

Kenny Ausubel: The End of Prehistory

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Introduction delivered by Kenny Ausubel at the [2019 Bioneers Conference](#)

As we gather for Bioneers' 30th anniversary conference, we stand at the end of prehistory. Nature is deregulating human affairs faster than a lobbyist can buy a politician. Global weirding is upon us.

We're in the endgame of the Dim Ages: the collision between the state of nature and the nature of the state. Our civilization is a failed state.

The big wheels are turning. We face a reckoning: transform or perish. It's emergence in an emergency.

There's as much cause for hope as for horror. The good news is that we've done it before, and as Bioneers has shown for 30 years, in great measure the solutions are present, or we know what directions to head in. The solutions residing in nature consistently surpass our conception of what's even possible.

We're entering the Age of Nature. It's high time to learn the ground rules and play by them to design a regenerative and equitable civilization.

The formula is simple: Taking care of nature means taking care of people, and taking care of people means taking care of nature. Regeneration is the byword. Building resilience is the grail – both ecological and social.

The imperative is to fast-forward the transition to 100% clean energy, keep the oil in the ground, and, as Project Drawdown is showing, sequester carbon back where it belongs in a drawdown to 350 ppm, which is do-able with what we already know and have.

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Doing what's right for the climate means doing what's right for everything else. It's the reimagination of civilization in the age of nature.

Yet the thing we need most is what we have the least of: time. Slouching toward sustainability will not turn the tide. Only immediate, bold and transformative action will enable us to make the leap across the abyss. That's what we're here to do.

Looking back over these past three decades of Bioneers, what's perhaps most salient is the extraordinary rise and influence of social movements and civil society. We've acted as the countervailing force holding back complete catastrophe, while developing and modeling real solutions for very different ways of living on Earth and with each other.

The Mayan people describe this movement of movements as “one ‘no’ and many ‘yeses.’” The “no” is to the concentration of wealth and distribution of poverty. The “yes” is to “a world where many worlds fit,” a global society devoted to health, justice, dignity, diversity, and democracy—to human rights and the rights of nature.

So, I want to honor so many of you in this room who've been among the visionary leaders of these movements – the tireless frontline activists – the organizers – the creators – the pathfinders – the healers – the dreamers.

As a community, we've shown that clean energy works. Ecological agriculture and carbon farming work. Biomimicry and Indigenous Traditional Ecological knowledge work. Restorative justice works.

Local economies – decentralized infrastructures – living buildings – permaculture – green chemistry – 3-D ocean farming – they all work.

And as Paul Stamets first showed us here in 1997, we know that mushrooms really can save the world.

Meanwhile, communities are reclaiming democracy by revoking corporate rights. Nations are instituting legally enforceable rights for nature. Beloved community and gender reconciliation are alive and growing. Reparations are on the table.

The forefront of leadership is coming from women, First Peoples, communities of color, citizens, and now from the swell of amazing young people demanding that society wake the fuck up and start acting like grownups.

Over these decades, we've seen these movements grow from the margins to the mainstream. Our job now is to bring them to scale.

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We first began advocating for a Green New Deal here at Bioneers in 1995. What may have seemed impossible is now suddenly within reach. The questions are what it's going to look like, how fast we can make it happen – and how we will overcome the retrograde forces pushing business as usual – and they do mean business.

One thing is for sure: The twin crises of climate chaos and extreme inequality will keep getting worse fast — and people will keep rising up in ever bigger numbers demanding and making change. That's what happened in the 1930s and it's happening again.

As Tom Hayden pointed out here three years ago, at the time the New Deal was gestating, it was not called the New Deal. It was called “the movement.” It crystallized from a spray of initiatives often incubated in the “laboratories of democracy” – cities and states. In a few short years, the impossible became reality.

Social security and pensions – bargaining rights for organized labor – jobs by the millions doing meaningful work that needed to be done – and a cultural renaissance that changed the mindscape and politics.

Above all, the New Deal was about redirecting government away from serving the rich to protecting the vast majority of people and the common good.

As Kevin Baker recounts in his brilliant article *Where Our New World Begins*, “The Great Depression was an environmental collapse every bit as much as it was an economic collapse.”

By the 1930s, five-sixths of the original indigenous animal populations that thrived when the Europeans arrived had been extinguished.

Seven-eighths of the original woodlands had been cleared. One sixth of the topsoil in the US would soon blow away in the cataclysm of the Dust Bowl.

