

Welcome to this week's presentation & conversation hosted by the **Canadian Association for the Club of Rome**, a Club dedicated to intelligent debate & action on global issues.



The views and opinions expressed in this presentation are those of the speaker & do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of CACOR.

## Permacrisis, Polycrisis, Metacrisis: An Attempt to Clarify the Human Problematique Just What Are We Should We Expect?

**Description:** Confused & inadequate conceptualizations lead to wrong-headed understandings. Confused & wrongheaded understandings lead to well-intended prescriptions which often make things worse. Since our situation is worse today than when CACOR was formed, it is not unreasonable to explore whether we in Modern Techno-Industrial (MTI) cultures have been operating on the basis of confused & inadequate conceptualizations of the mess of living—"the human problematique." It is time to get clear about the root sources & nature of our troubles. The intent is to do so in this presentation.

**Biography:** A Canadian pioneer of serious futures thinking, Ruben Nelson has spent his life exploring & seeking to understand the forces that are now re-shaping our lives, world, & future. His unique mental models & strategic insights transform & make sense of the confusion, anger, & turmoil of our perilous times. He has come to understand the personal-to-civilizational transformation we are in. Today, he is Canada's leading researcher, practitioner, & teacher of strategic foresight 2.0, the next generation of strategic foresight and the new cognitive work of whole systems governance and leadership.

The presentation will be followed by a conversation, questions, & observations from the participants.

CACOR acknowledges that we all benefit from sharing the traditional territories of local Indigenous peoples (First Nations, Métis, & Inuit in Canada) and their descendants.



Website: [canadiancor.com](http://canadiancor.com)

Twitter: [@cacor1968](https://twitter.com/cacor1968)

YouTube: [Canadian Association for the Club of Rome](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...)

2024 Jul 31 Zoom #208





# Permacrisis, Polycrisis, Meta-Crisis: What are We up Against?

Reimagining the Human Problematique

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July 31, 2024  
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# A Brief “Sit Rep”

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We are in a mess of living complex messes which are killing life.

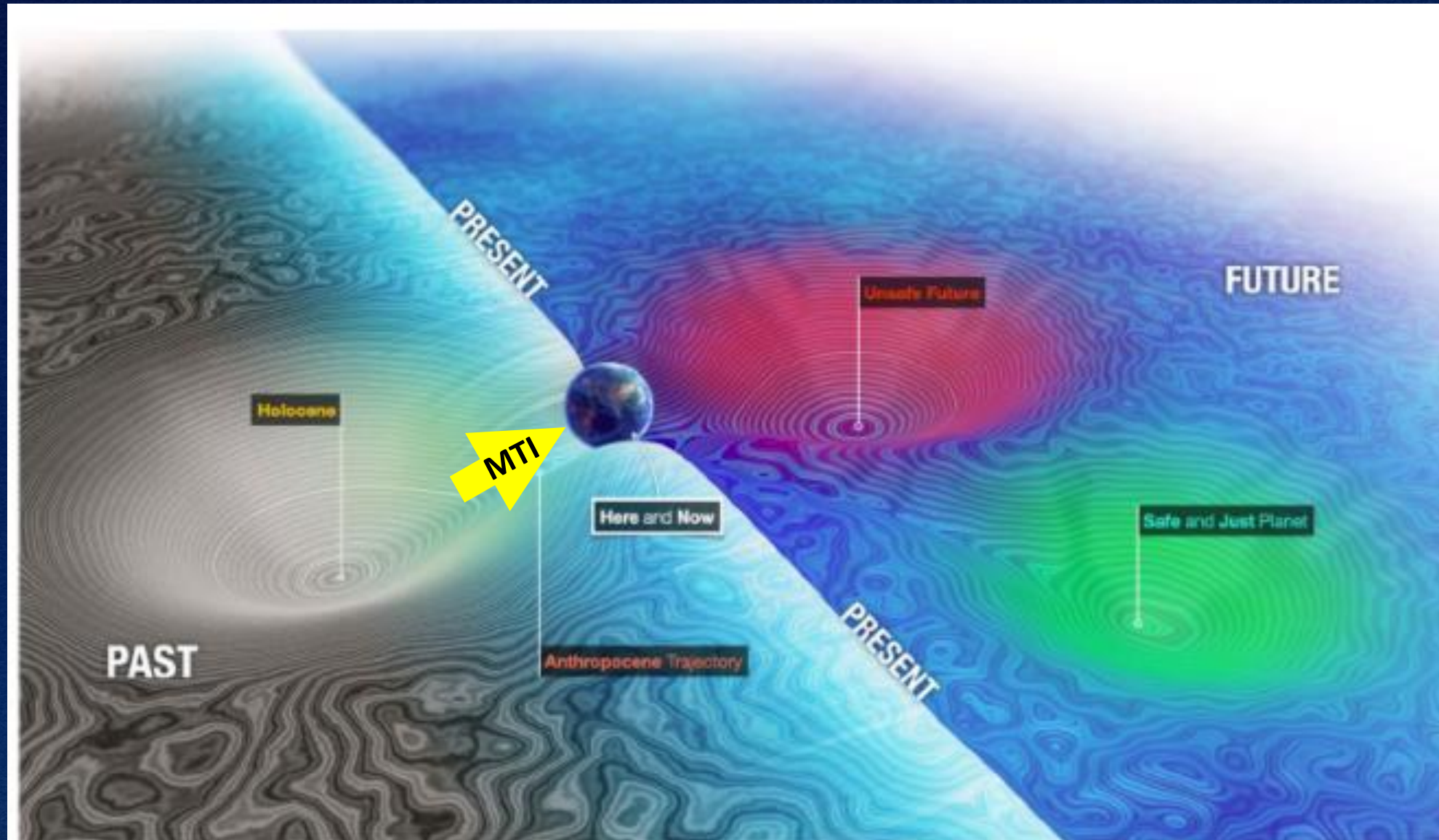
# Insight

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“ ‘Human freedom in history’  
never means the freedom to avoid  
the fundamental trends of an epoch.”

Langdon Gilkey

# We are in MORE and DEEPER Trouble than we know



A mess of complex living messes.



# We Face Complex Living Messes NOT Problems

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Managers are not confronted with **PROBLEMS** that are independent of each other, but with dynamic situations that consist of **complex systems** of changing problems that interact with each other.

I call such situations **MESSES**.

Managers do not **SOLVE PROBLEMS**, they **MANAGE MESSES**.

Russel L. Ackoff  
Warton School  
University of Pennsylvania  
1960s



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Senior leaders must **govern** the management of **messes**.

