The world in transition: towards holoreflexivity?

A review essay by Heikki Patomäki


*Worlds in Transition* is a large and ambitious study about contemporary and emerging global trends, set within the wide context of evolution on planet Earth. The central hypothesis of the book is that in the decades after the world wars, we have seen, and are seeing, the unfolding of a radical transition leading towards the emergence of a new stage in human civilization. This new stage is defined in terms of a qualitatively higher level of reflexivity. The authors have chosen to label this stage as the holoreflexive epoch. The new epoch involves the “reshaping many of the cognitive assumptions, practices and institutions that have shaped the Modern epoch” (p.15).

The approach of Camilleri and Falk is close to that of Big History. Big History is an emerging new approach that constructs a single narrative not only about the history of life and humanity, but also about the entire universe, even covering aspects of its future, too (see Brown 2007; Christian 1991, 2005). The concept of holoreflexivity makes the connection between *Worlds in Transition* and Big History plain. Holoreflexivity, Camilleri and Falk envisage, is the next logical step in the mutually reinforcing processes of increasing organizational complexity and personal and institutional reflexivity. It involves a holistic and comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms, structures and processes of the whole. “[This analysis] is global in that it encompasses all social groupings, communities cultures and civilisations, and planetary in that it comprises the totality of relationships between the human species and the rest of the biosphere” (p.537).

There are also differences. Unlike Big History, *Worlds in Transition* is confined to the history of humanity; and the main part of the book focuses on the current issues of global politics and governance. These differences notwithstanding, I find it a bit surprising that Camilleri and Falk do not explicitly link their project to Big History, especially since the ethico-political motivation behind both projects seems similarly environmentalist and cosmopolitan (cf. Bentley 2005; Laichas 2010).

The first nearly 200 pages of this exceptional and fascinating study are devoted to an overall contextualisation of the current geo-historical situation (chs 2-4). The main part portrays and analyses those areas of global governance within which dangers and risks are imminent but where trends towards a new epoch can be seen (chs 5-11). Insightfully, the introductory and concluding chapters pull various threads together in an exercise that amounts to practicing holoreflexivity, instead of just theorising it.

The overall story

Camilleri and Falk deny that they are constructing a new meta-narrative about human history. However, they do propose a trans-historically applicable scheme of development of the type: more complexity → more efficiency → larger population.
but new problems → learning and more reflexivity → more complexity. This scheme applies to the development of human language, agriculture, writing, advanced metalworking, the rise of religious consciousness and universalist vision of ethics. It also applies to the Modern epoch of cultural, scientific, transportation and industrial evolutions, which are creating new problems that can only be managed by means of higher levels of personal and institutional reflexivity. According to the authors, this is also the mechanism generating the tendency towards holoreflexivity.

*Worlds in Transition* takes seriously the possibility of a systemic, worldwide collapse. A collapse can take, for instance, the form of a major financial crisis, nuclear confrontation, runaway global warming or the emergence of new pathogens. These and other hazards and dangers are interlinked, which is an important reason for the quest for a holoreflexive analysis, although the authors are also quick to add that “devil lies in the detail” (p.14). The result is a very long book, almost 700 pages.

While I am sympathetic to the project as a whole, and agree also with many of its parts, Camilleri’s and Falk’s wide scope come with a price. For a reader familiar with (or an expert on) the issues discussed in various chapters, the text may often seem elementary – written at a basic textbook level – and several points rather vaguely formulated. On the other hand, given the contested nature of various claims made in the book, a critical reader will inevitably notice points that are problematical and not fully supported by evidence or arguments; and will recall relevant concepts, theories and studies that have been omitted. The authors themselves are aware of these potential pitfalls and have painstakingly gone through large literatures and checked thousands and thousands of details. Clearly, it has taken years to write this book.

