

The Application of Integral Theory to Futures Studies

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[PP1] The application of integral theory to futures studies is probably the shortest possible definition for what has become known as “integral futures.” Yet, at the same time, to explain what “integral theory” is and what “futures studies” is requires much more time than I have here. As a matter of fact, one could spend a lifetime exploring both of these interdisciplinary/meta-disciplinary fields and still not obtain a thorough or complete understanding of them.

When I sent an email to a well-respected figure in the futures field that I would be giving a presentation on this topic, he shot back a short reply that the futures field is in dire need of a theoretical framework – that without it, the discipline would never be able to achieve the academic credibility it seeks. Of course, in futures, the proposition that a theoretical framework is even needed is not a point that you will find consensus on – but then, if it’s any consolation, there’s not much else in the futures or foresight field that will you find much consensus on either. For example, it has been disputed whether futures studies can even be considered an academic “field” and, moreover, some question whether it should be called “futures studies,” instead preferring “foresight studies,” or “futurology,” or a dozen other names that have been variously proposed. [PP2] However, here will I avoid this semantics trap and state up front my assumptions and contentions that: (1) futures/foresight studies *is* an academic discipline, (2) it *is* in need of a theoretical framework, and (3) integral theory *does* have the capacity to serve the field well and even propel it to a new level of operational capacity, which is the purpose of the emergence of “integral futures.”

Integral Futures, or “IF,” is largely the innovation of Dr. Richard Slaughter during the beginning of this century. On the basis of Dr. Slaughter’s pioneering work, other futures practitioners have successfully applied IF to their research and practice, which was showcased in a 2008 special issue of *Futures*. Mostly, these integral futurists demonstrated how IF, as a theoretical framework for futures/foresight research and practice, could help futurists better understand and thus improve futures methodologies. [PP3] However, my own particular application of IF relates to futures schools of thought as images of civilizational futures; thus, in this presentation, I will not refer to futures methodologies but will instead focus on futures schools of thought and their evolution during the past 40 years. Hopefully, consideration of futures schools of thought as civilizational futures within the IF framework will help to better understand the challenge of the future as well as how to construct a multifaceted, comprehensive, integrated image of the future for the 21st century. Yet, before presenting this comprehensive image of the future through the IF framework, since integral theory may be new to some of you, I will give a brief introduction to the four-quadrant model as put forth by the American philosopher Ken Wilber, to be followed by

an overview of the origin of the three futures schools of thought in the 1970s. I will then show how these three futures schools of thought evolved into the present-day eight futures schools of thought, which can be located within each of the quadrants of the four-quadrant IF framework. Finally, I will show how modern and postmodern stages of consciousness are reflected in distinct images of the future.

The Four-Quadrant Model

[PP4] As a whole, the four quadrants of the “integral operating system” (IOS) represent a “map” or theoretical “window” for interpreting reality, the universe, all that exists, or “everything,” as Wilber has bluntly stated. Even so, it can also be applied to specific phenomena as well; thus, the four-quadrant model has been applied to a variety of disciplines or fields such as medicine, art, business, education, spiritual practice, politics, Christianity, social work, and ecology. This new holistic perspective has the capacity to enable such disciplines or fields to engage in their respective practices more freely and completely than had been previously understood, largely due to the incorporation and revitalization of the “invisible” Left-Hand quadrants, which represent the internal or subjective qualities or natures that are not readily “seen” in the external world, but which, nevertheless, are just as important, vital, and “real” such that, without their consideration, the interpretation of reality is reduced and compressed into “flatland,” a monological, Right-Hand only “it”/“its” perspective (or “gaze”), which is the cause of much of the pathology, dissociation, and alienation that so plagues modern life within the technological society of industrial civilization.

The integral model can also be divided into upper and lower quadrants, simply understood in terms of “singular” and “plural”; thus, applied to humankind, the upper-left (UL) quadrant refers to individual consciousness, Mind/Being, including subjective feelings and desires. In terms of pronouns, this is the “I”; in Plato’s language, this is the “Beautiful” since it is the source of spirituality. However, all that is experienced and interpreted by humans does not take place within individual vacuums since we also live within cultures and societies that have considerable influence over interpretations of internal experiences, reflections, consciousness, and spirituality. So, we discover that the singular and plural intersect and overlap in ways that cannot be so cleanly divided; for instance, one may have individual spiritual experiences that, nevertheless, take place within the context of a particular religion, which is part of the culture and society that one belongs to: the context influences the way that we interpret such experiences.