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Managers are not confronted with **PROBLEMS** that are independent of each other, but with dynamic situations that consist of **complex systems** of changing problems that interact with each other.

I call such situations **MESSES**.

Managers do not **SOVEREIGNLY SOLVE PROBLEMS**, they **MANAGE MESSES**.

Ashby's Law of  
Requisite Variety

Russel L. Ackoff  
Wharton School  
University of Pennsylvania  
1960s

Senior leaders must **govern** the management of **messes**.

# We are Unprepared and Ill-equipped

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The situation of humanity in the face of global transformations can be summarised in two sentences:

**Societies are unprepared; Governance is unequipped....**

In the main contemporary governance is obsolete and unable to deal fittingly with rapidly mutating problems and opportunities.

Yehezkel Dror  
*'The Capacity to Govern'*  
2001

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In the main contemporary governance is obsolete and unable to deal fittingly with rapidly mutating problems and opportunities.

**Libertarian Populism reduces democracy to:  
give the people what they want.**

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2001

# A Clue to Our ~~Future~~ Present

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...humanity is no longer moving towards a future anymore that will allow our communities locally, nationally, and globally to flourish together. If we're moving anywhere at all, we seem to be sliding down a slippery slope towards a treacherous place, with unreason, self-righteous anger, and racism greasing our shared descent.

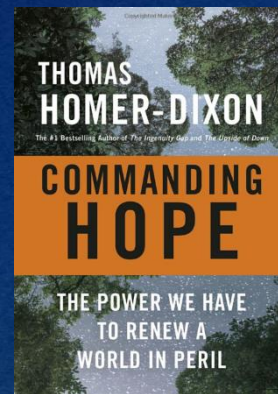
What does all of this this portend?...

As the century unfolds, fear is likely to become humanity's overriding emotion.

Thomas Homer-Dixon

Commanding Hope: The Power We have to Renew a World in Peril.

2020



Foreboding about the future was a prevailing theme at this year's Davos, sometimes even with dash of dystopian prophecy. This brooding was accompanied often, in speeches and interviews, by a rueful acknowledgment that government leaders are desperately improvising — often with bleak results — to meet the political crises of the moment, much less the long-term technological and climatological challenges of the age.



These alleged masters of the universe came off nearly as perplexed and anxious about the future as the populist forces inveighing against them.

# Davos elites fear they're on a toboggan ride to hell

The global winners here in Switzerland aren't so sure they're up to the task of running the world anymore

By JOHN F. HARRIS | 1/25/19, 5:54 AM CET | Updated 1/26/19, 10:38 AM CET

# What WE DO, Matters

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Our world confronts rapid and potentially profound transitions...  
It is increasingly clear that today's decisions could play a decisive role in determining whether the 21<sup>st</sup> Century offers peace and prosperity or crisis and collapse.

The Challenge of Long-Term Policy Analysis

Rand Corporation

2003

# Learn to Play by The Rules of the Earth's "Game"

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1. The Earth sets the conditions, offers clues and is the referee.
2. All persons/communities are embedded in cultures which exemplify a form of civilization which construes reality, we:
  - **Must not destroy the Earth's living ecology by either consumption or pollution to the point it cannot support us and other forms of life.**
  - **Must not consume NNR to the point where diminishing returns entail the collapse (simplification) of the biosphere, our economy or our cultures.**
  - **Must be humane enough keep us in the game.**
  - **Must honour these conditions & be humane enough keep the game going.**



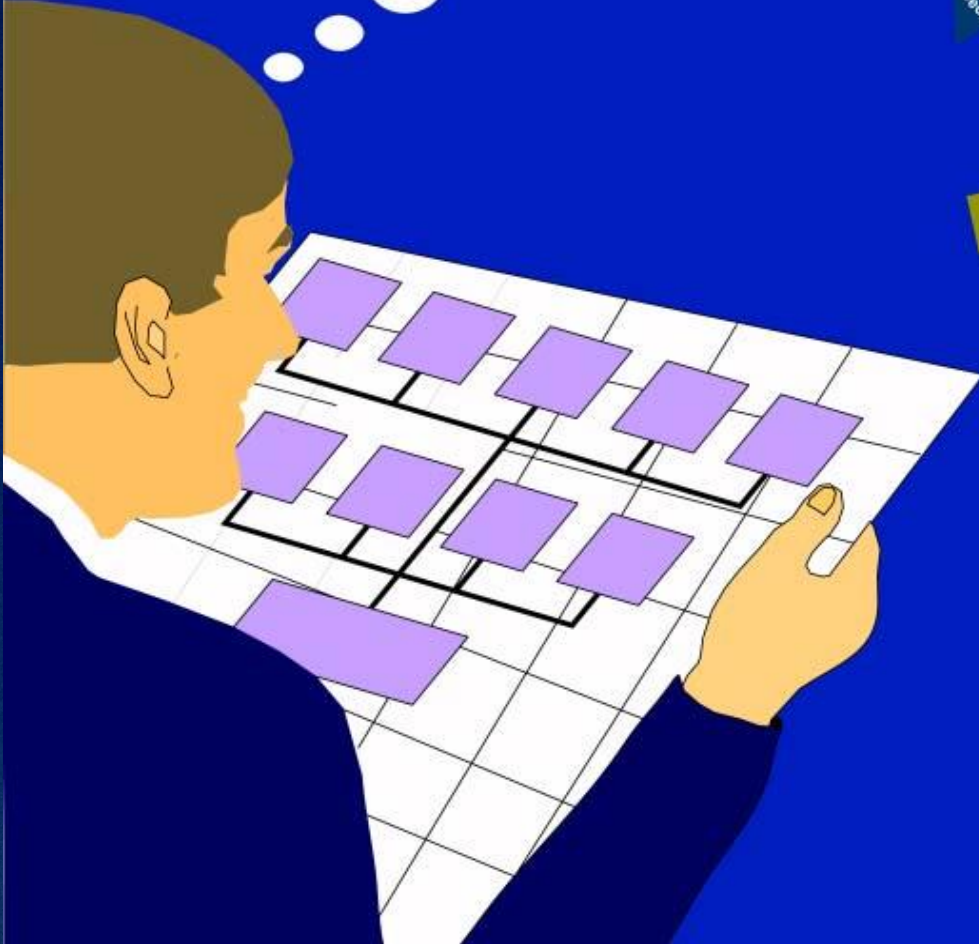
# In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century MTI Fails This Test

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1. The Earth sets the conditions, offers clues and is the referee.
2. As persons/communities embedded in cultures which exemplify a form of civilization which construes reality, we
  - Must not destroy the Earth's living ecology by either consumption or pollution to the point it cannot support us and other forms of life.
  - Must not consume NNP to the point where diminishing returns entail the collapse (simplification) of the biosphere or our cultures.
  - Must be humane enough keep us in the game.
  - Must honour these conditions & be humane enough keep the game going.