In chapter 2, the authors describe the wide evolutionary context within which culture and organizational complexity have evolved. The story-line seems basically correct. Biological evolution has created – through increasing complexification that has generated learning and then language – the basis for our extraordinarily fast-moving cultural evolution. As a consequence of this breakthrough, human population growth has broken out from the biological regime. Throughout their discussion on the pre-history of humanity, Camilleri and Falk stress the contested nature of aspects of the theory of evolution and cite a range of literatures, including some very recent studies. Nonetheless, several details appear inaccurate or out of date. For instance, Cro Magnon was not a primitive *Homo sapiens* (p.19) but an early modern human settled in Europe and probably genetically very close to contemporary Basques.

More importantly, however, although I agree with the notion of ‘bio-cultural nexus’, I feel that Camilleri and Falk tend to conflate biology and culture too much, partly as a result of somewhat hasty periodisations. They claim that language emerged with *Homo sapiens sapiens* some 100,000-130,000 years (p.50). Although a tad more apt flake-techniques evolved about 100,000 years ago, there is no evidence of major technical, societal or cultural changes at this time – in fact, very little new emerged for tens of thousands of years following the biological emergence of the ‘modern’ variation of *homo sapiens*. Like their predecessors, the early ‘modern’ humans continued to use roughly made stone weapons and tools and live in small bands, with no complex social structures. Further, our African ancestors and their Eurasian offspring did not leave any traces whatever of history, religion, arts, architecture, science, or philosophy. It seems that human reflexivity did not yet exist.
Although absence for evidence is not the same as evidence for absence, I find the hypothesis of Julian Jaynes (2000) credible in the light of our current knowledge. Jaynes’ maintains that the first humans in Africa did not have complex verbal language, although – like other hominids before them – they could sustain various techniques and social expectations with a combination of imitation, visual images, body language, facial expressions and oral sounds and signals. The development of language was a very slow (compared to cultural-historical scales of time) dialectical process, which started, step by step, to accelerate. Each new stage of linguistic learning created new perceptions and attentions, resulting in important cultural changes, which are reflected in the available archaeological record.

The Jaynesian interpretation goes against Camilleri’s and Falk’s claim that “that there is no a priori reason for thinking that the link between genetic endowment and cultural change has been severed or decisively weakened” (p.41). The ambiguity works also the other way around, making it a bit far-fetched to interpret human pre-history in terms of Robert Cox’s (1981) ‘historical structure’, or read reflective consciousness and complex cultural categories into the distant past, as Camilleri and Falk tend to do.

Chapters 3 and 4 follow the footsteps of Condorcet, Hegel, Marx, Spencer, Spengler and Toynbee in sketching an evolutionary interpretation of history in terms of changing social and political organizations. However, Camilleri and Falk want to exceed these classics of history and sociology by placing “the evolution of governance within a co-evolutionary theoretical framework” (p.75), that is, by situating human history in the wider context of biological evolution and planetary biosphere. Although Camilleri and Falk are not the only ones trying to reconnect nature and society, this is clearly an important development in social theory – and in line with the notion of holoreflexivity.

In chapter 3, the authors first review a wide range of conceptual and interpretative possibilities, stressing that human societies respond to both changes in the natural and social and cultural environment. Subsequently, they use a selection of these conceptual and interpretative possibilities to provide a “cursory sketch” (p.108) of the landmarks of recent human history: the rise of agricultural settlements, early complex societies, ancient civilisations, classical civilisations (Roman Empire, Han Dynasty), and post-classical empires (600-1100 CE). Chapter 4 covers the ‘promodern’, ‘early modern’, and ‘late modern’ eras, and then lists the limits of modernity and signs of an epochal shift towards a new planetary epoch.