This plural component, in terms of pronouns, is the “We,” lower-left (LL) quadrant, which represents the culture, worldview, and agreed upon terms of relationships – the morals and ethics that form the basis for laws within societies. In Plato’s language, this is the “Good” since it is the source of culture, religion, morals, concepts of justice, and interrelationships. Hence, even though the “Beautiful” is something that one can experience personally or realize individually within one’s soul, the “Good” is always determined in relation to others.

Finally, the Right-Hand quadrants represent the objective, external world, which in the upper-right (UR) quadrant is the “It” of science, with its plural counterpart in the lower-right (LR) quadrant appropriately termed simply as “Its.” Whereas the UR quadrant focuses on the singular specific, the LR quadrant focuses on systems of external interactions. Both quadrants, in Platonic terms, represent the “True,” which in the objective language of science is that which can be observed and verified empirically. When we apply the Right-Hand quadrants to humankind, the UR quadrant focuses on the composition of the human body, its external development, and the norms of individual human behavior through the lens of empiricism and scientific materialism; however, when we view its plural counterpart, “Its,” in the LR quadrant, we discover systems of human interactions with each other and the natural world. The plural counterpart of “Its” represents the external world of humanity through the formation of economic and political structures and systems in technological society. “Its” also represent human interactions with nature and the environment.

[PP5] However, just as the singular and plural counterparts in the Left-Hand quadrants overlap and cannot be so cleanly divided, so it is similar with the singular and plural counterparts in the Right-Hand quadrants, and the same can be said for the division between the Left-Hand quadrants representing the subjective, internal world and the Right-Hand quadrants representing the objective, external world: all quadrants are the four parts of an integral whole, which is indivisible and more than just the sum of its parts. Moreover, as Wilber has pointed out in several publications, the four-quadrant model is merely a map and so shares all the shortcomings of representation; in other words, the conceptual map should not be mistaken for the territory that it represents. Nevertheless, even as we take into consideration its representational shortcomings, it *is* important to have a map, especially when we want to know what direction we are going in; in this respect, the “map” also serves as a guide for the future, and the better the map we have, the more informed we will be when it comes to futures and foresight studies. Such was the principal reason for applying integral theory to FS – into what has become known as “Integral Futures.”

The Identification of Three Futures Schools of Thought

Before exploring the map of the future through the lens of the integral framework, we should first examine ways that the future has been perceived through schools of thought within the field. When the first futures program was developed at the University of Massachusetts in the early 1970s, Dr. Chris Dede (currently a professor at Harvard) and others who initiated the program systematically surveyed a variety of sources on studies of the future and through a brainstorming and discussion session identified three distinct “schools of thought” concerning the future. [PP6] Since the evolution of technology was seen as the main driver of the future, the “schools of thought” focused primarily on the role of technology in fashioning the future in the image of the technological society. Accordingly, the image of the future emerged as severely fractured since

the futures schools of thought were greatly divided on this question; for example, the “positive extrapolists” were quite “positive” about the technological society, that it was mostly a good thing that technology continue to be the main driver of the future – that the image of the future is a world shaped in the image of technology. As a matter of fact, the positive extrapolists were scientific materialists and technological determinists convinced of the inevitability of progress through further developments of science and technology.

On the other hand, the so-called “negative extrapolists” were not so convinced or “positive” about the future of the technological society and world. Increasingly, largely because of the environmental movement of the 60s, a new consciousness emerged that was quite critical of the technological side-effects taking a great toll on the environment, principally in the form of air, water, and land pollution; resources and ozone depletion; species extinction; deforestation/desertification; death of the oceans; and global warming. In 1972, through the sponsorship of the Club of Rome, Dennis and Donella Meadows published *Limits to Growth*, which showcased the computer modeling of dynamic systems to simulate interactions and the exponential growth of five variables: world population, resources depletion, industrialization, pollution, and food production. The conclusion of the study depicted an overreach and collapse scenario of industrial civilization during the 21st century.