**MTI CANNOT  
Meet these conditions**

**MTI**  
**This map is not working!**

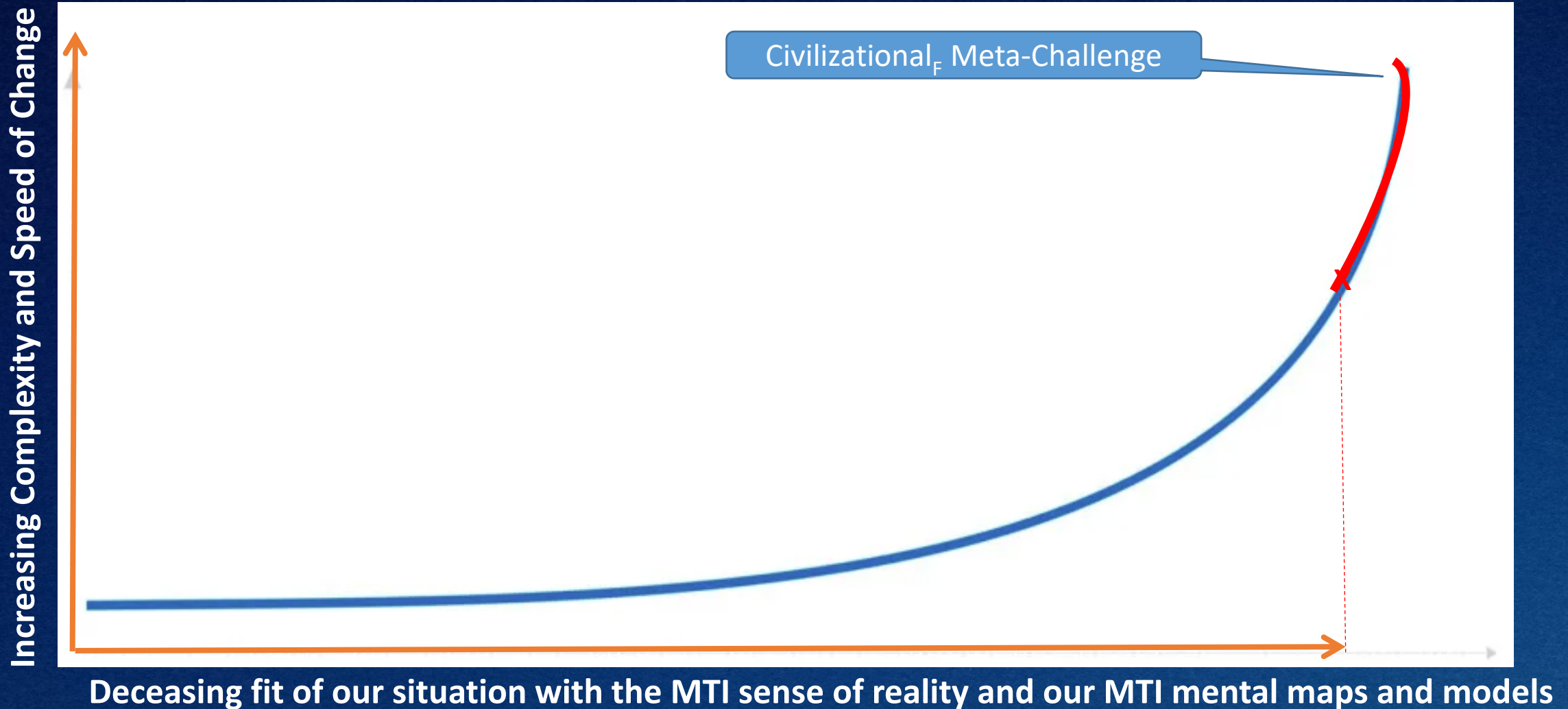


# What are We Up Against?

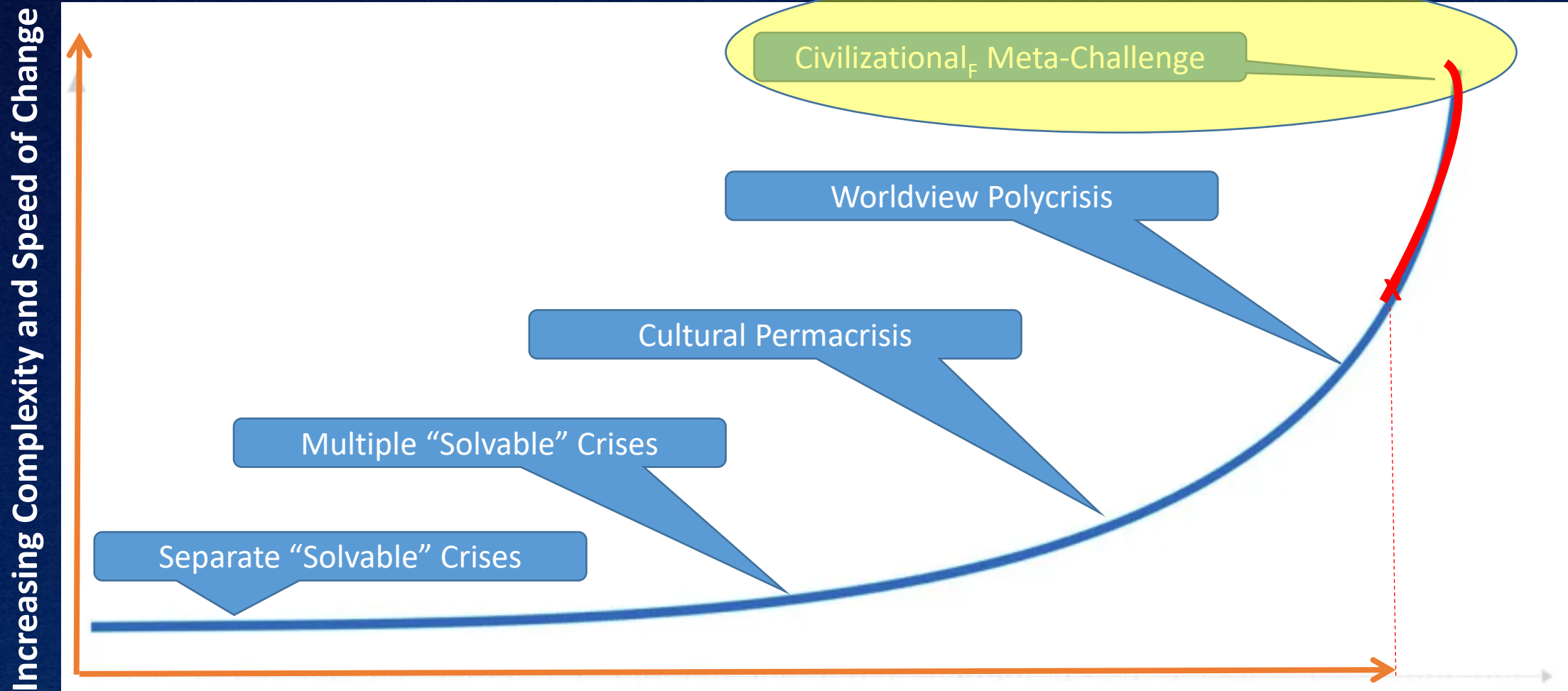
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Overview.