Given the vast and ambitious scope, some details of these sketches are inevitably uncertain, contested, or out of date, in much the same way as they were in chapter 2. What really matters, however, is the overall framework and story. Chapter 3 succeeds well in situating the current era of transition in a wide spatio-temporal perspective, involving both the natural and social history of the planet. What is more, Camilleri and Falk are at pains to provide a nuanced and comprehensive picture that avoids the pitfalls of the usual types of reductionism, such as the ecological reductionism of Jared Diamond (1997). “There is little to be gained and much to be lost from singling out any one of the proposed factors as the key to an explanation of this remarkable evolutionary development [the rise of agriculture]” (p.93). For instance, Camilleri and Falk emphasise the role of writing in ushering in the early civilizations.
Yet, despite manifold qualifications and complications, my impression is that ultimately Camilleri’s and Falk’s story is overtly materialistic. Rather than integrating, in a nuanced and balanced way, or even better, dialectically, natural rhythms, constraints and possibilities with the partly autopoietic rhythms of human learning and social developments, the story usually follows a simple scheme of ecological/economic stimulus → response. In chapter 4, this ecological/economic materialism grounds claims about various ‘limits of modernity’. The authors maintain that, in the late 20th century, state sovereignty and state actions are undermined by “the twin processes of technological change and capital accumulation” (p.153). “The transnationalisation of the marketplace, whether justified in the name of consumer choice, economic competition or the free market, had achieved a psychological, ideological and organisational ascendancy over the institutions of the sovereign state” (pp.153-4). The state is no more legitimate at a time when the ecological limits to growth, inseparable from the limits of techno-science, are becoming increasingly insurmountable, and when “control and direction of technological change [have become matters] of unprecedented complexity and controversy” (p.158).

I agree that there are limits to sovereign states, to economic growth, and to science and technology; the existence of some limits is widely accepted. And yet, the overall story is a bit too simple and linear. The linearity of the story probably follows from the empiricist idea that the basic task of social science is identify and analyse prevailing and emerging trends (p.11), rather than explaining them, in a critical scientific realist way, in terms of underlying causal mechanisms and processes, which also involve non-linearities, ambiguities and contradictions not analogical to barriers in physical space (cf. Patomäki and Wight 2000; Patomäki 2002).

I am also slightly concerned about Camilleri’s and Falk’s decision to use the term ‘governance’ as a generic trans-historical category, instead of building on a variety well established social theoretical concepts such as production, power, rule or organization. The recent rise to prominence of the term ‘governance’ is closely associated with the market-oriented theories, stories and blueprints of neoliberalism (e.g. Taylor 2000), and more generally with the prevailing geo-historical formation that Foucault (1991) has labelled as ‘governmentality’. Under the prevailing circumstances, the authors run a double risk of implicit neoliberalisation of grand social theory and reification of neoliberalism.

A striking outcome of these conceptual, methodological and theoretical choices is that our current world, with all its problems, is portrayed as more or less predestined. “All states, regardless of their size or complexion, were constrained to accept the competitive logic of the marketplace, and the limits this implied for the efficacy of state action” (p.166). Hence, it appears that, so far, there has been no alternative.

Double movements in different areas of global governance

Chapters 5-11 tackle different areas of global governance: world economy, atmospheric flows, global warming (‘a defining issue of our time’), information flows, pathogens and health, and finally security. In each chapter, Camilleri and Falk summarise the key problematic and describe the historical developments of the
existing institutions of global governance. In some chapters they go further and introduce new theoretical conceptions. Chapter 5, “Economic governance”, is built around Karl Polanyi’s concept of double movement. Following Robert Cox (see Cox 1996), Camilleri and Falk propose that the colonisation of society by market forces is now proceeding on a global scale. This leads to an expectation, or hope, that the double movement would be repeated on a global scale. After the (inevitable) phase of neoliberal globalisation, perhaps a new era will arise in which human affairs are organised “in ways that check or mitigate the pernicious effects of the market” (p.182)?

