successes of these emissions reductions were far from sufficient to meet the goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 to 2 degrees Celsius, which had been officially established as part of the Paris Agreement in 2015. In terms of *Realpolitik*, it was assumed even then that global warming would reach 3.5 to 4 degrees by the end of the 21st century. Joint climate policy decisions by the global community did not materialize, as carbon-driven countries such as the USA, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states repeatedly undermined collective regulations. Rebound effects and the growth of economies in the Global South combined with population growth (the

world's population is currently around 9.5 billion people) did the rest. An ever-growing global middle class has driven a further increase in energy demand. In 2045, global warming reached 2 degrees, and it seems very likely that further warming will no longer be gradual but erratic and self-perpetuating. The current prediction is that the three-degree limit will be reached between 2065 and 2075. This will massively exacerbate the existing problems with the global water supply, and the areas that can be inhabited by humans will continue to shrink; further conflicts and wars are to come.

The securitization and militarization of climate policy has been increasing for 25 years. It is precisely the militarily, economically, and politically influential countries that are concerned with securing important resources such as energy, water, soil, and food. Some cities, on the other hand, have developed into green centers of sustainability and resilience (e.g., in Japan, Germany, Scandinavia, and Canada), in part through the use of AI and the digitalization of all areas of life. Many megacities in the Global South, however, regularly face infrastructural collapse owing to water shortages, heat waves, floods, and storms and use digital technologies as early warning systems and monitoring tools for entire population groups.

While the pros and cons of geoengineering measures were still being debated 30 years ago, they have now been an integral part of climate policy measures for around 25 years. It became clear that carbon-capture storage only helped to reduce CO₂ emissions to a limited extent. Thus, large-scale technological interventions in the Earth system began in 2031, partly spurred by massive protest from individual nations of the Global South. The fertilization of the oceans was stopped in 2042 in light of unforeseen feedback loops with the marine biochemical cycles. The discharge of aerosols into the Earth's atmosphere, despite the measurable reduction in solar radiation, also became highly controversial because of the massive feedback effects on atmospheric processes with strong weather fluctuations. Many social movements from the Global North and South are therefore now calling on politics, business, and science to abandon the hubris of wanting to steer the Earth system towards a 'good Anthropocene.' They refer to *The Second Convivialist Mani-*

festo, published in 2020, which generally denounces human hubris and instead pleads for self-limitation and conviviality among humans and non-humans alike.

3. World Politics

Political constellations are extremely different from region to region, which is also due to the fact that the model of Western modernity—forcefully supported first by European colonialism and then by the USA—is no longer recognized as generally binding. Even before the Trump administration, the US had abandoned its global political role as a hegemon that also provides global public goods. China has since risen to become a new global player with great political, military, and economic dominance but still shies away from taking responsibility for global commons. This, in turn, is also a result of internal conflict (e.g., democracy claims of the middle classes) for which the authoritarian country has not yet found any integrative answers.

Moreover, the three principles of order of the second half of the 20th century—that is, liberal democracy, free-market capitalism, and a pluralistic and individualistic culture, which lasted until the 2010s—are only robust and still alive in a few countries. They have come under increasing pressure from right-wing populist movements, and the counter-projects of authoritarian, illiberal nation states (coupled with notions of homogeneous communities) are in permanent conflict with defenders of individual liberties. The idea of human rights has also come under pressure from common-good-oriented, anti-individualist concepts of relational rationality (*tianxia* in Chinese).

In the last 20 years of ecological crisis, most nations have experienced both authoritarian phases of states of emergency and the disintegration or even collapse of established infrastructures as well as political and socio-economic orders. Capitalist enterprises in the ‘crisis industry’ such as security companies are profiting from this disintegration, and the economy of crisis (including state expenditure for crisis man-

agement and abatement) already accounts for 27 percent of the world's GDP.

4. Future Imaginaries

These developments have also contributed to change in the religious landscape, fed by the new social, economic, and ecological lines of conflict. Charismatic movements within the world religions became stronger. Various processes of sacralization have been observed: traditional revivals of collective sacralization in the form of nationalism or racism but also new immanent sacralities that regard Gaia, nature, or aspects of nature as sacred. The Earth, the cosmos—all these entities have been sacralized in the new age of the Anthropocene, and we are just experiencing the beginnings of this phenomenon. Most prominent and influential at present are collapsological notions that have been combined with apocalyptic ones. Advocates of such a perspective cultivate a religious narrative of an eschatologically necessary collapse that stands in the way of further efforts towards social-ecological transformation and habitability on Earth.

On the whole, our time is characterized by very contrasting processes, contradictions, conflicts, innovations, and normative regressions. In some places, we are falling far behind a basic level of civilization that we had achieved, whereas in others, new ideals of transformation are being advocated that can only to a very limited extent provide impulses for global society. In 2021, it became increasingly clear that the idea of modernization had merged with a control and security paradigm and that the path of radical social-ecological transformation aimed at a new post-capitalist beginning had only succeeded in social niches at the local or regional level.

What the future of the second half of the 21st century will bring is largely open, but this openness is far from the ideas that moderns once entertained about the future, ideas that—from today's perspective—seem based on almost naive beliefs in the notion of progress for all. It is precisely the extant belief that in principle anything can be

accomplished, that organization and technology will overcome every limit, that has so far repeatedly led to the failure to build a convivialist politics of self-limitation and new beginnings as an alternative to the hubris of modernity. Political theorists of the 20th century like Hannah Arendt saw in the illusion of omnipotence, of being able to dominate man and nature, a totalitarian and destructive element, which, as we must note today, has not yet been overcome.