

The HOPEFUL REALIST Newsletter:
Looking at the World Today as if Facts Matter

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Here we explore the latest facts, actions, and perspectives on the New Great Transformation of the Earth System, as it unfolds before our eyes. We apply the Hopeful Realism we all need to work through the greatest predicament in human history.

Latest News from the Hopeful Realist

The Necessary Transition from an Industrial to an Ecological Civilization does not require that we “go back to living like cavemen,” as some would have us believe. Here we are, almost a quarter of the way through the 21st century, having plundered the Earth System to feed our system of insatiable growth of industrial capital—which, by the way, is not equivalent to human progress, since GDP measures energy/material use and waste, not human wellbeing. Eight [billionaires](#) own as much as poorest half of the global population, most of whom barely subsist.

In the process we have learned so much about the ‘material world,’ that our knowledge has enabled us to plunder all that much faster, leaving a toxic trail of waste and pollution at a scale that remains hard to imagine, even as the evidence of the danger to our very survival has become overwhelming. Yet, the potential for applying our prodigious technical knowledge to shaping a very different (and livable) world, simply awaits our imagination.

One of the flaws in the reductivist dualism of the predatory culture of industrial civilization is that a false assumption keeps us from seeing the possibilities of converting our vast technological knowledge to use in constructing a very different kind of economy, one that works in harmony with Nature and contributes to the wellbeing of all. We must create new social formations not based on endless economic profits for the few and indiscriminate waste polluting the many. Instead, we must judiciously apply inventive technique to the problems of shaping a way of life based on low energy use, minimal extraction of materials, and repairing, restoring, and regenerating the ecosystems upon which we depend for our survival. The happiest people on Earth live in such ways and should be viewed as icons of ecologically viable living.

In a way, it is like racism in America (see today’s commentary below). As an integral part of the culture, the predatory extractive practices of industrial consumerism are the water in which we product-hungry fish swim. The very concepts that made some people ‘believe that they are white,’ as Ta-Nehisi Coates put it, were generated in the process of colonizing the lands and

peoples on non-European continents. The materials were extracted and the peoples of diverse lands were captured and exploited as slaves to serve the obsession with economic growth for capital accumulation by global elites.

It is almost as if we had nothing to compare it with, although we do. That is why it is so hard to imagine a *democratic ecological civilization* without reverting to cartoon caricatures of ape-like cave men or Stone Age hunter-gatherers sans cell phones, air conditioning, and freeways. The oppression of diverse peoples and the wasteful extraction of materials from their lands continues today, albeit in different forms and at accelerated rates. The achievement of an ecological civilization is unattainable without abandoning the twenty-first century legacy of hundreds of years of colonial and imperial violence to humanity and to the living Earth System.

One of the most important though least considered aspects of industrial modernity is the separation of people from the most consequential components of their lives: their work and their relations with each other. Most of the technologies that ‘make work easier’ and more efficient (or eliminate jobs entirely), have the direct effect of taking control out of the hands of workers and into the orbit of institutional machinery, including software, especially Artificial Intelligence (AI). For all its prowess in writing a term paper or producing other ‘content’ (never mind the errors of fact and context) the essence of AI chat-bots is to remove our role as thinking acting beings who make real world judgements on the basis of real world lived experience and values.

One of the clearest differences between us moderns and the happiest people on Earth, many of whom live in the ‘Blue Zones,’ is that for the happiest groups, their relationships with others are their highest priority. The whole thrust of industrial consumerism is to separate us from each other and make us feel and be alone—thereby vulnerable to marketing psychology and thereby locked into the system that keeps us compliant and apart—socially ‘naked and alone.’ Living the good life, which will result only if we can construct ecological societies, requires none of that; instead, it requires us to engage with other people and engage with the real world, not with some artificially constructed imaginary.

Publishing Plan v. 2.0. As previously mentioned, because of its density and length, I decided to recast my book, *At the Edge of Illusion: Facing the New Great Transformation*, in a new more accessible form. It will consist of a three part series. The first volume of the trilogy, *Holding It Together: Social Control in an Era of Great Transformation*, is in the editing process and will soon be ready for publication, at which time this newsletter will announce how to acquire it.

My eBook **HOPEFUL REALISM: A Climate Manifesto** is still available for free download from [Kindle Unlimited](#). The price will soon go to normal. Please give it a rating/review on [GoodReads.com](#). Or, [review and rate](#) *Hopeful Realism* on Amazon. On Amazon, do so by clicking the button on the lower left of the book’s Amazon page below “Customer Reviews,” and say a few words about what you think about the issues and how I frame them.