The rest of chapter 5 is largely devoted to showing, or at least indicating, that such a trend may be emerging, even if only in an ambiguous way. The hegemony of the US is in decline. In the periodic oscillation between deregulation and regulation, regulation is gaining momentum. G20 is giving a voice to a new consensus that takes into account the social costs of globalisation. WTO has become a site of contestation. Global civil society is demanding change. The rest of chapter 5 is largely devoted to showing, or at least indicating, that such a trend may be emerging, even if only in an ambiguous way. The hegemony of the US is in decline. In the periodic oscillation between deregulation and regulation, regulation is gaining momentum. G20 is giving a voice to a new consensus that takes into account the social costs of globalisation. WTO has become a site of contestation. Global civil society is demanding change.

Chapters 6 and 7 deal with the atmospheric and environmental regulation; and chapter 8 suggests that new information and communication technologies are important for human learning and reflexivity. The point of the ‘co-evolutionary framework’ is to situate human history in the context of natural processes and rhythms. Thus pages 229-444 deal mostly with environmental and health issues and their global governance. If in economic governance neoliberalism remains, despite contrary hopes, unrelenting, perhaps the transition towards something new and something better is breaking through in other fields? Perhaps the post-modern, planetary, holoreflexive world is coming into being through changes in global environmental and health governance, as a response to pressing planetary concerns?

Chapters 6-8 provide a careful consideration of this possibility. The basic argument is that “the current transition period is marked by a series of limits which the norms, rules, practices and institutions developed during the Modern epoch have encountered as they respond to the critical challenge of the age” (p.281). The concluding part of chapter 7 repeats the earlier discussion on the limits of modernity, this time focussing on atmospheric and ecological issues. Moreover, Camilleri and Falk analyse the expanding role of the market, which mediates much of the collaboration and competition among states; and the developing role of global civil society. “None of this [is] without its difficulties or ambiguities” (p.312). At this point of the book, the authors clearly side with progressive change, but, confined to the analysis of trends, have only little to say in anticipation of the future, or to provide guidance for actions:

While the market continued to embed itself globally across the entire spectrum of social relations, climate change had emerged as the paradigmatic manifestation of market failure. The reshaping of market relations, that is, the rebalancing of the double movement, had gained considerable impetus. (p.314)

Chapter 8 poses the key question of the book from a new angle: “Could new advances in human reflexivity set the species on an environmentally sustainable (adaptive) path,
that is, away from ‘negative’ and towards ‘positive’ niche construction” (p.321).
Quite interestingly, here the authors focus less on empirical trends and more on real
causal connections, introducing the notion of cumulative causation as self-reinforcing
change in a system caused by a series of positive feedbacks. Human reflexive capacity
is grounded on language and can only operate through it. The symbolic representation
of language in letters and the development of mathematics have enabled higher levels
of reflexivity. Camilleri and Falk argue that “the growth of the ICT [information and
communication technologies] may be considered an extension of the evolution of
language” (p.323).

Especially the Internet – built on layers of previous technological innovations – is
now changing conceptions of social space and time. Communication and information
retrieval is virtually instant; and the importance of the physical distance between
receiver and sender is diminished. A result is that citizens start to see themselves as
members of diverse communities that span the globe. However, the Internet is
changing also the state and market, not only civil society. A part of chapter 8 is a
technical exposition of the evolving standards and rules of governance of the ICT
field, but towards the end of the chapter the authors return to the main theme. “Seen
through the lens of the double movement, the Internet was weakening existing forms
of regulations while at the same time acting as a catalyst for a new regulatory regime”
(p.365). The catalyst is supposed to work especially through civic activities and new
solidarities, but so far the evidence is anecdotal and tentative, rather than solid.

Chapter 9 is devoted to human health and especially to controlling pathogens. This is
an interesting new point of view that underlines the need for holoreflexive thinking.
The way Camilleri and Falk formulate the problem is indicative of their ecological
materialism and tendency to adopt terms that are associated with the neoliberal era,
such as ‘resilience’: “In crude terms, a healthy society is likely to be more resilient,
hence more able to adapt, especially in the face of biological challenges” (p.377).
Pathogens are argued to be especially problematical because of the high speed in
which they change and adapt. They can evolve rapidly, also in response to human
activities. “Because of their high replication and mutation rates, pathogens, notably
viruses which could reproduce thousands of times in one day, were capable of
developing biologically adaptive responses perhaps faster than even human cultural
responses” (p.380). Microbes do not carry national passports, but can air travel across
the planet in about 24 hours. A global disaster has become a real possibility.