# What We are Up Against

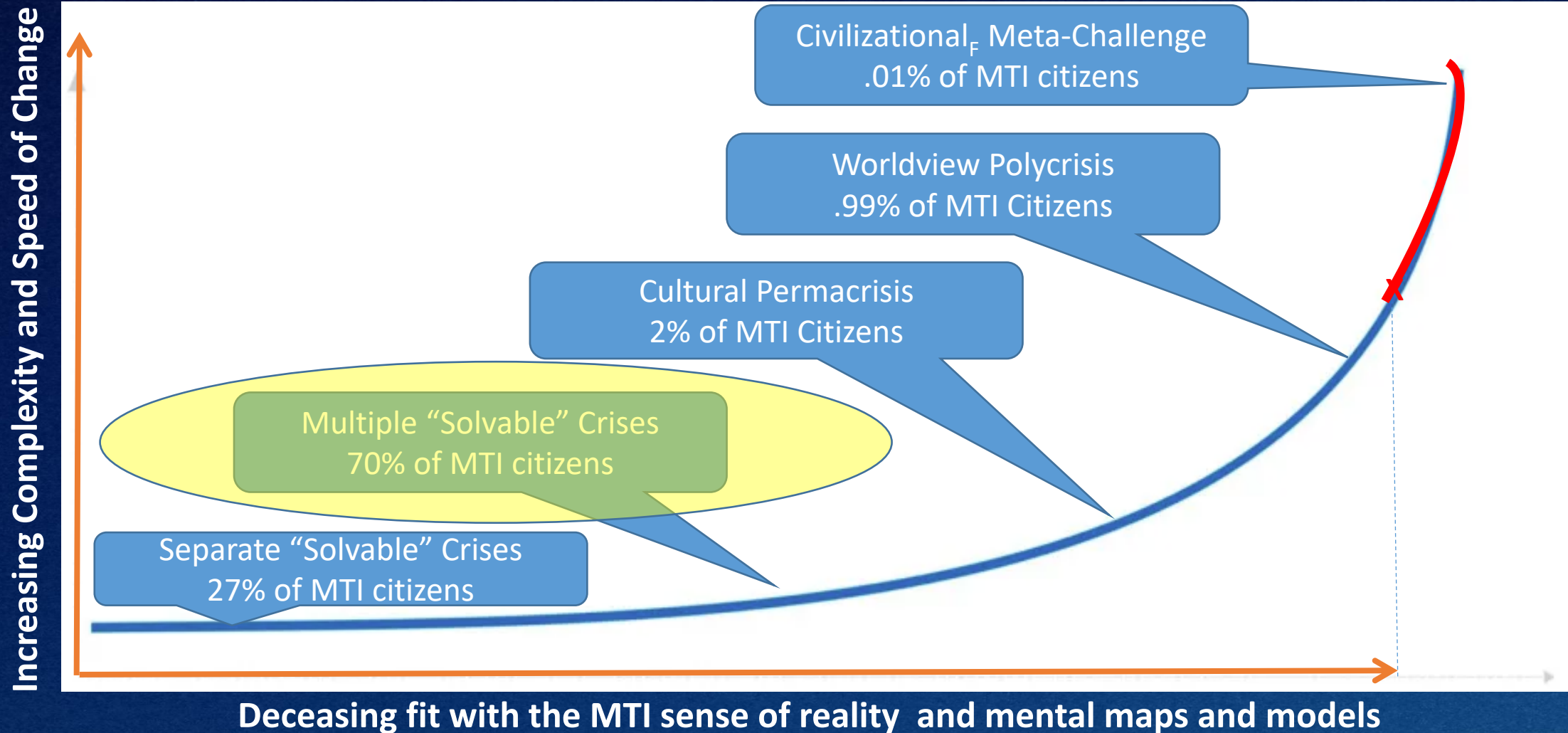


# What We are Up Against



Decreasing fit of our situation with the MTI sense of reality and our MTI mental maps and models

# What We Understand and Can Countenance



# What are We Up Against?

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Caution: Key concepts still under construction.

# 1<sup>st</sup> Our Formation as MTI Cultures in an MTI World

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*As a species we who are Homo sapiens have faced many profound challenges and a handful of existential threats over our 350,000 year-long journey. Before we became modern, we were at great risk because we could not tease out the real objective truth about Earth, other species, and ourselves from our inherited cultural traditions, myths, superstitions, and prejudices, from our theological suppositions and from village gossip. Nor could we protect those we loved from the ravages of weather and disease. However, now that we have the science of the Enlightenment we can wrestle truth to the ground and own it. With the technologies which that science enables, we can also own the Earth. Our success over the past 500 years makes this clear. Happily, today, we who are MTI peoples and cultures know what needs to be done and have (or will soon have) the capacities, human and technological, to do it. Therefore, our core work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to find the leadership, political will, science-based technologies, and money which will enable us to extend our MTI ways of being and living to and even beyond the ends of the Earth, and as we do create a future which is more just, equitable, and inclusive.*

Ruben Nelson, "Where are We in History: Reflections on the New Core Work of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." 2024 (in print)



# 2<sup>nd</sup> Cultural Lag: The Stories We Tell Ourselves Lags Reality

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*One damn thing\* after another.*

