

Global Crisis and Insecurity

From the dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, to the escalating effects of climate change, public consciousness of existential threat waxes and wanes. Despite the occasional intense capacity to imagine the global consequences of our cumulative actions, we seem to lack a collective will to act alternatively *and* systematically to conserve the fundamental conditions for human life. This book confronts the basic challenges of insecurity, violence, genocide, refugee displacement, and technoscientific intrusions on embodiment and identity – but it also points to alternative ways of thinking and practicing in an unsettled world. It argues for an engaged cosmopolitanism, grounded in place and guided by local and global debates around principles of what constitutes good ways of living. In order to create a positive change, we must better understand the human condition in crisis, the causes of the global crisis, and the possible pathways to human flourishing.

Paul James is Professor of Globalization and Cultural Diversity in the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University. He was previously Scientific Advisor to the Mayor of Berlin and Director of the United Nations Global Compact Cities Programme. Paul's previous publications include *Globalization Matters* (with Manfred Steger, 2019) and *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism* (2006).

Global Crisis and Insecurity

The Human Condition, Darkly

Volume 3 of *Towards a Theory of Abstract Community*

Paul James

Western Sydney University



Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-61426-9 — Global Crisis and Insecurity
Paul James
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009614269

DOI: 10.1017/9781009614221

© Paul James 2025

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

When citing this work, please include a reference to the
DOI 10.1017/9781009614221

First published 2025

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

*A Cataloging-in-Publication data record for this book is available from the Library
of Congress*

ISBN 978-1-009-61426-9 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-009-61427-6 Paperback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will
remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-61426-9 — Global Crisis and Insecurity
Paul James
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

For Manfred Steger

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	page viii
<i>List of Tables</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
 Part I The Dark Energy of Our Time	
1 The Future of Humanity Does Not Look Good	3
2 Redefining Basic Concepts	33
 Part II Confronting Global Contradictions	
3 The Existential Unsettling of Security	61
4 Descending into Postcolonial Violence	86
5 Disrupting the Hopes of Reconciliation	114
6 Dehumanising Refugees	132
7 Abstracting Embodiment	154
 Part III Struggling for Positive Human Development	
8 The Ontological Weight of Human Security	183
9 Reconsidering Humanitarian Intervention	206
10 Creating Capacities for Human Development	228
11 Bringing Cosmopolitanism Down to Earth	256
12 Moving towards a Manifesto	279
<i>Appendix A: A Note on Method</i>	309
<i>Appendix B: A Glossary for Engaged Practice</i>	320
<i>Bibliography</i>	341
<i>Index</i>	358
	vii

Figures

2.1	Variations of the triple bottom-line approach	<i>page 37</i>
2.2	Circles of social life: Decentring the human while grounding the social	46
2.3	Levels of analysis in relation to domains of activity and ontological formations	49
2.4	Levels of analysis in relation to modes of integration	52
4.1	Levels of analysis, focussing on ontological categories and formations	100
4.2	Different valences across different ontological formations	101
8.1	Themes of social integration	195
10.1	Themes of integration as critical to relating and being	230
10.2	Circles of social capacities: With the assessment conducted as a speculative judgement of the contemporary global condition	254
12.1	The emphases of the sustainable development goals	284
A.1	Levels of analysis in relation to doing, acting, relating, and being	319

Tables

7.1 The dualisms of the critics of dualism	<i>page</i> 177
10.1 Social capacities for positively engaging in social life	253
12.1 Principles for local–global living expressed at the subdomain level	297
12.2 Identity and engagement: Principles for good global–local relations expressed across three levels	301
A.1 Ontological formations in relation to modes of practice	312
B.1 Modes of production with reference to relations, forces, and objects of production	334

Preface

Many years ago, at a time before most of the people now living on earth were born, U Thant, Secretary General of the United Nations, wrote the following words:

I do not wish to seem over-dramatic, but I can only conclude from the information that is available to me as Secretary General, that the Members of the United Nations have perhaps ten years left in which to subordinate their ancient quarrels and launch a global partnership to curb the arms race, to improve the human environment, to defuse the population explosion, and to supply the required momentum to development efforts. If such a global partnership is not forged within the next decade, then I very much fear that the problems I have mentioned will have reached such staggering proportions that they will be beyond our capacity to control.¹

We have perhaps ten years left, said U Thant. That was more than fifty years ago. Since then, a decade of uneven and ineffective action has turned into half a century of back-sliding, profit-taking, green-washing, and violence-making. The planet now burns. The day I wrote this sentence, a Monday, was the hottest day globally in the history of humans recording earth's temperature. We now stand on a cliff-edge of calamity, seeking hope in layers of technological mediation, political deferral, and existential anxiety.

Some writers ask searching questions. Achille Mbembe writes: 'If ultimately humanity exists only through being in and of the world, can we find a relation with others based on reciprocal recognition of our common vulnerability and finitude?'² Claire Colebrook asks, 'How is it that the human species, seemingly so hungry for life and dominance, has conveniently forgotten its own self-extinguishing tendencies?'³ Isabelle

¹ U Thant, cited in Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jorgen Randers, and William W. Behrens III, *Limits to Growth*, New York, Universe Books, 1972, p. 17.

² Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2019, p. 3.

³ Claire Colebrook, *Death of the Post-Human*, Ann Arbor, Open Humanities Press, 2014, p. 11.

xii Preface

Stengers asks, how we can resist the coming barbarism.⁴ And Andreas Malm entreats, ‘So what, then, can still be achieved in the struggle to maximise the prospects for survival?’⁵ This book responds actively to these questions. Seeking to understand and find a way through the current crisis condition.

At the same time, I remain acutely aware of the dangers of generalising descriptions and theories about our times. In Geoff Sharp’s words, it is important that an author acknowledge that, working with ‘abstractly grounded powers, ... the social theorist as universal interpreter, might be integral with the crisis to which he [or she] is responding’.⁶ All too often, critical descriptions turn into prescriptions with unintended consequences. Worse than that, thinking that we are overcoming the horrors of the old, social theorists and political commentators all too often become ideologues of new destructive developments. I have worked hard to avoid that tendency. But I have no doubt that this book remains flawed, skewed, and limited. As best as an author can, I will draw attention to some of the limits of the present enquiry as the book proceeds.

Equally, I have no doubt that hiding away from the crises and reveling in lines of indeterminacy or celebrating rhizomic meanderings are not sustainable options. Neither can our responses be reduced to seeking signs of resilience. Anna Tsing’s allegory of the *matsutake* mushroom cannot be our guide, even if the *matsutake* ekes out its existence and sometimes flourishes in the ruins of capitalism.⁷ *Matsutake* may have been the first living thing to emerge after the bombing of Hiroshima, but it remains like us a living creature struggling in the chaos, not a sign of wondrous hope. Alternatively, we need not succumb to the options laid out by Bernard-Henri Levy in *Barbarism with a Human Face*. In his weird world, it remains either ‘for rats like us to find a corner in the ruins and wait there in peace’⁸ or to join the new philosophers to resist the barbarian threat of Left optimism.

The same can be said for the bizarre, abstracted worlds of Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari who seek an alternative politics in the

⁴ Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, London, Open Humanities Press, 2019.

⁵ Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World*, London, Verso, 2018, p. 226.

⁶ Geoff Sharp, ‘An Overview for the Next Millennium?’, *Arena Journal*, no. 9, 1997, p. 2.

⁷ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in the Ruins of Capitalism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 2.

⁸ Bernard-Henri Levy, *Barbarism with a Human Face*, New York, Harper & Row, 1979, p. 191.

surface meandering of the rhizome,⁹ or of Bruno Latour who thins out ontologically different ways of being to networks and double-clicks.¹⁰ It can even be said of Alain Badiou, at least the writer of *Being and Event*, who argues that the full multiplicity of the world, of human being can be given a universalising base through the abstraction of mathematics.¹¹ The list goes on. Perhaps unfairly, I will not have time to do more than mention these theorists in passing in this book, but our task is much more urgent. These writers pitch some of the most vocal alternatives on offer, but other more positive pathways can be unearthed. And, maybe, as I have tried to do in this book, they can be generalised into a map of possible reorientations of the human condition in these dark times.