At the same time, our complex societies have developed a reflexive capacity that
permits the monitoring of epidemics as they sweep across large populations. As a
tentative global response to the new situation, the World Health Organization (WHO)
was created in 1948. “The founding of the WHO was just one of the many
developments that would transform health governance during the current transitional
period” (p.384). Camilleri and Falk portray the cases of HIV/AIDS, Mad Cow
Disease, SARS, and Bird Flu and conclude that “[to guard against the [possibility of
disastrous epidemic], either in the current context or a future one, and to deal with it
effectively if and when it occurred, the world’s health governance systems would
have to mobilise much higher levels of reflexive capability” (p.401). Finally, the
authors discuss the current situation and various obstacles to adequate responses; and
in the last section indicate trends towards new global health governance.
The remaining two substantial chapters, 10 and 11, analyse global (in)security and emerging holoreflexive responses to global security problems. At this point, the concept of double movement acquires an entirely new meaning. In the context of the security dilemma, the double movement is interpreted as a movement “between offence and defence, and between protection and vulnerability” (p.446). From the point of view of the security dilemma, one’s protection is another’s vulnerability. In the nuclear age, the problem-solving capacities of the system of national sovereign states have been vastly exceeded due to new powers of destruction and resulting mutual vulnerabilities. Insecurity has become globalised:

On closer inspection, the end of the Cold War, important a landmark though it was in the evolution of the global security system, added even greater force to the globalisation of insecurity. The transnationalisation of security, or to be more exact, ‘insecurity’, continued unabated. (p.453)

Military spending in the US and elsewhere declined after the end of the Cold War, but soon climbed again and exceeded, in absolute terms, the spending of the late 1980s. However, in chapter 11, Camilleri and Falk focus more on the positive trend of growth of multilateral processes and initiatives, envisioning them as signs of the transition towards a new epoch. They discuss the development of international law, UN system, peacekeeping practices, regional integration processes, NATO, and the OSCE. They also summarise new trends in security discourse, welcoming the emergence of concepts such as ‘comprehensive’ and ‘human security’, even presenting ‘humanitarian intervention’ and the ‘responsibility to protect’ in a positive light, because they reflect “a growing disenchantment with the analytical and policy utility of boundaries” (p.514).

The authors do not cite critical security studies about the problems of these openings. Widening the concept of security can imply unjustified securitisation (Waever 1995; Balzacq, 2005); and lowering the borders of the others may also allow for 21st century forms of imperialism (Patomäki 2008, chs 6-8). True, Camilleri and Falk mention in passing ”the possibility that interventionist strategies might be skewed to serve imperial interests” (p.514), but go on to discuss the resistance against these new concepts in terms of cultural differences and, especially, dialogue among civilizations. “This relatively new phenomenon was indicative of a normative project which consciously sought to address the governance needs of a world that was culturally plural but technologically and economically interconnected” (p.516).

Concluding reflections

Worlds in Transition is an unusual and laudable effort to open up a new perspective on world politics. The authors make a good case for the importance of advancing human learning by way of developing and propagating higher and more holistic forms of reflexivity. Holoreflexivity is grounded on a large temporal and spatial frame, also in order to “more effectively monitor and diagnostically integrate the rising volume, speed and intensity of flows” (p.537). The authors maintain that holoreflexivity is the adequate response to the challenges that we humans are now facing; and the best way to ensure adaptation and long-term survival of humanity.
Methodologically however, *Worlds in Transition* is less innovative. The main hypothesis of the book is not something that is being tested or assessed; rather the authors are seeking for confirming – or at least suggestive – evidence for their claim about the era of transition towards a holoreflexive epoch. In order to make this ‘hypothesis’ falsifiable, it would have to be specified in sufficient detail to allow for contrastive possibilities. If everything can be interpreted either as a sign that the old world is still there or that the new world is coming into being, everything necessarily falls neatly into the proposed grand narrative but very little is in fact said. In other words, the risk is that the adopted story dominates the research process in a way that makes genuine learning difficult. One indication that this may be the case with *Worlds in Transition* is that Camilleri’s 1976 book *Civilization in Crisis. Human Prospects in a Changing World* already told a similar story about global crises and imbalances that must and will be addressed in terms of a major cultural shift.

