

Chapter 1 – INTRODUCTION AND APPROACH

We need a new lodestar, a new map of the world. In our terms, a guiding image of the future. — Rutger Bregman

You may well be among the many believing that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (ironically, those two concepts may indeed be related). I once thought so too. I invite you to accompany me on a journey to possibilities beyond today’s dominant capitalist system. At the finish you may come to believe that a better approach is indeed possible. Perhaps then you will join me in the mission of spreading this news of hope for a better tomorrow. In short:

- The good news is that there are indeed viable guiding images for life after capitalism.
- The bad news is that it is going to be a long, tough ride for at least the next several years, if not longer, and a “good” future is by no means guaranteed.
- The ugly news is that we have no choice but to develop alternatives, because capitalism is in trouble.

This work is US-focused, given the country’s position as an exemplar of neoliberal capitalism, and the primary focus on one country enables the telling of a more cohesive story. It is noteworthy that despite this exemplar status, the Heritage Foundation ranks it as only the 25th “most capitalist” country, using degrees of economic freedom as the key criteria. Singapore, Switzerland, and Ireland top the list (Heritage Foundation, 2023). International examples are brought in throughout the text to reinforce the point that *After Capitalism* is indeed a global question, not just a US one. For example, the seven key drivers of change in Section 2.3 are happening across the globe. While they are primarily explained from the US perspective, global examples are included to demonstrate their reach.

This chapter begins with a note on the style and then describes the focal issue. Next, the method is explained, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of the *After Capitalism* framework.

1.1 Why *After Capitalism*?

The topic sprang from the minds of my students in the University of Houston Foresight program (Hines 2014) back in 2012. The leading advocate was Graduate Assistant Christopher Manfredi, who brought tremendous energy and enthusiasm to it, which sparked many rich classroom discussions. We devoted our annual Spring Gathering that year to “After Capitalism.” We planned to spend the morning laying out the problem and the afternoon generating solutions. The day was quite fruitful, but we found that far more time was spent on the problems than the solutions.

My initial research found that there indeed were lots of ideas but few comprehensive works on the future of the next economy. There were many calls to reform the existing system but few advocating entirely new approaches. The new ideas were fragmented and preliminary — a case of what futurists call weak signals.

Further scanning led me to seriously question the future of capitalism. I started with several books touching on the future after capitalism, and five years later, in 2017, I set up a scanning library to identify and capture signals of change more rigorously. The scanning revealed many problems with capitalism that brought to mind Jim Collins’s (2001) concept that one must “confront the brutal facts” — in this case the possibility of capitalism’s demise — so that we “don’t ever lose faith in our search for something better.” I was not ideologically opposed to capitalism, but I started to believe that perhaps its time was up. Over its course, capitalism had stimulated economic growth, produced wealth, and raised overall standards of living (not for all, of course). But now we are dealing with all the consequences of that growth, from inequality to climate change to social and political instability. Put simply, capitalism is not a good fit for the emerging future. Jim Dator (2017) puts it bluntly: “If we don’t use the unfolding collapse of contemporary social and environmental systems as an opportunity for imagining and creating viable social and environmental systems in their stead, others will use the collapse to create worlds more to their liking than to ours. For us to grasp this thin thread of possibility requires a great deal of wisdom, insight, creativity and innovation, and a kind of entrepreneurship of which we all should be a part.”

Once we accept this “brutal fact” of the possibility of capitalism’s demise, we need alternatives. Kate Raworth (2017, 20), who developed the

influential doughnut economy concept, was influenced by cognitive linguist George Lakoff's assertion that it is absolutely essential to have a compelling alternative frame if the old one is ever to be debunked. Simply rebutting the dominant frame will, ironically, only serve to reinforce it. Pointing out the flaws of the existing system without an alternative can be counterproductive. The challenge was the relative scarcity of alternatives, which reminded me of Polak's (1973) *Image of the Future* that lamented the absence of positive guiding images of the future in contemporary society. Part 2 of this work, *The Guiding Images*, will explain the concept in depth. The relevant point here is that he found that the central feature of successful civilizations of the past was that they were guided by a common positive image of their future.

I revisited Polak's work and started looking for guiding images. I did find several pieces emphasizing the importance of guiding images:

What Guiding Images Do

Guiding images tie the future to the present. They provide a stimulus for change and serve as a guide for decisions and actions to achieve that change.

