1 The Future of Humanity Does Not Look Good

The world faces a deep and comprehensive crisis. However, for all of our technical and analytical knowledge, we collectively still do not know how to respond. Actions are animated in various forums, and we understand many of the elements of what might be called *a crisis condition*. However, the manifold and interconnected nature of the crisis remains elusive. Yes, capitalism is rampant, and its dominance needs to be taken as critical to any explanation of the current human condition.[1] But that is not enough. Yes, the (non-)designation of the Anthropocene names the complexity of damaging human impact on the planet. But most current debates fail to address the constitutive consequences of the contemporary crisis upon the human condition.

We have become good at measuring the demise of the planet. The devastating graphic of the Great Acceleration illustrates how resource use and damage to the planet is dramatically increasing. It shows curves that reach ever-upwards, documenting the global use of fossil fuels, paper, water, and fertiliser.[2] However, despite all the meetings and negotiations, all the pacts and all the COPs,[3] those lines continue to stretch upwards. Placing those many statistics alongside each other shows the confluence of exponentially increasing resource use. Yet, for all its importance, this graphic dashboard stops at the point of a shallow economic–ecological diagnosis. Indirectly, it also illustrates how the ecological crisis and its economic underpinnings have drawn our attention to climate change while the more comprehensive matrix of

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[1] This puts me in contention with Nancy Frazer (*Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet, and What We Can Do about It?* London, Verso, 2022), who blames capitalism for everything by expanding the concept of 'capitalism' beyond a mode of production to an encompassing societal form.

[2] W. Steffen, W. Broadgate, L. Deutsch, O. Gaffney, and C. Ludwig, 'The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration', *Anthropocene Review*, 2015, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 81–98.

[3] The most recent COP (Conference of Parties) was held in 2023 after twenty-seven previous conferences. Since the first COP in 1992, more carbon has been emitted than in all of human history preceding.

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human–planetary crisis has been left in the shadows. How does one count a comprehensive crisis? How do we measure, or even document, the unsettling of the human condition?

We have begun to talk of climate change as an existential crisis, and this is critically important. Climate change does threaten our world. But the argument of this book seeks to go further. It suggests that we, humanity – with an emphasis on those variously with the most power – have created an all-consuming crisis that goes beyond the degradation of the planet. This existential crisis *of* humanity and *by* humans is the encompassing condition of the climate crisis. It is bigger than even what some are calling the polycrisis of climate change, COVID, and generative artificial intelligence. Occasionally more comprehensive terms hit the streets – collapse,[4] permacrisis, meta-crisis, the Great Unravelling,[5] and the end of world as we know it, or TEOTWAWKI.[6] These terms go beyond the usual well-placed urgency about compounding issues. However, there is little sustained integrating analysis of the processes that give rise to them. Economic instrumentalism still rules. Cultural and political questions still tend to be treated as add-ons. This means that we are destroying ourselves and the planet without understanding more than the proximate causes.

In summary, although we face a manifold crisis of the human–planetary condition, most commentators continue to focus on certain elements of that crisis, rather the relations between them or the processes that drive them on. The vast and accumulating literature rarely addresses the grounding basis of the *crisis condition*, nor its broader consequences for being human. Most critics tend to focus on measurable trends and debated trajectories, rather than either the qualitative abnegations or the alternative pathways to mutual human and planetary flourishing.

Accordingly, this book explores three interconnected processes that, in their dominance, are contributing to the destruction of the human condition as we have known it: abstraction, reconstitution, and relativising. These processes may not be familiar to those outside certain debates in social theory, but they can be described in basic terms. I am acutely aware that expressed at this level of generality, the argument can sound

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[4] Pablo Servigne and Raphaël Stevens, *How Everything Can Collapse: A Manual for Our Times*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2020.

[5] The Carbon Institute's concept of the 'Great Unraveling' is treated in the most comprehensive way of all these terms, but even it tends to be factorial. See Richard Heinberg and Asher Miller, *Welcome to the Great Unraveling: Navigating the Polycrisis of Environmental and Social Breakdown*, Corvallis, Carbon Institute, 2022.

[6] In 1987 the rock band REM released 'It's the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)'. The acronym TEOTWAWKI entered survivalist parlance and became the title of a *Fear the Walking Dead* episode in 2017.

overblown, but bear with me. In the following chapters, this overture will be grounded in detailed elaborations of these processes as they unfold in particular places and times: drone wars in Western Asia (Chapter 3), postcolonial violence in Rwanda and Sri Lanka (Chapter 4), refugee management in Australia, Canada, and the United States (Chapter 6), human security in Japan (Chapter 8), and so on. Keep in mind that I am talking of processes in an unevenly emergent, even if now globally dominant, condition.