Through the years that followed, the overreach-and-collapse conclusion drawn by the *Limits to Growth* research project stirred considerable criticism and controversy within the futures field and beyond. The technological optimists charged that LtG was mere “chicken-little” alarmism and that the computer modeling system and simulations were just that – a crude model and oversimplified simulations that bore little resemblance to the complexities of the “real world.” Besides that, the techno-driven positive extrapolists believed that the negative side-effects of progress and growth were well compensated for by the positive benefits of technology and, moreover, technology itself had demonstrated time and again its capacity to create positive solutions to its negative side-effects and would continue to do so in the future.

However, for the so-called “negative extrapolists,” this reaction and criticism was misplaced – more indicative of “scientism” rather than real science, which accepts the results if the method and data are shown to be valid. Instead, it seemed that the positive extrapolists did not accept the results not because of any fault in the method or data but only because *the results challenged their fundamental assumptions and worldview*, which was their “great faith” in technology and the virtues of the economic system of capitalism. For the negative extrapolists, this reaction represented an example of paradigm blindness and a state of denial. To this day, despite the storm of criticism, through a number of updates, the Club of Rome LtG study has weathered the crisis with its fundamental thesis still intact, and though science and technology has come up with some solutions to the “global problematique,” it does appear that the global crisis has only

grown worse during the past 40 years, while the promised techno-fixes have mostly been a case of “too little too late.”

The dispute between the positive and negative extrapolists over the role of technology in the future was largely a dispute within science; however, one other futures school of thought was more critical of the scientific paradigm in general, at least in its capacity to bring about the necessary transition to a new kind of society and civilization, which cherishes spiritual values over material, consumer-based values. Instead, this futures school of thought focused on the transformation of consciousness as a key prerequisite to the realization of a new paradigm for the 21st century and beyond. Thus, the third futures school of thought, the “transformationalists,” envisioned and proposed creative, “alternative futures,” which admit the subjective realm of spirituality and the evolution of consciousness in its image of the future. Though not necessarily rejecting science and technology in general, it nevertheless rejected the way that the technological society tends to reduce the individual to a mere consumerist cog-in-the-wheel of the economic machine. In other words, while the transformationalist vision of the future does not outright reject the role of science and technology, at the same time, it does not accept it as the dominant metaphor for the civilization of the future. As a child of the New Age Movement, the transformationalist futures school of thought also does not accept traditional religion, at least in the form of authoritative, literalist fundamentalism, just as it does not accept the scientific materialism that seems to displace traditional religion in the modern, rational worldview, but instead seeks to reaffirm spirituality, spiritual values, and transcendental consciousness as part of a new paradigm and worldview, which is to replace technology as the key driver of the future and produce a new civilization primarily based on spiritual values rather than material values.

The Three Futures Schools of Thought within the IF Framework

At this point, one might inquire whether these three futures schools of thought can be identified within the integral futures framework. Indeed, if so, then how can the IF framework help us to better understand the three futures schools of thought in the context of the whole? Let’s take a look at how these schools of thought are positioned within the IF framework. [PP7] First of all, regarding the positive extrapolist school of thought, we can see that the image of the future projected operates entirely within the Right Hand quadrants. In the UR quadrant, it is the image of techno-man, who functions within the scientific-materialist paradigm as an economic animal and consumer of products. At the same time, however, techno-man plays one of the many well-defined roles within technological society and industrial civilization, depending on his/her status, class, nationality, or cultural orientation. Essentially, s/he is a PAC man since the main imperatives in life are to *Possess* property/things, *Amuse* oneself, and *Consume* products.¹

¹ If you’ve ever played the PAC man video game, you will notice that PAC man is hyperactive and has a voracious, insatiable appetite.

Also, the line of projection of the positive extrapolist future is linear. Although technological systems *are* dynamic, they tend to be autonomous, homogenous, and one-dimensional, perpetuating more of the same efficiency and complexity within a well-defined future of machine civilization, whose economic base is PAC man capitalism. In contrast, however, the projection of the image of the future for the negative extrapolists is not linear but based on dynamic systems theory. Nevertheless, because the negative extrapolists also still operate entirely within the scientific-materialist paradigm, they are situated within the LR quadrant.² Moreover, the dynamic systems theory of the negative extrapolists is more advanced than that of the dynamic systems of the technological society because the systems theory of the negative extrapolists contains the *critique* of technological systems and is more comprehensive, taking into account all externalities, which the technological system refuses to consider because of its single-minded, self-perpetuating interest and autonomous nature, conditioned by the economic imperatives and structure of the capitalist system.

