

# Emancipating Transformations: from Anthropocene control to culturing systems

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## Abstract

Current global environmental governance reverberates with talk of a new 'Anthropocene epoch' defined by 'human domination', in which a 'perfect storm' of catastrophic threats is seen to force a singular 'great transition' towards 'Earth systems management'. The advent of this new discourse raises particular questions for how systems-based understandings can best inform policy making.

A key theme in this new governance movement, is the emphasis on 'control'. Under a growing mood of 'environmental authoritarianism', humanity is conceived "as a self conscious control force that has conquered the planet" and with a destiny to "take control of Nature's realm". And it is Earth systems theories that are relied upon to help take charge of the 'control variables of the Earth'.

But what these moves also reflect, are the longstanding priorities attached by powerful incumbent interests to exactly these kinds of rhetorics of control. Indeed, democracy itself presents an early target. Increasingly portrayed as a 'failure', a 'luxury', or even 'an enemy of Nature', leading figures argue for democracy to be 'put on hold'. With systems approaches apparently leaving no room for argument, there seems 'no alternative' but compliance – or irrational denial and existential doom.

Yet there are alternative ways to address the gravity of current ecological and social imperatives. It can be recognised, for instance, that democratic struggle is the principal means by which knowledges and practices of Sustainability were shaped in the first place. In this view, concentrated power and fallacies of control are more problems than solutions. Here, history shows the greatest ongoing forms of transformative progress (like release from colonialism, racism or patriarchy), to owe more to plural knowledges and values and unruly hope-inspired agonistic contention, than to single orderly technical 'transitions' based on deterministic notions of systems science or fear-driven structured control.

Like other great progressive struggles of history, radical shifts in grassroots culture and anarchically choreographed flocking behaviours in nature, the most effective modes for radical change often lie in spontaneous bottom-up collective action. These do not depend on rigidly disciplined 'integrated science' and monolithically-structured 'planetary management'. So, relations between human systems and natural systems are defined more by co-evolutionary processes of mutual culturing than control. It is in helping to understand, highlight and explore these contrasting modalities of distributed social and ecological coordination that enlightened forms of systems theory may offer special contributions.