First, we are materially *abstracting* social life in ways that hollow out basic social relations.[7] From commodity abstraction to the abstracting interventions of technoscience, we are being 'drawn away' from relatively unmediated relations with others, including non-human others. Embodied presence – slow engagement with others, where that presence matters over the long term – is being unsettled. As we answer the calls of progress, connectivity, escape from limits, technological enhancement, and freedom, we are thinning out our relations with social others and the environment.[8]

As well as being uneven, this material abstraction of the human condition is full of contradictions. Economically, we instrumentalise, reify, and commodify relations between persons and their worlds in the name of living better. Ecologically, we remake nature in the name of saving it. Politically, we produce a world of increasing insecurity, while this is legitimated by heartfelt speeches about defence, peace, and liberty. Culturally, people reach out for intimacy and connection, while systematically living in ways that objectively shake the foundations of such hopes. Lauren Berlant describes the emotional adjustments we make to these contradictions as cruel optimism – a condition when the things that we desire impede their very possibility.[9] It is indicative that Life's Good is now the name of a white-goods producer. Build Your Dreams is a vehicle manufacturer. But the process is much broader than just the cruelty of consumer capitalism. We are also witnessing, it seems, the banalization of an aesthetic of nihilism that a century ago was confined

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[7] Abstraction is the material and ideational process of drawing away from more embodied, sensate, or particularistic relations and meanings. My use of the concept of *material* abstraction comes from Geoff Sharp and writers associated with the journal *Arena*. For an early development of this concept, see Geoff Sharp, 'Constitutive Abstraction and Social Practice', *Arena*, no. 70, 1985, pp. 48–82. Sharp drew upon the path-breaking intuitions of Alfred Sohn-Rethel when he asked, 'Can There Be Abstraction Other than by Thought?' (*Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, London, Verso, 1978), but completely up-ended Sohn-Rethel's approach.

[8] Simon Cooper, *Technoculture and Critical Theory: In the Service of the Machine*, London, Routledge, 2002.

[9] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011.

to pockets of intellectual culture. We are living through the banal gener-alisation of a culture that Justin Clemens and Chris Feik describe as 'a romantic *optimistic pessimism* that vacillates between joyful apocalypticism and a disappointed utopianism' (emphasis in the original).[10] Processes of abstraction are profoundly shaping the contours of this emotional terrain, and the material contradictions of this abstracting world are, despite our better selves, undermining the basis for a flourishing human condition.

Second, we are *reconstituting* the fundamental elements of nature and culture, including our own bodies, our identities, and prior taken-for-granted forms of social life. This is different from past attempts to recon-struct our worlds. We humans are now remaking the very forms that make up those worlds, or at least forms that were once relatively taken for granted as basic. Questions of power, identity, class, community, gender, race, and nature have never been more important. However, attention to these matters cannot leave unexplored the material and conceptual blurring of these basic categories of practice. Once relatively stable categories are now being drawn into a global maelstrom. The differences between sustainability and exploitation, combatant and civil-ian, male and female, refugee and terrorist, and victim and perpetrator have all been existentially unsettled in ways that increasingly empty out the positive possibilities of a politics in common. All the world is at war, and it is a war of words as well as practice.

Third, we are *relativising* the ground on which we walk. From the way we understand knowledge to the way in which we turn the building blocks of existence – sounds, atoms, genes, colours, DNA, stem cells, flesh, and blood – into relativised entities. Everything is being turned into standpoint-oriented objects.[11] This postmodernising process emphasises the standpoint of each of us in giving meaning to the world. At the same time, it allows any practice or thing to be rationalised so long as we indi-vidually and severally believe it to be valuable, aesthetically pleasing, nec-essary, or advantageous. Truth thus becomes relative to the situation as defined by the speaker. 'Do you know what I mean?' Ethics becomes individualised agonism. 'Does it feel right to me?' Recognition turns into postmodern identity politics. 'I have a right to be whomever I want to be.'

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[10] Justin Clemens and Chris Feik, 'Nihilism, Tonight …', in Keith Ansell Pearson and Ansell Morgan, eds., *Nihilism Now: Monsters of Energy*, Basingstoke, Macmillan Press, 2000.