As I have indicated, from a purely scientific-materialist perspective, the negative extrapolists' critique exposed the destructive direction of the technological society within industrial civilization and the capitalist system. This critique is more potent than Marx's critique of capitalism (which focused primarily on human-to-human relations within capitalism), for the LtG critique exposes the self-destructive nature of capitalism through a human-to-environment critique, strongly implying that a fundamental structural shift is necessary in order to avoid an otherwise inevitable overshoot and collapse scenario in which the quality of life for future generations is jeopardized on a global scale. Furthermore, the LtG critique implied that superficial technological quick-fixes are not going to be enough to prevent the breakdown of industrial civilization; in other words, the conclusion indicates that the system itself is inherently broken and in need of a complete overhaul that calls for a new way of life.

This brings us to the identification and discussion of the third futures school of thought, the "transformationalists," which represent the "third way," or "alternative futures," within the IF framework. The technological society within industrial civilization, powered by capitalism as the engine for development and growth, is the hallmark of modernity; yet this era, one way or another, is coming to a close, so what will replace it? Can it be restructured in a way that preserves its redeeming features? The transformationalist futures school of thought sided with the negative extrapolists' critique of the positive extrapolists' image of the future; however, the transformationalists went a step further and deeper to begin to visualize a new future based on a new paradigm that emphasizes spiritual rather than material values. For this reason, the transformationalist school of thought about the future opened up the Left-Hand quadrants, which until then had been thoroughly ignored, dismissed, repressed, and eliminated by the scientific-materialist paradigm of modernity. It's not that the transformationalists deny the progress of

² Though, as we will later see, the negative extrapolists point to implications for alternative futures within the LL quadrant.

science and technology – no, rather, it is the stifling reductionism, repression, and domination schemes that they fault, for S&T, in the technological society of industrial civilization, has been systematically reinterpreting and remaking man in the image of its machine; moreover, as the LtG study revealed, this machine has become autonomous and is hell-bent on the destruction of the biosphere – the foundation of all life.

Thus, within the IF framework, we can see the emergence of the transformationalist futures school of thought within the subjective, internal Left-Hand quadrants of the “I” and the “We” (the “Beautiful” and the “Good”), proposing nascent, alternate futures in contrast to the direction of the “official future” of the mainstream positive extrapolists operating entirely within the Right-Hand, “It/Its” quadrants (the “True”). Actually, one might object that the Left and Right hand quadrants should not be in opposition to each other, and perhaps ideally speaking, that’s correct; yet, at the same time, the IF framework is not static but dynamic, exposing the dialectic of change. For example, the positive extrapolists contain the seeds of their own critique (and thus their own transcendence) from within the scientific-materialist paradigm since the negative extrapolist futures school of thought appears as the antithesis of the positive extrapolist school of thought, and the transformationalist school of thought then appears as the synthesis, which represents the new thesis or new paradigm of futures beyond overshoot and collapse.

From Three to Eight Futures Schools of Thought within the IF Framework

In 2007, 15 years after I graduated from the futures program at the University of Houston – Clear Lake, I had the honor to work with Dr. Richard Slaughter on an interesting Internet-based, meta-scanning research project called State of Play in the Futures Field (SOPIFF). While scanning, recording, and analyzing futures sources globally, I was struck how the three futures schools of thought had seemed to have expanded to eight and could, furthermore, be paired, showing distinct lines of development within each quadrant. [PP8] For example, in the UR quadrant, the positive extrapolist image of the future as techno-man, refashioned in the image of its technical civilization, had taken a decidedly transhumanist direction towards Ray Kurzweil’s image of the future as the Singularity. In fact, one could say that the positive extrapolists had arrived at a new stage of development, with their own version of transformation in the future, one in which the image of man is completely transformed into the image of the machine.

At the same time, in the LR quadrant, we can see how the positive extrapolist image of the future has become globalized after the end of the Cold War (globalization with an American face) in the distinct image of the American empire and multi-national corporations. This vision of the future was boldly announced by the Bush Administration through its neoconservative manifesto, The Project for a New American Century, which outlined its strategy for global domination in the 21st century. [PP9] The technological society of industrial civilization linked with multinational corporations and contained a distinctly American flavor of a global empire ruled by a “corporatocracy.” However, is this empire sustainable? Even as soon as it is recognized, its

unsustainable and contradictory character, especially in its opposition to democratic values, has also become evident.