*Now there are more of them.*

*Run faster to keep up.*

*We can do it.*

*WE are getting tired and worried.*

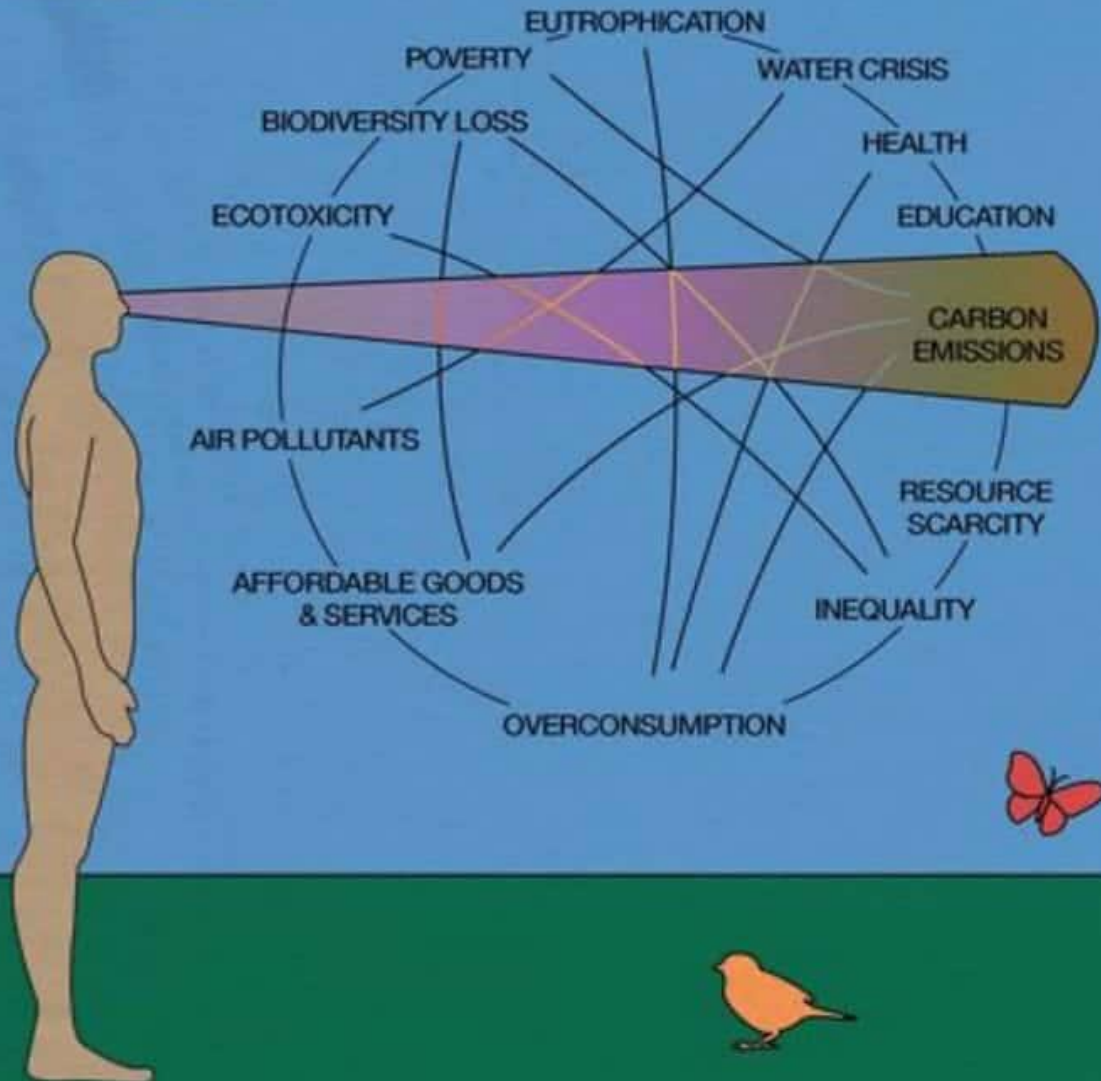
- 'thing' = problem.
- Happily problems come as discrete items and all have solutions.
- Thankfully, we who are MTI people in MTI cultures are the world's best problem solvers ever.
- We can safely optimize for profit and productivity.

# GLOBAL SOLUTIONS SUMMIT 2024

MAY  
6-7

MOVING BEYOND THE CRISIS:  
MOBILIZING CHANGE  
FOR GLOBAL PROSPERITY

SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITION



**Climate change is a narrow view that looks only at one part of the whole**

**“One thing at a time.”**

**Counterfactual Context**  
Our cultural tendency is to focus on one detail at a time by deliberately removing messy contextual links so that we may scrutinize the internal logic of each piece in isolation (see Iain McGilchrist’s *The Master and His Emissary* for insights into this phenomenon). I’m sure any of the previous sections could be made to seem less scary/dire in such a piecemeal way by intentionally ignoring the full context. But guess what: the actual real biophysical world we live in does not operate as tidy, isolated, non-interacting domains—rendering invalid many of our analysis efforts, however elegant.

Tom Murphy  
Metastatic Modernity  
2024

# GLOBAL SOLUTIONS SUMMIT 2024

MAY  
6-7

Our leaders in all sectors keep  
promising that they will solve  
our specific problems.

MOVING BEYOND THE CRISIS:  
MOBILIZING CHANGE  
FOR GLOBAL PROSPERITY

# 3<sup>rd</sup> A 'Permacrisis' Collins Dictionary word of the year 2022

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“An extended period of instability and insecurity, especially one resulting from a series of catastrophic events.”

Collins English Dictionary

“Permacrisis” is a term that perfectly embodies the dizzying sense of lurching from one unprecedented event to another, as we wonder bleakly what new horrors might be around the corner.

David Shariatmadari

[Collins Language Lovers Blog](#)

Nov. 1, 2022

# A “No Final Solutions” World

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...“permacrisis” implies that we now see our crises as situations that can only be managed, not resolved. Indeed, “permacrisis” suggests that every decision to accelerate a difficult situation in order to come out on the other side of it risks something far worse.

Permacrisis signals not only a loss of faith in progress, but also a new realism in relation to what people can cope with and achieve. Our crises have become so complex and deep-seated that they can transcend our capacity to understand them. Any decision to tackle them risks only making things worse. We are thus faced with a troubling conclusion. Our crises are no longer a problem. They are a stubborn fact.

Neil Turnbull

Permacrisis: What it means and why it’s word of the year for 2022

The Conversation UK

November 11, 2022

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# 4<sup>th</sup> A Polycrisis

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The debate around polycrisis is largely a question of whether we really understand the mess we're in.