Note: Past issues of this Newsletter are available, archived on my web site:

LOOK UP! A Bi-weekly Featured Commentary

Why I am not White. For a long time now—over a half century of which it is hard for me to believe has passed so quickly—I have known that “race” is a fiction. The famed British American anthropologist, Ashley Montague put the claim that race had a biological basis to rest in his classic UNESCO essay, “[Statement on Race](#),” (1950) in which he explained that race is a social invention with no biological basis. That invention was a product of enslavement and its exoneration by people who believed themselves to be ‘white.’ But science, as we see so often today, does not necessarily change invalid beliefs. Race remains a dominant social construction, even when veiled in false narratives of exoneration.

If you have ever watched Henry Luis Gates’ PBS program, “Finding Your Roots,” you will have noted how shocked and surprised many guests have been on discovering their complex previously unknown ancestry, including folks unimaginably distant from their assumed heritage. Angela Davis, the famous African-American intellectual and civil rights activist, was stunned to discover that Gates had traced one of her roots back to a European passenger on the Mayflower! Most of her other early ancestors in America probably made the passage on slave ships.

‘Race’ becomes complicated because some fictions are real, real in the sense that if enough people believe that the fiction is actually a reality, then they act as if the fiction is real, thereby making it a ‘social reality.’ That is where we still are with race.

I never thought of myself as ‘white.’ Or anything else, for that matter, except as a young man (back then) trying to figure out who I was, where I was going, and who I might become in life. I knew that my father was orphaned from a Canadian family whose ancestors were Scottish, Irish, and English. I also knew that my mother’s father had escaped being impressed into the Tsar’s army, probably a decade before the 1917 revolution, had stowed away on a merchant ship and was discovered on board in Constantinople (now Istanbul). The ship’s captain put him to work as a merchant seaman and he sailed around the world until he decided to ‘get off’ at New York harbor. He settled into various occupations and eventually married my grandmother who had emigrated from Germany. When he worked as a waiter in exclusive New York hotel restaurants, the likes of Bernard Baruch, J.P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, often gave him tips on the stock market. He ignored them, and instead won and lost several fortunes betting on the horses. As to his specific ethnic or ‘racial’ origins, I have no idea beyond Russian.

So, I have always thought of myself as from, well, all over. Then, there is the fascinating technology of tracing ancestry by DNA and old records. Both archeology and DNA research trace all human groups to our common source in Africa. In contrast, scientists have traced

domestic dogs to several widely separated grey wolf groups in different parts of the world. In any case, I always thought of all people as just humans not nearly as variable in appearance as dogs are from each other. Nobody disputes, however, that they are all dogs.

As a teenager growing up in a working class suburb of Los Angeles in the late 1950s, I had never even met a Black person until I went to work during my high school summers as a construction laborer. Jimmy Smith became my construction-worker 'role model' and humorous mentor. As an unsure adolescent, I was so envious of his skill and physique that I strived to emulate him. I knew he and the other Black workers were 'different,' and sometimes treated (and talked about) differently by some of the other workers, in ways that made me uncomfortable. I was just beginning to become aware of the racism and thinly told textbook history of slavery in the American South. But, this was California in the late 1950s, which as far as I knew was not racist. Well, I was a naïve teenager, as events would soon enough violently demonstrate.

Anyway, as I said, I never identified as white; my striving for personal identity looked elsewhere. Much later, after a couple of decades teaching Black and Brown university students from South Central Los Angeles and Compton, (in the most ethnically diverse campus in the nation) the idea of identifying as white was about as far from my sense of self as it could be. Once, on entering a club to listen to a singer I knew who was a Black, a friend with me said, "Oh, look, we are the only white people here," without a thought I said, "What do you mean? I'm not white." I had long since semiconsciously objected to being associated with the personal category that connoted domination and oppression of others. I despised high school bullies.

Race is a learned social construction. No matter how I may think I have overcome the idea that I am defined as 'white,' the definition is all around me; it is implicit everywhere I go. So, when I read Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, I immediately took note of his several astute references to "people who think they are white." (p. 79) I had not recalled any other writer, whatever her/his color, speak of "people who believe themselves to be white..." (p. 97) As it turned out, near the end of the book Coates offers a couple of lines from a poem by James Baldwin, in which Baldwin uses the phrase.

*And have brought humanity to the edge of
Oblivion: because they think they are white.*

Coates explicitly recognizes such beliefs residing in such folks, who "...are obsessed with the politics of personal exoneration." Now, don't tell me that you highmindedly choose to be 'color blind,' implying somehow that exonerates you from living in racist America—that IS the white politics of exoneration. The only way to be color blind in America is to be BLIND. Complicity reigns.