Thus, within the LR quadrant, the LtG negative extrapolist critique created the impetus for transcendence through the principle of global sustainable development (GSD) as the only means by which globalization can be tempered and global empire transformed. The principle of GSD has become very critical to futures studies – to such an extent that futurists can now say with confidence that *either the future will be sustainable or else there will be no future*. The image of global empire must be transformed into the image of global sustainable development; otherwise, the overshoot and collapse scenario threatens the future with devastating consequences for future generations during the 21st century and perhaps centuries to come. This transition is the greatest challenge of the future during this century.

Moreover, the IF framework also reveals that the Great Transition cannot come about solely through the Right-Hand quadrants, for the recognition of the validity of the Left-Hand quadrants is also critical for the transition to be successful and complete. The new paradigm must be one in which *all* quadrants are validated and balanced; otherwise, the future will develop into what Wilber calls “flatland” – [PP10] a one-dimensional existence within an unsustainable, autonomous, technological society on the runaway course of industrial civilization. Hence, the impetus for transformation within the LR quadrant from Global Empire to GSD comes from within, from the LL quadrant of the collective “We” and the “Good Society” – through the transformation of values, ethics, and worldviews towards a new, sustainable, global culture based on Earth Community.

Already this line of development can be seen in the LL quadrant of the IF framework. [PP11] Initially, this change began as an act of civil disobedience by pockets of localized, independent, organic farming communities that refuse to depend on, cooperate, or have anything to do with the direction of industrial civilization. The finest example of these can be seen in the advent of “permaculture,” which is the movement to create a “permanent agriculture” that does not depend on unsustainable, large-scale, agricultural technology and the oil that greases it since it recognizes that due to “Peak Oil,” the world-wide supply of oil will be exhausted by mid century. Because Permaculture also implies a new cultural awakening, I have placed it in the LL quadrant as the antithesis to the globalized culture of Global Empire.

However, these isolated pockets of resistance will not be enough to bring about the transformation of Global Empire to Global Sustainable Development and are, in fact, in danger of being subsumed by the domination schemes of Global Empire unless they link up with each other globally in the Great Transition Movement to form the nucleus of Earth Community, for only Earth Community has the power from within, as the global “Good Society” based on authentic democracy, to transform Global Empire into GSD. As a matter of fact, present-day

various democracy movements worldwide represent the yearnings of the multitude to awaken to Earth Community. Largely through the advent of the Internet, global consciousness has awakened as a thoroughly democratic consciousness, which yearns for a new paradigm that can transform Global Empire into GSD, in the form of a new, “natural capitalism,” directed through wise foresight, in a principled way that goes beyond sustainability towards a vision of environmental economics and Earth restoration to guarantee the protection and preservation of future generations and all life upon the Earth.

Finally, we turn to the UL quadrant, which is the inner “I,” the home of the “Beautiful Individual,” of transcendent consciousness, creativity, and spiritual growth. It might be surprising that I have placed the rebellious and anarchistic “Anti-civilizationalists” within this quadrant. However, one must bear in mind that the Anti-civilizationalists are the original Romantics, artists, spiritual leaders, and philosophers who criticized Western, industrial civilization for its materialism and rational denial of spirituality. Though over-emotional, idealist, and irrational at times, they fought for the integrity of the individual in the face of increasing materialism and mechanization of technical civilization. The problem, however, as Wilber has pointed out, is that some of these artists and philosophers were also affected by the logic of the industrial grid to become spirit-denying nihilists. Still, credit must be given to the Romantics and anarchists who dared to defy the image of techno-man and instead chose to “swim upstream” in the fight to preserve the integrity of the individual, and many of them did go on to realize new pathways to transcendent consciousness and spiritual growth. That’s why I draw the line of development in this quadrant as a matter of spiritual evolution and transformation from “Anti-civilizationalist” to “Spiritual Transformationalist.” Because many of these spiritual pioneers and revolutionaries did not have cultural support, they had to swim against the current and face the dark night of the soul in order to realize new pathways to consciousness transformation and spiritual growth. Indeed, some of them, like Buddha, Socrates, Jesus, Mohammed, St. Francis, Ghandi, and Paramahansa Yogananda, were later recognized as great spiritual teachers and leaders of humankind, acting as luminaries of the future, demonstrating the way of the evolution of consciousness, Being, and spirituality. These are the great wise men and women, then and now, whose teachings bequeath to us a spiritual legacy, which forms the basis for the agreed-upon values, morality, ethics, and worldview of the culture of the “Good Society” within Earth Community.