Is our predicament so unprecedented that we need a new perspective on crisis? Won't established concepts suffice? Is more research really necessary for us to act effectively?

Yes, no, and yes.



# Polycrisis

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In his 2008 book, *On Complexity*, French philosopher Edgar Morin argues that humanity now resides within a network of interlocking systems and any crisis in one of those systems will engender a crisis in all the others.

Morin uses the word “**polycrisis**” to describe this situation. It is an idea that is also used in historian Adam Tooze’s work on crisis and disaster. As Tooze recently put it, when considering the sheer accumulation of problems the world currently faces – from conflict and the climate crisis to the pandemic and rising inflation – “the whole is even more dangerous than the sum of the parts”. Interconnected microsystems, because of ever-shortening positive feedback loops, can very quickly trigger crisis, even catastrophe, in the wider macrosystem.

Neil Turnbull

Permacrisis: What it means and why it’s word of the year for 2022

The Conversation UK

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# Contagion, Cascading Failures across Multiple Systems

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Experts know a lot about individual systemic risks (such as pandemics) and the vulnerabilities of particular global systems (such as finance or food), but our understanding of interactions between systems and their crises remains weak and underdeveloped. Epidemiologists warned that a major pandemic was coming, for example, but who could predict that the government's response would interact with political polarization, misinformation, and radicalization to produce a "Freedom Convoy" that brought swastika flags to Ottawa? And we have yet to witness the full macroeconomic fallout of fiscal stimulus as high inflation interacts with energy shocks and supply chain disruptions.

Polycrisis: Why We Must Turn This Meme Into A Big Idea

Michael Lawrence

Cascade Institute

December 12, 2022

# Proposed Definition

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The Cascade Institute proposes that a global polycrisis occurs when crises in multiple global systems become causally entangled in ways that significantly degrade humanity's prospects. These interacting crises produce harms greater than the sum of those the crises would produce in isolation, were their host systems not so deeply interconnected.

Polycrisis: Why We Must Turn This Meme Into A Big Idea

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# 5<sup>th</sup> A Meta-Crisis:

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‘Meta’ A Greek word with great subtlety. The meaning of which is determined by the context in which it is used. To ask what it “really means” apart from a specific context shows you do not understand how language works.

It can be used to refer to that which is:

- **Beside** something else physically.
- **Above** something else, literally or at a high level of generality.
- **Beyond** something else, literally or at a high level of generality.
- **After** something else, literally or at a high level of generality.

# 5<sup>th</sup> A Meta-Crisis: Definitions Offered to Date

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- “A crisis of crises.”

Kyle Kowalski

- “The multiple overlapping and interconnected global crises that our nascent planetary culture faces.”

Daniel Thorson

- “A single phenomenon. We may be thinking of it as an ecological crisis. We may be thinking of it as a psychological or spiritual crisis. We may be thinking of it as a cultural crisis and a breakdown of community, family, etc. We may be thinking of it as a crisis of government and economics and finance. And, it is all of these things. But, it’s not reducible to any one of them. That’s why it’s a *meta-crisis*.”

Terry Patten

- “The *metacrisis* is the underlying crisis driving a multitude of crises.”

Jonathan Rowson

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- “The *metacrisis* is the convergence of a multitude of crises.”

Jonathan Rowson

# Clues

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- Hard to grasp with our MTI minds.
- Includes everything.
- Overarching or undergirding.
- Not just one more of what we already have.
- Not just additive.
- *Sui generis*.
- Need a new conception; a fresh imagination.

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**We do NOT face a Meta-crisis**



# Clues

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We do NOT face a Meta-crisis.

We face a Meta-challenge:  
Personal to civilizational<sub>F</sub>

# Where We (MTI cultures) Think We are in History

Here

MTI

- Economic Growth is necessary and possible.
- We can extend and improve our MTI cultures.
- Innovation will be within the MTI frame.
- Speed beats depth – making and learning.
- MTI can “solve”/”fix” all problems.