[11] The implied critical reference here is to the object-oriented ontologies approach of writ-ers such as Graham Harman (*Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*, London, Penguin, 2018), which reduces everything – events, humans, processes, ani-mals, rocks, and ideas – to objects. This theory is apotheosis of the intellectual enthral with abstraction for itself.

This relativising drive is different from earlier intellectual experiments that sought to relativise absolute claims about the meaning of life – an important practice when it does not become a politics in itself or when those intellectuals do not think of themselves as celebrities or gods. Hence, just as with the process of abstraction, it is not relativising itself that is the problem, but rather its generalisation as a dominant way of life. This relativising dynamic has become increasingly encompassing. It is taking hold far beyond prior modern recognitions of plural difference such as liberal tolerance or cosmopolitan open-mindedness. Described in singular instances it can be helpfully qualifying or personally affirming, but as a generalising process the relativisation of meaning fractures the basis for integrated knowledge, ethics, and relational recognition. To the contrary, evidence remains important to all arguments, including the present claim, and those across the course of the book. Chapter by chapter, building the details of this evidence, I will use a series of key moments and zones in contemporary history: military insecurity, postcolonial violence, refugee displacement, and technoscientific intervention.

Even if unfamiliar, abstraction, reconstitution, and relativising are all well-defined conceptual and material processes. The theoretical threads of the present argument are woven into the warp and weft of these basic concepts. Definitions of keywords used in the narrative can be found in the glossary at the end of the book. The argument turns on these concepts as part of a systematic approach to theory that always sits just beneath the surface of unfolding narratives about things in the world: bombs, drones, machetes, garbage trucks, biometric devices, ultrasound wands, and DNA synthesisers.

Understandably, however, the meaning of these tricky concepts slips away all too quickly in practical life. It is hard to build an ethical politics around a critique of such dark energy when the work of describing these processes *itself* entails such conceptual abstraction. It is hard to bring evidence to bear when the processes are not obvious. Even using the metaphor of dark matter is complicated here. The dark matter/energy which theoretically structures the universe has some qualities that do not map on what I am trying to argue. Nevertheless, these processes of abstraction, reconstitution, and relativising do have everywhere-structuring qualities akin to what physicists have described as dark energy. They too are undetectable by conventional measurement. They too are utterly and comprehensively structuring our worlds – and sometimes carefully used metaphors can help us to understand complexity.

Without any markers in this riven landscape, we are in danger of falling into the black holes of condensing contradiction surrounded by these elusive yet ubiquitous processes – all the while looking elsewhere for

the causes. For example, many commentators unevenly understand the problem of conceptual relativising and the emptying out of generalising forms of knowledge, but all too quickly it is blamed on the post-truth politics of radical populists and the rhetoric of the growing number of self-serving manipulative politicians. Yes, such partisans carry forward the relativisation of knowledge, but post-truth, big lies, and Trumpism are tragic, dangerous developments that should be treated as symptoms of longer-term, deeper processes. Tragically, 'good' liberal-democratic governments have also been involved in truth-fabrication for decades.[12]

Taken together, I suggest, the churning *dominance* of these processes of abstraction, reconstitution, and relativising – weaker in some situations and places, stronger in others – are contributing to the existential unsettling of the human condition, including our sense of prior limits. This is the core argument of the book. Note, however, how careful I am being here. It is not these processes in themselves, but their consuming dominance that is the problem. Abstraction stands out from the other two processes as always having been a dimension of the human condition – always a constitutive one. But now, in its encompassing intensifying reach, it is colonising all of our life-worlds. Or, to be more accurate, given that it is not a process that is just imposed from above, it has been reconstituting our life-worlds for generations. And it is this utter dominance that is the problem, not its existential contribution to human development. All of this means that we are now unsettling the deepest structures of human practice and meaning. And we are doing so in such ways as to change our social being, to take apart the world as we have known it.

A throughgoing response to this upheaval will arguably entail living together more simply in engaged relations, re-establishing the enduring limits of embodied presence, and negotiating boundaries, thresholds, and transversals.[13] All these terms are important here – presence, negotiation, boundaries, thresholds, *and* transversals. As will be seen as the book develops, and most directly in Chapter 11 on grounded cosmopolitanism, I am not putting forward a one-dimensional, place-based alternative. To be sure, *place* is central to the argument of this book, but it

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[12] A. B. Abrams, *Atrocity Fabrication and Its Consequences: How Fake News Shapes World Order*, Atlanta, Clarity Press, 2023.