- Futurist Patrick Van der Duin (2009) drew on the work of cultural historian William Irwin Thompson to promote the idea that images ***emerge organically*** at an unconscious mythological level. This also connects to the myth-metaphor level of the popular Causal Layered Analysis tool developed by futurist Sohail Inayatullah that outlines the importance of the underlying stories we live by (1998).
- Medina Vasquez (2003) notes that the ***future and the present are tied*** by images, which have an anticipatory and strategic function.
- Masini and Van Steenberg (1983) suggest images of the future are the ***stimulus to change*** the present.
- Van der Duin (2009) cautions, however, that there must be a ***conscious will*** for an image to actualize.
- Masini (1993) emphasizes the capacity of images to build the future or serve as ***guides for planning decisions*** (Shipley, 2002).

But there was very little in the way of actual guiding images! This work steps into this void and identifies three potential guiding images of the future after capitalism. What I eventually found regarding guiding images is

organized and synthesized as “AC Concepts.” Table 1.4 outlines the 52 AC Concepts included in this book. While much more will be said about the three guiding images, it is useful to introduce them at a high-level up front:

- **Circular Commons.** Expands the concept of sustainability to embrace circular principles as part of a social, political, and economic commons.
- **Non-Workers’ Paradise.** A play on the socialist idea of the workers’ paradise, but in the *After Capitalism* world we are not working in paid jobs as a means of sustenance.
- **Tech-Led Abundance.** Technological progress drives and leads to abundant wealth that fixes the core distribution problem of capitalism.

1.1.1 Theory of change

This is a book about change. So, a word is in order about the underpinning theory of change here (Peck 2009). In the Houston Foresight program that I lead there is an entire class on social change that explores a dozen theories of social change (Bishop and Hines 2012), which is also referred to as macro-history (Inayatullah and Galtung 1997). At the root of the theories is how one views the direction of change: random, cyclical, or developmental:

- **Random:** there is no overall direction to change.
- **Cyclical:** change in a recurring pattern — what goes around comes around.
- **Developmental:** change in a consistent direction over time; one variation, Progress, assumes that the direction is a positive one; Development is neutral on whether the change is good or bad.

This work assumes “Developmental” with its consistent direction of change over time, with caveats.

First, it explicitly avoids the notion that progress is inevitable. While the guiding images are offered as positive and could be viewed as Progress, the possibility of a Collapse future is also noted and briefly described. In fact there is a proliferation of collapse or even “end of times” works: from Pogany’s (2015) “Dark” period to the Stockholm Resilience Center’s Hothouse Earth future (Steffen et al, 2018) to Ziehan’s (2022) *The End of the World is Just Beginning*, and one might put Long-Termism in here as well (MacAskill, 2022), and so on. These dystopic images fit with our Collapse archetype described in Chapter 4.

Second, however, it allows for some cyclicity — there can be steps backward, sideways, and forward, and iterations within the overall

consistent direction. Current research on the Houston Archetype Technique (see Table 1.1), which is part of the method for this work, suggests the possibility of a New Equilibrium Loop, that is, change follows a pattern of several challenge-and-response loops, within a larger pattern of a developmental direction. Similarly, the Three Horizons framework (see Table 1.1), which is central to this work, has a cyclical aspect in that the three horizons are a cycle that repeats over time — the Horizon 3 Transformation future eventually becomes the Horizon 1 Baseline or current system. The Developmental interpretation of the Three Horizons cyclicity is that this new Horizon 1 Baseline reflects development — it is not going backward to a previous state but represents a new state with greater complexity and choice. The overall orientation is still development — toward greater complexity with more options and choices — albeit with cyclical characteristics.

The third caveat recognizes that the developmental model may be guilty of over-simplification. The random concepts fit here. Futurist Zia Sardar's (2010) post-normal times questions any model hinting at linearity — as developmental models do to some extent. He emphasizes interconnections amongst complexity, chaos, and contradictions. His view suggests developmental models would fit in a normal context that no longer exists. But post-normal and related ideas are also assumptions that have yet to be proven. Development theory would certainly agree that today's context could be termed post-normal. It would also agree that complexity, chaos, and contradictions are significant contextual factors, but nonetheless takes the view that a development pattern can be discerned and that it provides a useful framework for exploring the long-term future.

This work re-asserts the utility of big-picture, long-term thinking supported by developmental theory, which has fallen out of favor. The disfavor can be traced back to Lyotard's (1979; 1984) influential work on the postmodern turn, which favors local, contextual, and situation-specific explanations over broad, global, and more generalized ones such as development theory. This postmodern turn, which is particularly prevalent in academia, questions the very idea of grand or meta-narratives. It rejects the whole notion of guiding images of the future, with the criticism that they are hegemonizing or colonizing because they do not specifically address local differences. This work acknowledges the importance of the local, contextual, and situation-specific — indeed the resulting images focus attention on this context — but does not agree that this means we cannot also usefully identify a larger concept of global, big-picture narratives/guiding images. It sees the local and global as complementary.