1000 CE

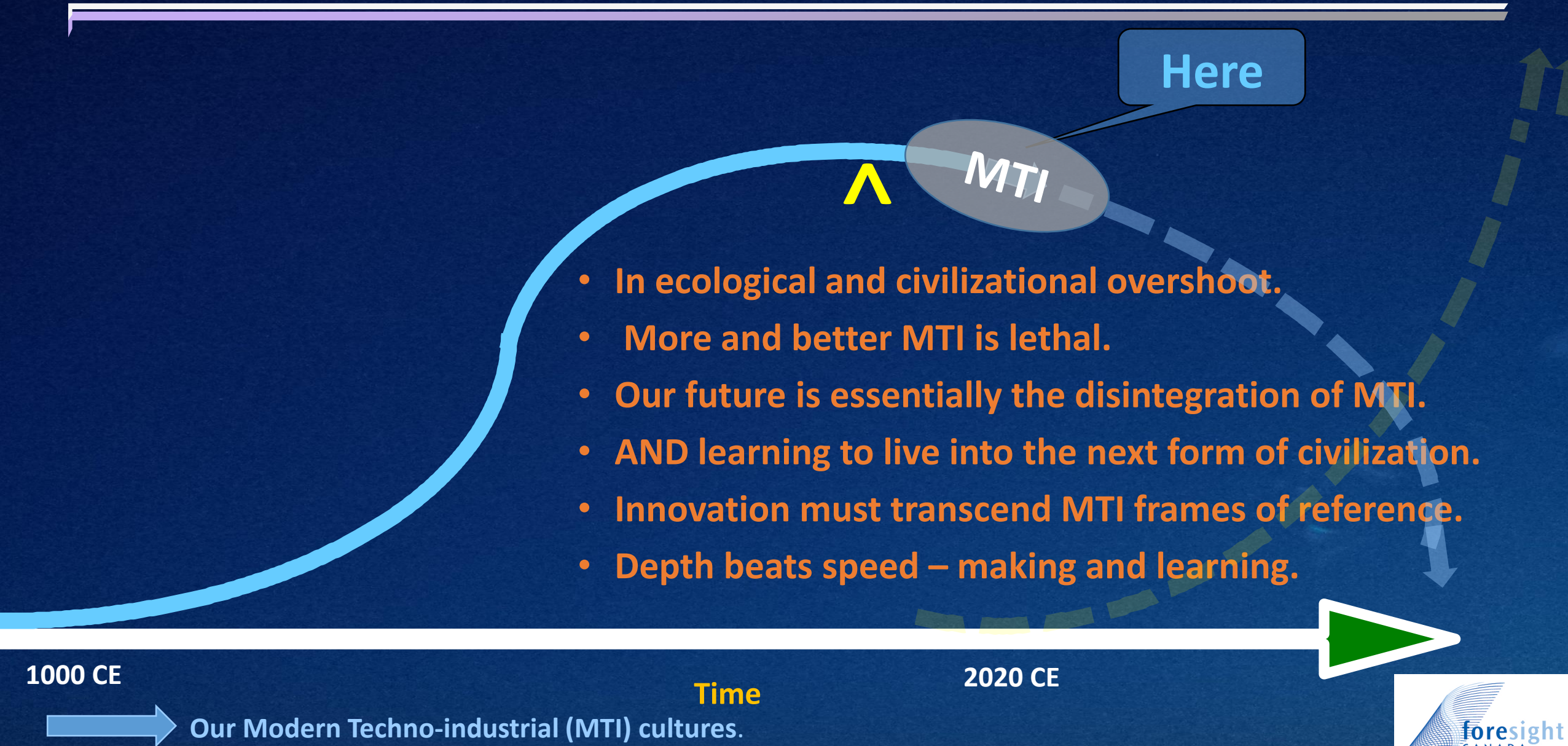
2020 CE

3000 CE

Time

Our Modern Techno-industrial (MTI) cultures.

# Where We (MTI cultures) Really are...



# The P2C Meta-Challenge

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To become reflexively and even meta-reflexively conscious enough to come to learn and understand:

- The construable nature of reality.
- The dimensions, drivers, dynamics, depths and drifts entailed in the emergence of the three forms of civilization that have emerged to date.
- Why and how the MTI form of civilization is fatally flawed.
- What is entailed in learning to outgrow, mature beyond, our formation as MTI persons and institutions in MTI cultures.

As we seek to mitigate the worst of the collapse of our MTI cultures and nurture the next form of civilization into robust being.

# A Word of Caution

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The MTI “take” on reality is sufficiently faulty that it **cannot** nurture a reliable sense of the Earth and life on Earth, including that of humans and other persons.

The key is that MTI **cannot require** that reflexivity is a routine practice of persons and cultures.

# Core Insight: MTI is Unreflexively Reality Blind

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“Nothing good ever came out of a blind spot.”

Louise Penny  
*Kingdom of the Blind*  
2018

# Core Insight: MTI is Unreflexively Reality Blind

MTI requires us to be:

- Logical
- Empirical
- Rational
- Critical
- Reflexive



“Nothing good ever came out of a blind spot.”

Louise Penny  
*Kingdom of the Blind*  
2018

# A Further Word of Caution

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As yet, no culture has developed the capacity to work competently, consistently and meta-reflexively at the foundational levels of its culture and form of civilization.

Therefore, none as yet is able to illuminate, in-form and re-frame the policy and operational issues with which it wrestles in light of a sound understanding of its profoundly changing lives and circumstances.



# Our P2C Meta-Challenge

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To become a leading, living, learning laboratory for the development of a whole culture that is truly aligned with the deep character of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – one that is committed to learning how to cooperate with our own evolution beyond our MTI identities as persons, families, communities, companies and jurisdictions as we learn to embody a new form of civilization.

# Refresher

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Key Insights of Ruben's Take on Reality

# The Reality of Our Situation

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1. We live in a reality that in its totality is construable.
2. The spectrum runs from the *“bloody obvious”* to the *“blindingly obvious.”*
3. *We humans live in worlds which we have construed with others.*  
*I call such worlds “Forms of civilization”\* (also written “civilization<sub>c</sub>”)*  
*All human cultures exemplify one or more form of civilization.*

\* *“Forms of civilization” is a new concept. I coined it in 2010.*

# A New Level of Generality for Civilization<sub>F</sub>

Higher  
Still

Family

*Human Civilization*  
*All humankind at a given time.*

Higher

Genera

*Forms of Civilization*  
*Provides a “root paradigm” of reality  
and persons in reality.*

New  
Concept  
&  
New  
Level

Lower

Species

*Cultures as exemplars*  
*A way to live within & embody the “root  
paradigm” of a form of civilization.*

Integral  
sense of  
'culture'