[13] There is a long lineage of important books on living together more simply. See, for example, Soren C. Larsen and Jay T. Johnson, *Being Together in Place: Indigenous Coexistence in a More than Human World*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017. But these kinds of books tend to leave out the framing conditions that colonize and thin out contemporary place-making. In this case, Larsen and Johnson even argue as part of that politics that 'comprehension of the whole is precluded' (p. 4). In an act of anthropological anarchism, they thereby shut off a much needed comprehensive politics.

is always treated as layered and contradictory – layers of embodied and more abstract connection cross different extensions of social space. Even locally, it means understanding and working with the layers of placement brought by histories of transversals. Globally, it means carefully negotiating a pluriverse of ontological difference.

Unfortunately, however, these limits and lines of negotiation are being worn away on a daily basis by the promises and practical possibilities held out by the waves of abstraction, reconstitution, and relativisation. And then in a redoubling of the unsettling, attempts to hold onto more enduring embodied relations are treated suspiciously as part of the problem. Expressive of this, positive place-based politics is often criticised as a romanticised return, an empty simulacrum, or a restrictive parochialism. To explicate the meaning of this requires considerable groundwork. First, let us try to give the process a name.

Naming This Transformative Process

Working together on a recent book on globalisation, Manfred Steger and I tentatively began to develop the concept of 'the Great Unsettling' to describe a qualitative transformation of the nature of social life over the past half-century or so.[14] Definitionally, the Great Unsettling names the period beginning around the middle of the twentieth century when humans developed the capacity to take apart and reconstitute the basic conditions of life on planet Earth. During this period, postmodern relativising compounded the modern reconstruction of social life. It redoubled the continuing disjunctures of modernity and generalising its many crises into a crisis of everything. In figurative terms, if, across the middle of the twentieth century, Auschwitz marked the extreme expression of the modern unsettling, then Hiroshima marked the beginnings of a postmodern unsettling. Together, they now interweave as a Great Unsettling, the existential unsettling of both the human condition and planet.

This unsettling now includes how humans make themselves in relation to others – human and non-human, intimate and collective, local and global. That is, twisted into the fabric of the current manifold crisis is an unexplored ontological unsettling of the human condition as a whole. We thus began to use the concept of 'the Great Unsettling' with self-conscious ambivalence as a pointer to a matrix of interconnected processes. We treated it as much more than a pile-on of separate crises as described in the vogue term 'polycrisis'. Rather, in Barrie Axford's

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[14] Manfred B. Steger and Paul James, *Globalization Matters: Engaging the Global in Unsettled Times*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

words, 'the Great Unsettling … is an aphorism for the imbrication of dynamic systems and reflexive actors, as well as an intimation of possible entropy or massive rupture'.[15] This needs some elaboration.

Manfred and I were looking for a big connecting term, a synoptic concept, that would signify a qualitative transformation of the human condition over recent decades. We wanted a concept that would stand alongside terms such as 'the Great Acceleration' and extend their relatively narrow sense of ecological accounting. To respond adequately to the manifold crisis, we suggested, requires going beyond the view that just curtailing some of the excesses of production and consumption would be enough to save the planet. But on the other hand, we wanted a contingent concept that would not reduce the past seven or eight decades to a singular one-dimensional period (thus, I have started to use lower case for the concept).

The concept needed to carry a sense of the unresolved contradictions and disjunctures that have become apparent as people have sought to respond to existential change. Hence, so long as the great unsettling is understood as a shorthand concept for a process in dominance and not an epochal claim about a singularity, then we thought the naming might work.

The concept of the 'unsettling' needs to be understood as tied to the ontological unsettling of social *and* natural life – or at least the fracturing that occurs with the imposition of one formation of being upon a pluriverse of others, human and non-human. This adjective, 'the ontological', describes the conditions of existence. It is integral to what a number of writers from Hannah Arendt to William McNeill have called the 'human condition'.[16] Before them, René Magritte developed a set of paintings in the 1930s called 'The Human Condition' in which a series of rendered canvases standing in front of windows appear to represent the world beyond the window and, at the same time, to obscure most of that world outside the dwelling. This metaphor of the world obscured is critical.