For a long time, Ta-Nehisi Coates had been fully aware of the politics of erasing knowledge of racism from American history, which is now surging in active political practice. Today, we have an explicit white nationalist autocratic attempt at personal but also collective white exoneration for not only slavery but also for the continuing white psychology of domination in

contemporary politics and everyday life. American racism will not be constrained until it is recognized at its deepest level of both personal identity and social practice. Real exoneration comes only with resolution, redemption, and justice.

For more Hopeful Realist discussions of this and related matters, go to:

<https://thehopefulrealist.com/the-hopeful-realist-blog/>

Today's Featured Image:

Industrial Consumer Culture Results in Loneliness, Anxiety, and Depression. What could possibly go wrong?



General Happiness, U.S. 8th, 10th, and 12th graders (ages 13 to 18), Monitoring the Future, 1991 – 2017 World Happiness Report, 2019.

Source: <https://www.gbbn.com/insights/learning-from-covid-19-campuses-are-poised-to-help-students-be-happier/>

Recent data show that the general level of happiness among children has plummeted. Some studies have shown that by decreasing 'screen time,' connectedness with others and the world increases, as does happiness. This is only one of the differences between living in the artificial world of consumption, whether of physical products or of attention to electronic imaginaries. Six or more hours a day of 'screen time,' whether internet, texting, or on social media, tend to disconnect one from the real lived world while building dependency on the artificial world of 'media content' which only mimic the world by presenting caricatures of reality. Neither social relations (including those with groups of 'others') nor engagement with physical reality can flourish unless time is devoted to them. Time spent in social media 'silos' increases fear, anger, and hatred for others.

Books and other Sources on the New Great Transformation

Today, our featured source for understanding the New Great Transformation, particularly as it plays out in the U.S., is a New York Times bestseller and winner of the National Book Award, hailed as “required reading” by Toni Morrison. Mr. Coates relays the experience of a Black man growing up in America, in the form of a letter to his adolescent son. It is a fast read, not because it is only 152 pages, but because it contains such compelling writing and so effectively conveys the real-life experience of surviving in American while Black.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2015. *Between the World and Me*. Melbourne, AU: The Text Publishing Co.

As a sociologist, I have often noticed that people who are not sociologists have written some of the best sociology I have ever read. Why? Well, in this case, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes about sociological matters—power, racism, oppression, social relations, personal identity, fatherhood, culture—in ways that are near impossible to achieve via standard sociological methods of investigation. The combination of superb writing skill with direct personal experience and astute observation is impossible to beat as a method of achieving lived sociological insight. Toni Morrison was right; this is required reading for anyone who professes to be an American and a sensitive human being. Who killed Jim Crow? Well, nobody yet.

Quotable Quotes

Mahatma Gandhi sensed the history of which he was a pivotal part. As is often the case, wisdom is applicable across the ages. Today, we find ourselves in a quandary that is not unique in history, with one exception: the conflict between the wellbeing of humanity and the path our ‘leaders’ follow, is globally grave. If the journey continues down that path, all will be lost. That is why in this particular moment, what we need Gandhi recognized precisely. Now, the people must lead, since the global corporate and governmental leaders appear incapable of stepping out of their ambition to act in the interests of everyone. They do not understand that real leadership is only to seek the wellbeing of the people.

There go my people. I must follow them, for I am their leader.

Mahatma Gandhi

Gandhi led one of the great social movements of history. Who is to say whether he actually led or followed? What mattered was that he and his people were united in seeking their escape from the oppressive force of the British Empire. Today is quite different and also quite the same. We have multiple intersecting crises growing and interacting while leaders and movements attempt to seek status-quo solutions to each separately. However, underneath they are all really the same human emergency requiring a New Great Transformation.

We need global unity to address the converging crises of climate and ecosystems destabilization, extreme disparities in income, wealth, and political power, and rapidly

deteriorating conditions in all complex living systems fed mostly by global financial and political failures. Under such conditions, including gross leadership failures, humanity needs to lead its institutions toward regeneration of the most fundamental principles of living as humans in the world. That is unlikely to happen until the people mobilize to redirect and transform political economic systems, and the only way left to accomplish that is to mobilize people everywhere to form a global movement to force institutional transformation leading to an equitable *democratic ecological civilization*.

See you in two weeks. Meanwhile, stay safe and read [HOPEFUL REALISM: A Climate Manifesto](#).