Although powerful stories are charismatic and have strong motivating power, they can also be misleading. We are predisposed to see order, pattern and meaning in the world also in places where there is none. The predisposition to detect patterns and make connections is what leads to scientific discovery and learning, but without subjecting the resulting ideas to systematic critique we often end up believing in the existence of phenomena that just are not there, and in stories that may not be reasonable. We over-generalize; we are more excited about affirmative than negative evidence and remember it better; we perceive truly ambiguous information in a way that fits our preconceptions; we see essential similarities when they are purely random; we manufacture evidence on the basis of hindsight without realising it; we are quick to invent arbitrary ad hoc explanations; and we project our own predispositions, fears and desires into the world partly for motivational and partly for cognitive reasons. Therefore, I feel that the story of *Worlds in Transition* – even though a critical reader like me can see a lot of plausibility in many parts of it – should be methodologically decomposed into smaller and well-specified parts, some of which should be falsifiable in a way that can lead to the revision of the overall story itself.

Moreover, Camilleri’s and Falk’s argument could be improved also ontologically, normatively and futurologically. From an ontological point of view, chapter 8 is exemplary. It focuses less on empirical trends and more on real causal connections. It is true that there are often all kinds of patterns also at the level of actual, observable phenomena. Trends, however, are best conceived as ‘contrastive demi-regularities’ (Lawson 1997: 204). Regular empirical patterns are always identified in terms of a contrast to another outcome, tendency or process. They are only demi-regularities because they are liable to change. Demi-regular patterns may provide grounds for forming (always-uncertain) expectations about future developments. More importantly, however, contrasting patterns require a causal explanation. An explanation must be constructed in terms of relevant parts of an open system, such as relatively enduring reasons for actions, social structures and mechanisms, that have tendentially produced the effects that seem to form the observed systematic patterns.

Normatively, the notion of holoreflexivity is instructive but leaves most of the questions of ethical and political theory open. Is holoreflexivity always good? Always right? What kind of a theory of justice or democracy or eudaimonic society does it imply? There are a few hints especially at the very end of the book (pp.546-50), but they are mostly limited to suggesting a trend towards “more inclusive way of
perceiving, relating to and negotiating with the ‘other’, a significant shift in the articulation of purpose and foresight”; and towards “a new understanding of life that ties human destiny to the workings of the entire biosphere” (p.546). Does holoreflexivity include all possible normative theories if they are sufficiently universal and inclusive of the biosphere? What does it exclude, if anything?

For good reasons, Camilleri and Falk emphasise the importance of foresight and future. The longer time spans are meant to inform public policy via two functions. The first is cognitive. What can we know about the future? How do we evaluate future risks and challenges? The second is prescriptive. How do we plan for the future? “The capacity to produce complex models which can predict the future consequences of human actions, itself the product of higher levels of reflexivity, translates future consequences into current ethical dilemmas, not least in the sphere of governance” (p.548). Camilleri and Falk are on the right track, but futures studies is not, and cannot be, primarily about prediction. Scenarios are about possible futures. Realist ontology posits that the future – which is real but not yet determined and therefore consists of a multiplicity of different possibilities – unfolds through various transforming events and nodal points, themselves presupposing particular concept- and action-dependent historical social structures. Our scenarios, too, must be criticisable and revisable as we acquire new evidence, and as history unfolds.

References