Taking Magritte's allegory seriously, the notion of the human condition should be treated as inclusively naming our contradictory planetary condition – both being in the world but desperately seeking to be lifted out from its limits. Finding alternative pathways means getting past either the modernist social–natural divide or the postmodern collapsing

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[15] Barrie Axford, 'A Modest Proposal: Global Theory for Tough – and not so Tough – Times', in Barrie Axford, ed., *Why Globalization Matters: Engaging with Theory*, London, Routledge, 2021, p. 5.

[16] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958.

of ontological difference. It means treating culture and ecology as central to any social analysis alongside politics and economics.[17] All in all, it forces us to reflect upon where we stand in a world, while recognising that even our standpoints for reflection are being unsettled.

Adding 'great' to 'unsettling' serves as a pointer to this more profound existential sense that what is being unsettled is both the human and planetary condition. Otherwise, 'unsettling' could easily be taken to refer only to a phenomenal or psychological sense of individual or collective unease and anxiety. As I will elaborate over the course of this book, the unsettling is as objective as it is subjective. It is brought on by the dark energy of our time, and these processes are as material as they are ideational.

The great unsettling is more than the cyclical crises of capitalism that have afflicted modernity multiple times. Karl Marx's fabulous invocation 'All that is solid melts into air'[18] begins to get at an earlier stage of unsettling, a period when *modern constructivism* emerged into dominance, but his metaphor suggests a dissolving rather than a material reconstitution of the ground of social and environmental being – the process also being described here. In other words, the great unsettling is closely connected to the objective and subjective dynamics of those space–time extensions that go by the name of 'globalisation' but it is not explained by those extensions. It builds upon longer-run unsettling forces such as modern capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism. However, with the postmodern relativising of categories of existence, it goes far beyond even these to combine forces in an accelerating manifold crisis.

Other writers have previously used the adjective 'great' to signify what they saw as an epochal shift. For example, Karl Polanyi's analysis of what he called the Great Transformation was directed much more narrowly to understanding the political and economic collapse of nineteenth-century 'European civilisation'. This era, he reductively claims, was marked by the end of four institutions: the international gold standard, the self-regulating market, the balance-of-power system, and the liberal state.[19] By comparison, the great unsettling is a global dynamic that points beyond such a limited, Eurocentric, and institutionally framed set of political and economic changes.

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[17] Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013.
[18] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, London, Verso (1848) 2016, p. 10.
[19] Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Boston, Beacon Press (1944), 2001.

Francis Fukuyama also seizes upon the signifier 'great' in his fin-de-siècle study on the reconstitution of social order – the Great Disruption.[20] Writing as a moderate conservative, his primary concern lies with what he characteristically diagnosed as a collapse of moral order that occurred in the period from the 1960s to the 1990s. For Fukuyama, the whole transition from late industrialism to the information society was marked by a cultural–political sense of unsettling. Familial kinship became unstable, crime increased, communities saw themselves as under threat by varying others, social trust diminished, and the legitimacy of state governments went into a forty-year decline. Ultimately, then, Fukuyama saw the Great Disruption as a cyclical crisis of social norms that would supposedly end in the early twenty-first century with the rebirth of a new moral order.

By comparison, the great unsettling is a world-historical and ontologically fundamental dynamic that continues to shake up both the very process of being human and the planet which sustains us. In both subjective and objective terms, it puts humans in a position of considering the end of the world, at least as we have previously known it.

For this reason, I emphasise the ontological depth of the process as unsettling the basic categories of being – embodiment, time, space, knowledge, and so on. This relativising layer of unsettling extends across fields as diverse as the bioengineering of life, the algorithmic coding of exchange processes, the cybernetic transformation of human consciousness, and the reconstitution of the meaning of social identity. For example, in relation to embodiment, it manifests in the field of biotechnology as the taking apart and recombining of the genetic elements of life. Here we experience accompanying subjective changes such as the unsettling of gendered and sexual identity. This mode of unsettling is thus not just a series of institutional changes or a set of external threats and risks, though it quickly becomes institutionalised and encompasses such threats and risks. It is not just a singular crisis of familiar pedigree, though it certainly spawns a multiplicity of sub-crises. Rather, it points to what Mark Duffield calls 'entropic barbarism',[21] suggesting that this is the new structural condition of our time.

Older processes of social change continue. For example, a simple continuing process such as the rapacious extraction of ground water for industrial agriculture is contributing to something as complex as shifting

[20] Francis Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order*, London, Profile Books, 1999.
[21] Mark Duffield, *Post-Humanitarianism: Governing Precarity in the Digital World*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2019.