35 million acres of previously arable land had been decimated, with another 225 million acres soon to follow. Plagues of locusts, rabbits and green worms overran the land. The topsoil of Oklahoma and Wyoming blackened the skies of New York and Chicago. Like climate disruption today, millions fled as ecological refugees.

As Baker points out, the devastation resulted from “a desperate capitalist battle, with every man for himself. If producing more crops drove down farm prices and wrecked the land, well, that was just how the market economy worked.”

The private sector offered no plan, except more of the same. The Populist Party surged, and the plutocracy attacked them as “socialists.” FDR stepped in with transformative government action guided by the remarkable understanding that the crisis had to be addressed as a whole system – the care of both people and nature.

The new Soil Conservation Service launched over 500 soil project stations, experimenting with farmers with novel practices such as terrace and contour farming. The government paid them to participate and save their farms.

The Civilian Conservation Corps employed 3 million men to plant thousands of acres of experimental drought-resistant grasses. They constructed more than eight hundred state parks and planted nearly three billion trees, including shelterbelts to secure the soil. In time, they restored more than half of the damaged land.

The programs also acknowledged nature’s limits. They resettled farmers and refugees who became the unprecedented American middle class that emerged after World War II.

And that was just a piece of the New Deal. Massive public works programs. Public health campaigns. Pre-natal and birth care for women. Libraries. Public arts.

Although the New Deal made bad mistakes and odious compromises, it got a lot right. It had been a close call. The nation could just as easily have plunged to the right. And plunging to the right is exactly what the plutocrats have been doing ever since to roll back the New Deal to get back to a government serving the rich.

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The great work today of the Green New Deal is to avert climate chaos, build resilience to adapt, and lift the burdens of history once and for all. We need to overturn the New Deal’s grievous old deal with the Southern Dixiecrats to keep the racial caste system in place and build an inclusive society of jobs with justice and self-determination.

And ultimately in the ‘30s, big business coopted the economics to assure its ongoing hegemony. It was only World War II that finally lifted the nation out of the Depression.

Today the world war is to save human civilization as we know it. In the ‘30s, it boiled down to saving capitalism from itself. But this time around, capitalism may not be salvageable at all.

Beginning in the '90's, corporate globalization triggered a tectonic shift of wealth and political power to a super-elite of billionaires. They launched a full-frontal corporate takeover of government.

According to Jeffrey Winters, the author of *Oligarchy*, wealth in the U.S. today is over “two times as concentrated as imperial Rome, which was a slave-and-farmer society.” If billionaires were a nation, they'd be the world's 3rd largest country. Call it bottom down and top up – breadcrumbs and circuses.

As Fortune magazine CEO Alan Murray recently commented: “More and more CEOs worry that public support for the system in which they've operated is in danger of disappearing.”

As Farhad Manjoo wrote, “They're worried that when the next recession breaks, revolution might, too. The coming Recession might finally prompt the masses to sharpen their pitchforks and demand a reckoning. But the CEOs now have a plan to head off revolution. They want you to know: Actually, they really do care about the world. Like, a lot. If I sound cynical, it's only because I'm not a complete idiot. It's all a game to the moguls in charge. Their greatest fear is that we'll stop playing.”

So much for “the end of history” that political scientist Francis Fukuyama pronounced in 1992 following the fall of the Soviet Union. Capitalism seemed triumphant, unopposed, unassailable.

Author Mark Fisher calls it “capitalist realism.” It's easier for most people to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

Three decades later, it's Boom and Doom — the terminal convulsions of an oligarchic economic system bedeviled by \$100 trillion dollars of stranded oil assets and the impossibility of unlimited material growth on a finite planet.

Petrostates and fossil fuel corporations are growing desperate. The frenzy of deregulation is the distress signal of a failing business model. Market trauma is in store.

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Trump is just the hood ornament on the Hummer of plutocracy gone off road. Monopolies smother the economy. The roster of Fortune 500 companies reads like a rap sheet of mass crimes. It's gangsters and warlords making feudalism great again.

Meanwhile, what Oliver Bullough calls “Moneyland” has emerged as the “dark twin of globalization.” As much as \$36 trillion dollars of dark money is stashed in offshore black holes. \$1 trillion dollars a year exits the world's developing countries in laundered money and tax avoidance. By 2015, 52% of Russia's wealth resided outside the country.