It is not required that you adopt a development theory of social change, but that you can at least see it as a possibility. That is one of the greatest assets of a futurist — the ability to embrace and understand an alternative view or alternative future, even when you may not believe it. Futurists embrace the idea that our view of what is happening or should be happening may be wrong, and therefore it is important to search for and understand alternatives. So, you don't need to believe in development theory, but see it as a plausible explanation for how the future unfolds.

1.1.2 Voice, tone and intended audience

Most buyers of this book will be supporters of the idea of *After Capitalism*. Nonetheless it's written in a way that invites skeptics to join the inquiry. The arguments rely on data and logic and are intended to make a reasonable case to anyone — not just supporters. I do ask supporters to pass it on to the skeptics they know and perhaps we can expand the range of people thinking about *After Capitalism*.

While it is US-centric, given the US position at the center of neoliberal capitalisms, it is hoped that sufficient examples are provided for the non-US reader to be persuaded that it is indeed a global phenomenon. Interestingly, half the authors of the 52 AC Concepts are based outside the USA.

The hope is that these images will have a wide enough popular appeal to function as North Star guides. Most readers will likely prefer one of the three guiding images ultimately developed; some might prefer a mix. For skeptics, maybe you can find one that is at least palatable. I would be satisfied if you at least could come to terms with the potential end of capitalism and accept that this would not be the end of the world.

This book will spend time chronicling the demise of capitalism to persuade readers of the need for new guiding images. There is a strong foundational belief that capitalism is inevitable. The case against it needs to be strong. Thus, there are lots of citations first because it is primarily a work of synthesis and second to demonstrate that “I am not making this up” [referring to an old favorite humorist, Dave Barry]. Some of the ideas may seem far-fetched. But they are grounded in solid research from multiple sources. In sum, there are likely three kinds of readers and appeals:

- Supporters: already in the alternatives camp and looking for ammunition.
- Skeptics: have some doubts and gathering information.

- Opponents: most likely won't read the book; if they do, it is to refute the arguments.

So, you're probably a supporter or maybe a skeptic. I am not going to bother trying to persuade the opponents. Neither should you. Rather than waste time there, let's focus on strengthening the case for supporters and bringing more skeptics into our camp.

Given this strategy of bringing more supporters into the fold, let's not demonize capitalism, which would likely turn off those who might be on the fence or at least willing to listen. We can take the position introduced in the previous section that capitalism was arguably an effective system for economic development that fit the context of the industrial revolution era by promoting economic growth. It did its job, so-to-speak, but it simply doesn't fit well with today's emerging context. We can acknowledge that our more radical colleagues might favor a more confrontational approach due to the seriousness of the situation. It's a good thing to have a variety of approaches. Nonetheless the approach here is "you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar."

The guiding images of the *After Capitalism* future can be used in your work and shared with your colleagues and clients. So this book is written in a way that you in turn would feel comfortable handing it to your colleagues, clients, and friends. It is hoped that this work will also appeal to those interested in the future who do not have a background in foresight, as well as those curious about how a futurist sees this future. Other reasons for reading this work include:

- You might simply be searching for ideas about how to make a better future.
- You might be among the growing ranks of those disenchanted with capitalism and looking for something else.
- You might entertain some ideas about sustainability; the commons; a post-work future; a more inclusive, equitable, and co-created future; an abundance future led by spectacular advances in technology... and be curious to see how they might come together in a systematic way to create a better future.

The intent is to share just enough about the methodology to make a strong case for the guiding images by showing that they are derived from a rigorous futurist approach. Another means of bolstering the credibility of the resulting images is by providing literally hundreds of citations — these

ideas are not merely wishful thinking! It will not include the light breezy anecdotal stories typical of business bestsellers, but sprinkle in a few geeky methodological points, i.e., the difference between images, visions, and utopias. I want readers to understand the rationale of these guiding images and come away with hope for a better future, persuaded of the possibilities for a new system beyond capitalism that isn't simply a recycling of the old socialist or communist programs. I hope the guiding images are compelling enough to spark interest and ultimately galvanize action.

This is a book about what, not how. What could the future be like? It is my hope that crafting plausible positive guiding images will spur interest in how to get there. The how-to is a separate book that really is not worth writing unless there is already an established destination worthy for us to consider. If you are deciding where to go on vacation, it doesn't make sense to plan the itinerary until you know where you are going. A trip to Miami will have a much different itinerary than one to Paris, Dubai, or the Taj Mahal. So, let's decide where we want to go first!

Let's make a deal right here that the spirit of this journey is one of exploring alternatives — rather than producing the right answer. Admittedly, we are taking a position that capitalism is not the right answer. But we want to persuade those still tied to it and suggest why it's time to change, in the spirit of “come with us” rather than “we're right and you're wrong.”