The book has been written over a long period of time in dialogue with many people who have all made contributions to my argument: Barrie Axford, Paul Bacon, Barbara Berninger, Jayne Bye, Denis Byrne, Peter Christoff, Justin Clements, Liz Conor, Simon Cooper, Arnaud Diemer, Robyn Eckersley, Toni Erskine, Giangi Franz, Brad Haylock, Chris Hudson, Sally Gardner, Damian Grenfell, Christopher Hobson, Michael Janover, Elizabeth Kath, Nina Killham, Paul Komesaroff, Geoffrey Levey, Liam Magee, Brett Neilson, Kenneth Reinert, Ino Rossi, Ned Rossiter, Guy Rundle, Juan Salazar, Andy Scerri, Ayelet Shachar, Geoff Sharp, Jan Aart Scholte, Manfred Steger, Tamara Stenn, Tim Ström, Joel Trigg, Stephanie Trigg, Andrew Walter, Aiden Warren, Jessica Weir, Kelly Whitney, Linda Williams, Josh Wodak, and Erin Wilson.

Each of these people contributed to the book differently. Sometimes their influence came through asking me to redraft a section of writing as I fumbled towards clarity, sometimes it was through a critical reading of a working essay, and sometimes it came through discussion, questioning, or pushing me to new lines of reading. For example, it was Michael Janover who introduced me to Hannah Arendt as we facilitated a hermeneutic circle with students and colleagues three decades ago. We argued through *The Human Condition* for years without agreeing on the import of Arendt's concept of 'action'.

The present book would not have been written without my ongoing collaboration with Manfred Steger. The book is dedicated to him in

⁹ Giles Deleuze, Giles, and Félix Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

¹⁰ Bruno Latour, *An Enquiry into Modes of Existence: Anthropology of the Moderns*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2013.

¹¹ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, London, Continuum, 2005.

appreciation of half a lifetime of friendship and critical engagement. He, more than anyone else, gave me the courage to write this third volume of a series that I began more than three decades ago. Even with this volume, ‘Towards a Theory of Abstract Community’ remains unfinished. Over the years of its writing, we have talked our way through the method’s many complexities and profound limitations. It has been my long-term project to rethink the basis of historical materialism, keeping its emphasis on Marx’s Thesis 11. Manfred tried to bring some nuance to my tendency to overexplain theory and method.

Stephanie Trigg responded every time I was unsure about an argument and helped me to write a little less awkwardly, a little less protected by the shield of writing in the passive voice. She is central to everything I do. Liz Conor made insightful interventions into the chapter on postcolonial violence. Encouraged by her to elaborate on how modern taxonomies are different from other forms of categorisation, the chapter attempts to do what I failed to achieve in *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism* – that is, systematically define the differences between different dominant ontological formations.¹² Like other chapters in *Global Crisis*, this work on postcolonial violence took various published forms before being substantially rewritten for the current volume.

Damian Grenfell’s thinking was critical to writing the chapter on humanitarian intervention, just as he has been important to all my excursions into engaged theory. Aiden Warren’s invitation to write on security and globalisation was the basis for the chapter on global security. Paul Bacon and Christopher Hobson provided the setting for my rethinking of military security as human security. Kenneth Reinert set me off on yet another venture by asking me to define culture in relation to development. Ino Rossi prompted the development of ideas on good globalisation. Tim Ström critically commented on the full manuscript and gifted his thoughts on cybernetic capitalism.