Lower  
Still

Sub-  
Species

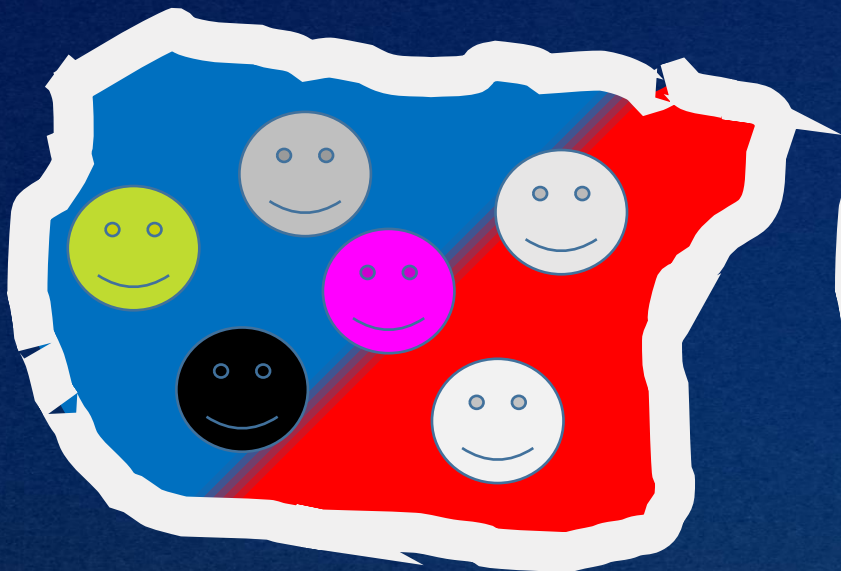
Sub-cultures

# 'Form of Civilization'<sub>F</sub>

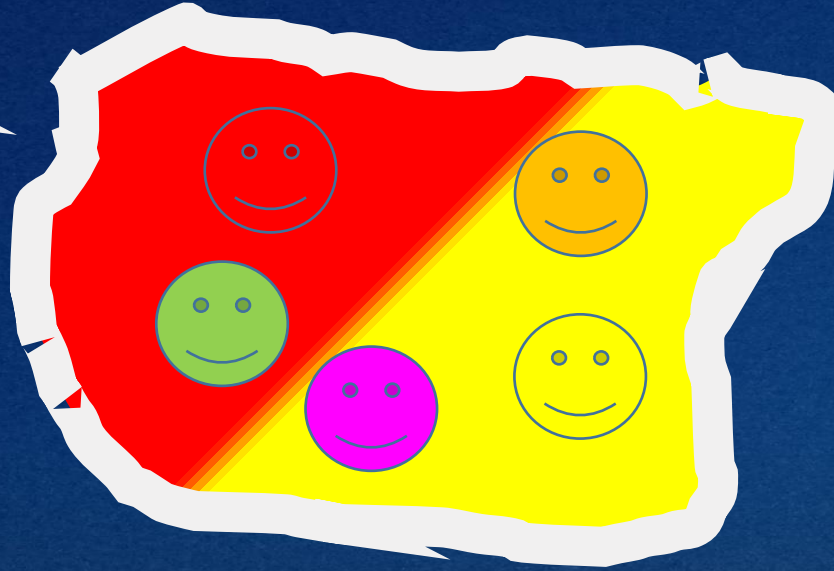
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A civilization<sub>F</sub> is a shared human way of knowing/  
experiencing/being in and responding to reality and being human,  
the core paradigm of which is fundamentally different from the  
core paradigm of a different form of civilization<sub>F</sub>.

Indigenous



Settled Agricultural



Modern Techno-Industrial



# Core Paradigm of a Civilization<sub>F</sub>

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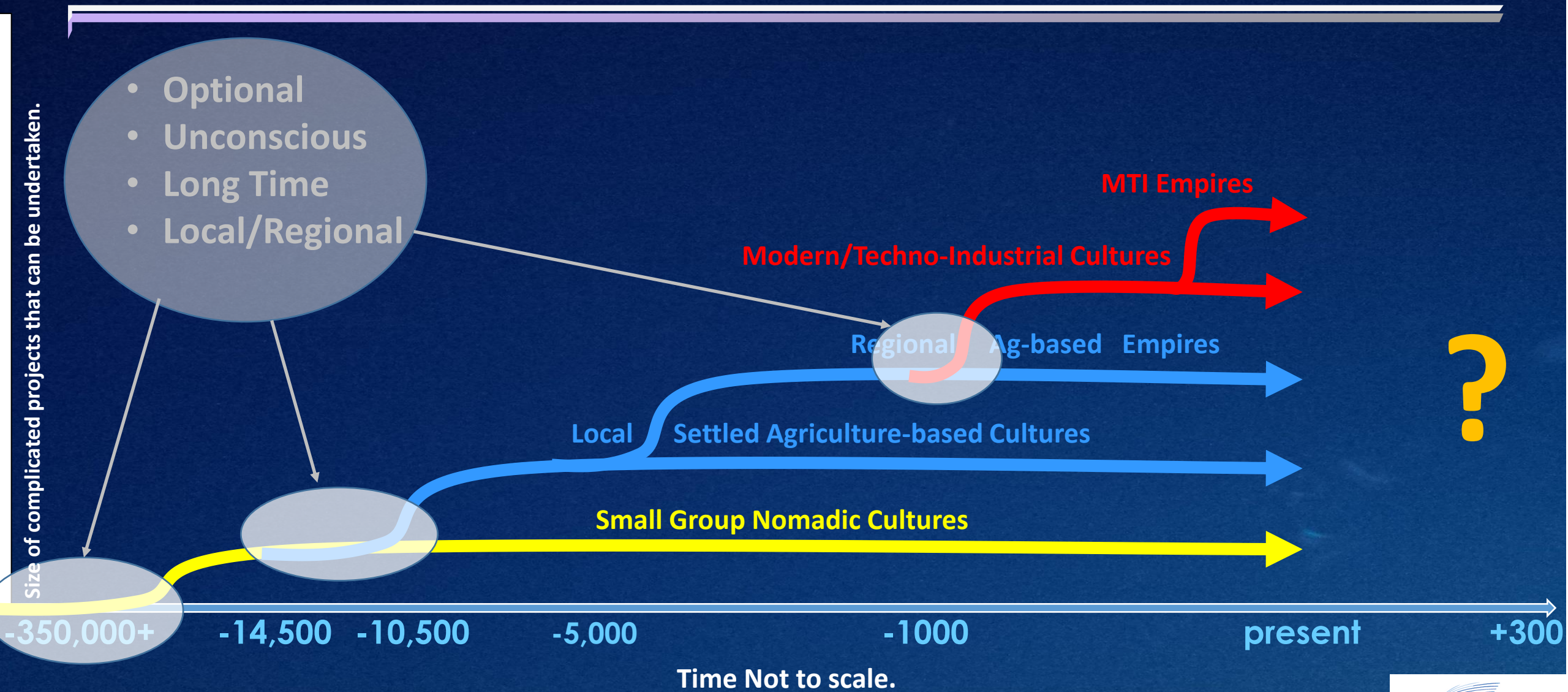
The majority of those who live in cultures which exemplify the same civilization<sub>F</sub> unconsciously share the ways they know, **imagine**, think things through and **conduct themselves** regarding:

- The nature of reality.
- The nature and agency of human persons.
- The relationship of persons to reality.

Each civilization<sub>F</sub> is one possible and coherent way of *“being/doing the human and the Earth as beings on the Earth.”*

The trajectory of history changes when a new civilization<sub>F</sub> emerges!

# 3 Forms of Civilization<sub>F</sub> Today



# Closing Comments

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# Key Notion

In each chapter we also provide examples of how, when done well, successful strategic leadership can transform even the most seriously disadvantaged situations for the better. Yet, when it fails, it can turn likely victory into certain defeat. Leaders, some of whom are politicians in this book, while others are soldiers, must be able to master four major tasks. First, they need comprehensively to grasp the overall strategic situation in a conflict and craft the appropriate strategic approach – in essence, to get the big ideas right. Second, they must communicate those big ideas, the strategy, effectively throughout the breadth and depth of their organization and to all other stakeholders. Third, they need to oversee the implementation of the big ideas, driving the execution of the campaign plan relentlessly and determinedly. Last, they have to determine how the big ideas must be refined, adapted and augmented so they can perform the first three tasks again, and again, and again. The statesmen and soldiers who perform these four tasks properly are the exemplars who stand out in these pages. The witness of history demonstrates that exceptional strategic leadership is the one asset that prefigures for success, but also that it is as rare as a black swan.

General David Petraeus

Andrew Roberta

*Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine*

2023

# Inspiration

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To be rid of illusions,  
if it does not break our courage,  
is a liberating experience.

John Macmurray  
Conditions of Freedom  
1949



**Over to YOU!**

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Our Future **is** in Our Hands, Minds, Hearts and Spirits

**Thank You!**