These guiding images are offered up as options or choices. I invite others to create additional images. My purpose is to contribute to the possibility space rather than dictate the menu that one must choose from.

1.2 Focal issue

Framework Foresight begins an exploration of the future by identifying a key framing issue or question to guide the project (Hines et al., 2017).

What are potentially compelling guiding images of the next system after capitalism?

The use of the term capitalism covers more than just the economy. Capitalism is broadly defined here as encompassing the supporting STEEP+ context: social/ cultural, technological, economic, environmental, and political/ideological — and sub-systems. Several of our AC Concept authors make this point:

- Mason (2015) observes that capitalism entails the whole system needed to make society function with an emphasis on markets and private ownership.
- Harari (2017a) notes that the mantra of economic growth underlying capitalism has moved into the realm of making ethical judgments with almost religious conviction.
- Srinivasan (2017) suggests it's useful to think of capitalism as an operating system.

This book opened with people's belief in the inevitability of capitalism. How to change that is a central challenge that needs to be addressed in looking for alternatives. It is not going to be easy! We will talk a fair bit about the importance of values — as they are relevant in this context. A central feature of the “capitalism is inevitable” argument is that it taps into the competitive instinct and relies on the “humans are wired to compete” (Diamandis, 2012) or “survival of the fittest” assumptions.

Not everyone believes this of course, but it is a central argument supporting capitalism, since it is the system that may appear to offer the best fit with human nature. Other books and authors reviewed for this work, such as Bollier (2014), discuss the potential for cooperation, and raise questions about the inevitability of selfish humans maximizing their prospects at the expense of others. Eisler and Fry (2019) make a strong case that debunks the popular idea that people are hard-wired for domination, selfishness, or greed. They point out historical precedents for partnership approaches that emphasize empathy, equity, and caring. They argue that the dominator approach has simply become entrenched and reinforced in familial, educational, religious, political, and economic structures. In short, it can be “unentrenched” should we make that choice.

My challenge to the belief that we are “wired to compete” is that it assumes a static view of human values. Supporters of capitalism and

STEEP

The acronym STEEP (social, technological, economic, environmental, and political) is commonly used by futurists as a set of categories to account for the broad global context external to the specific domain being explored. The + is used to indicate additional categories beyond the five principal ones. In the Framework Foresight method used here, STEEP categories account for the broad context and a domain map of categories is created to explore the domain – in this case, *After Capitalism*.

competition are describing the modern values paradigm and assuming that this is the end of the story. Modern values, described in more detail in Section 2.3.1, emphasize competition, achievement, and victory — a perfect fit for capitalism. A pernicious aspect of modern values focused on individual achievement is that capitalism exploits this in a hyper-personalized marketing approach that dramatically favors the individual over the group. However, values are shifting away from modern, and the fit will become less perfect. The developmental view of social change suggests that this high-competition phase of modern values is just that — a stage. It is not inevitable, hard-wired, or human nature. Indeed, the transition to postmodern values brings forth a different idea that emphasizes the common good over the individual one.

Valuing individual success over the common good is not human nature, but a stage of development.

It should be noted that there are far more concepts that seek to fix capitalism than ones that seek to replace it. We will keep the focus on what's to come after capitalism — the reform concepts will only be covered to the extent that they aid understanding of the transition to *After Capitalism*. It's not an on-off switch from the old to the new, but more like a morphing over time. Thus, some coverage of the potential transition is helpful.

Ultimately, whether one of these guiding images or a combination of them is pursued is a choice. Futurist Richard Lum (2014, 1) observed that:

“A review of current global trends such as population growth, continuing industrialization, rising energy demand, massive urbanization, and long-term climate change shows that humanity is entering uncharted territory with respect to the material and organizational challenges it will face in the coming decades. Yet, despite these considerable challenges, a review of humanity's history and an exploration of the presently dim outlines of the future both strongly suggest that humanity can and is developing the insights and tools to dramatically raise the material security and affluence for all if it chooses to do so. Thus, the future is very much a matter of vision and of choice.”

It won't be easy. Futurist Riel Miller (2006) suggested that strategic choice as part of a transformation will confront opposition and ignorance. One might add fear of the future. A personal observation from working with many different individuals and organizations over the last thirty years is that the last five or so years have been characterized by a relatively high degree of fear, uncertainty, and pessimism regarding the future. Lepore (2017) talks about the mostly dystopic view of the future, one of submission, helplessness and hopelessness; of an untrusting, lonely, and sullen twenty-first century. Opposition, ignorance, fear, and pessimism are hardly ideal conditions for transformative change!