Long discussions over decades with Paul Komesaroff framed much of my thinking, particularly on issues of violence and reconciliation. His insights are central to the chapter on reconciliation, but also to others around questions of human flourishing. The immediate context for writing the chapter on human capacities and flourishing was a project to develop a Digital Capacities Index for understanding how people might engage in a positive digital life. This intersected with an invitation from Paola Spinozzi and Mazzanti Massimiliano to write on sustainability and well-being. Subsequently, this line of writing was pursued

¹² Paul James, *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism: Bringing Theory Back In*, London, SAGE Publications, 2006.

in collaboration with Jayne Bye and Kelly Whitney as we developed the Circles of Capacities matrix together.

The abstraction and unsettling of the human condition have long been a preoccupation of mine. This is obviously not an academic discipline. It does not figure in the work-load formulas and Fields of Research codes defined by the contemporary university. I am therefore deeply grateful to my colleagues in the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University for making it possible for me to explore beyond the usual instrumental strictures of contemporary academic work. I am equally thankful to my colleagues in the Arena project¹³ – particularly Alison Caddick, Simon Cooper, John Hinkson, Richard King, Valerie Krips, Guy Rundle, Tim Ström, Dan Tout, and Grazyna Zajdow – for keeping me engaged in the immediacy of the crises that we as humans all face together. Learning from past editors of *Arena*, Geoff Sharp (d. 2015), Nonie Sharp, Gerry Gill (d. 2019), and Doug White (d. 2023) was critical to my taking up the constitutive abstraction approach.

Global Crisis was written in the shadow of human suffering in Gaza, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria, and Australia's refugee detention camps. How can a cosmopolitan country like Australia respond to those who come to its borders seeking support by indefinitely imprisoning them in institutionalised ghettos? How did a thick fog of impenetrable self-legitimation settle over the global debate on refugees? How can the Israeli military, born out of brutality to the Jewish people, now turn to inflict such brutal horror on the living ghetto of Gaza? Why, like the Angel of History, is the Israeli Right always looking backwards to prior horrors while itself contributing to the piling wreckage of history? How can we celebrate the resilience of the Ukrainian people, while their leaders decide that hundreds of thousands of deaths are worth sacrificing for a contested alignment of political borders?

Outside of those places, most of the world watches with multitasked (in)attention as a quarter of humanity now live in areas directly affected by armed conflict. Equally, the book seeks to understand this implicated *zone of interest* beyond those immediate sites of violence – the globalising world of cybercapitalism and technoscience. In this darkening world, ontological insecurity is either normalised or blamed on others. Just as the writer-director Jonathan Glazer said of his making of a film about

¹³ The project began in 1963, initiated by Geoff Sharp and others, and has involved many people in thinking, writing, printing, and talking as part of a broader intellectual practice. Over the last sixty years, we have produced a lineage of publications variously called *Arena*, *Arena Journal*, *Arena Magazine*, and now *Arena Quarterly*, each responding to the tenor of the times. I have been a publications editor of *Arena* since 1986, now nearly forty years.

xvi Preface

the Holocaust, I looked at ‘the darkening world around us, and I had a feeling I had to do something about our similarities to the perpetrators rather than the victims.’¹⁴ In this unsettled world, naming the ‘perpetrators’ has, however, become ever-more complicated. Certainly, there are some who actively and even intentionally perpetuate structural barbarism, usually with a human face. They should be called out. But the broader issue is that each of us, as we search for light in this darkening world, increasingly face the possibility that our searches, our lives, might also be implicated in perpetuating the engulfing gloom. As Bertolt Brecht said, life goes on and we make choices:

In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing
About the dark times.¹⁵

¹⁴ Jonathan Glazer cited in David Fear, ‘It’s Not a History Lesson, It’s a Warning: Inside the Making of *The Zone of Interest*’, *Rolling Stone*, 26 November 2023, www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-features/the-zone-of-interest-jonathan-glazer-interview-holocaust-nazis-1234907233/.

¹⁵ Bertolt Brecht, from the *Svendborg Poems, 1938*, in *The Collected Poems of Bertolt Brecht*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2018.