From Modern to Postmodern Consciousness of the Future

One other important factor to consider through the IF framework is the evolution of future consciousness. As Dr. Thomas Lombardo has shown quite effectively in his research, future consciousness is an integral part of consciousness itself, and so the foresight capacity was evident even in the early stages of human evolution. However, according to integral theory, consciousness has evolved in distinct stages throughout eras of human history, so at the same time, future consciousness evolves alongside and reflects the particular stage of consciousness of

each era of human thought. [PP12] Particularly during the modern era, when the evolution of consciousness became associated with the idea of progress, future consciousness became an integral part of civilization, and the image of the future has played a significant role in the evolution of western culture. Thus can we affirm that the systematic study of the future is, for all purposes, a child of the modern era. That's why in the IF framework, the futures schools of thought in the Right-hand quadrants are reflections of the modern consciousness about the future.

However, every stage of consciousness contains the seeds for its own transcendence, often in the form of critique; hence, the modern consciousness provided the basis for its own critique and transcendence in the form of postmodernism – the emergence of a new stage of consciousness out of modernism, which transcended the scientific-materialist paradigm and provided the basis for alternative, transformationalist futures schools of thought to emerge. As a matter of fact, one could even say that the shift to futures, in the plural, rather than “the future,” is indicative of the emergence of the postmodern consciousness, which places great value in universal pluralism.

At the same time, however, while pluralism is one of the great contributions of postmodernism, it can also be a weakness if pushed into extreme relativism; moreover, as I pointed out concerning the Anti-civilizationalists, the deconstructive skepticism of the postmodern consciousness can become nihilist, absurd, and thus irrelevant. Furthermore, just as the modern consciousness contains the seeds for its own transcendence, so it is with postmodern consciousness as well. Postmodernism and poststructuralism must go beyond deconstructive critique, with its backwards-looking reaction to modernism, if it is to provide a new, forward-looking paradigm to represent the consciousness of the next era in the 21st century; in other words, it must go beyond epistemological pluralism if it is to continue to be relevant in the field of futures studies.

Conclusion

The four-quadrant model of the IF framework is a theoretical, comprehensive, aperspectival map of the future, which demonstrates how all perspectives on the future, as futures schools of thought, interact and evolve through time. However, as I pointed out, it is just a map, and so shares all the representational shortcomings that all maps have – no map is perfect; nevertheless, regardless of the shortcomings, I think everyone will agree that maps can be quite useful, especially when you want to know what direction you are going in, and the more accurate and comprehensive the futures map is, the better off we are when it comes to creating the best future possible for all parties concerned. After all, the whole point of futures studies is to understand where we are, how we got here, what direction we're now facing, where we want to go, and how to get there through the best possible way – and to do that, a theoretical blueprint or map of the future, though not perfect, could still be quite handy, wouldn't you agree?

Some futurists have questioned whether futures studies is a field or whether it even needs a theoretical framework, instead positing a poststructuralist epistemological pluralism as the best

approach to futures inquiry and practice. If FS is to continue to be relevant in the future, it desperately needs a theoretical framework; nevertheless, contrary to what some futurists have contended, I do not believe that epistemological pluralism is the best approach to futures or foresight studies since it can become too relativistic, deconstructionist, and nihilist; more importantly, as a reaction to modernism, it does not offer an integrated vision as a way forward and can only lead to further fragmentation within the futures field. Instead, an integrally-informed map, such as that of the Integral Futures framework, goes beyond postmodern epistemological pluralism to offer a more comprehensive, in-depth, theoretical window into the multi-faceted nature of the image of the future in the 21st century, for not only are all futures perspectives represented, but we can see how they all evolve and interact in time to reveal more about the challenge of the future today and how to overcome this challenge in order to realize a new paradigm for the future – beyond overshoot and collapse – towards global sustainable development within an integrally-informed, democratic, Earth Community.

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