Untraceable shell companies are behind the majority of investment linked to Amazon deforestation, illegal fishing, and other crimes against nature and humanity.

Most of “Moneyland” is entirely legal. The system is the crime.

As writer Franklin Foer commented, “Thievery tramples the possibilities of workable markets and credible democracy. It fuels suspicions that the whole idea of liberal capitalism is a hypocritical sham.”

The predicament is double-barreled: Failing to imagine the end of capitalism may mean the end of the world. On the other hand, state socialism has equally failed. The ground truth is that there’s no precedent or grand model for a next economy – one that’s grounded in equity and the limits and principles of nature.

The first question is: “What’s the economy for?”

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If building resilience is the goal, the priority shifts from growth and expansion to sufficiency and sustainable prosperity. Real wealth creation is based on replenishing natural systems and restoring the built environment, especially our infrastructure and cities. It’s based on investing in our communities and workforce. It works best when done all at once.

Economic re-localization creates three times as many jobs, earnings, and tax collections—as well as far greater security.

Like the New Deal era, today waves of smaller-scale models and policies are percolating from the bottom up. Gar Alperowitz and the Democracy Collaborative call it the “Pluralist Commonwealth.”

A core principle is shifting ownership of the nation’s wealth institutionally to benefit the vast majority. Ownership becomes diversified, including public, private, cooperative and worker-owned enterprises. Too-big-to-fail giants are broken up or restructured as publicly owned utilities.

Nor is there a model for what true democratic governance looks like at modern scales. We need to reclaim democracy and decentralize political and economic power to local and bioregional levels. It begins and ends with community and with building stable transgenerational community wealth and job creation.

But paradigms die hard and empires die harder.

As Charles Blow wrote, “This is a game of power, pure and simple, and it’s about whether the people who have long held power will be able to retain it...”

“The Founders, a bunch of rich, powerful white men, didn’t want true democracy in this country, and in fact they were terribly afraid of it.

Now a bunch of rich, powerful white men want to return us to that sensibility.”

Naomi Klein warns against “climate barbarism,” saying “This is how the wealthy world is going to ‘adapt’ to more climate disruption: by fully unleashing toxic ideologies that rank the relative value of human lives in order to justify the monstrous discarding of huge swaths of humanity.”

It’s the last-ditch play by Billionaire Nation to make heaven a gated community – even if it’s in hell on Earth.

Instead what’s rising up is the return of the repressed. Everyone who has been othered, marginalized and deleted. The poor. Working people. Women. People of color. Indigenous Peoples. Immigrants. LGBTQ people. Young people. The last shall be first after all.

The word “crisis” comes from the Greek word *krino*. It means “to decide.” We need to decide what kind of future we want – and act like our lives depend on it.

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It’s now o’clock.

The Mayan people call this the “Time of No Time.” Ohki Siminé Forest, a Canadian wisdom keeper of Mohawk descent who lives and works with the Mayan people in Chiapas, describes the Mayan vision in this way.

From here on, we’re on Earth time. Mother Earth is shaking to her core. It’s a time of madness, disconnection, and hyper-individualism.

It’s also a time when new energies are coming into the world, when people are growing a new skin.

The Mayan vision says that we in the West will find safe harbor only if we can journey past a wall of mirrors. The mirrors will surely drive us mad—unless we have a strong heart. Some mirrors delude us with an infinity of reflections of our vanity and shadows. Others paralyze us with our terror and rage, feeding an empire that manufactures our fear into resignation.

But the empire has no roots and it’s toppling all around us. In this time everyone is called to take a stand. Everyone is called to be a leader.

To get beyond the wall of mirrors, the final challenge is to pass through a tiny door. To do this, we must make ourselves very, very small. To be very humble. Then we must burrow down into the Earth, where indigenous consciousness lives. On the other side is a clear pond. There, for the first time, we’ll be able to see our true reflection.

In this Time of No Time, they say, we can go in any direction we want—by dreaming it. Our dreaming can shift the course of the world.

It’s going to be a long and winding trek across generations.

We're already making some of the pathways others can walk toward our many dreams. Countless more dreamers will blaze luminous new trails.

The dreams are already within us. One day, may we awaken to find ourselves living in our wildest dreams.

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 **Steven Schmidt**
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A tip of our GreenPolicy360 hat to our long time friends. From 1990 in Santa Fe to this year's 30th annual gathering and every day in between, together we carry on, we carry on



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