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HUMANITY’S GREAT CREATIVITY RESET

Designing worlds beyond the grand global futures challenges

Jennifer M. Gidley

For millennia, humans have struggled to predict, control, and understand the future. Our forebears sought advice from oracles; read the stars through astrology; debated concepts of time and future philosophically; wrote utopias and dystopias; and, in the modern scientific era, tried to predict the future by accumulating and interpreting patterns from the past to extrapolate models of the future.

What we now know is that the single, predictable future that trend modelers propose does not actually exist. Instead, what is out there is a multitude of quantum possible futures. At the heart of this changed perception is the evolution of consciousness. This realization gives us the power to imagine, design, and create the futures we choose, notwithstanding that some individuals and societies are more constrained than others by social, political, and economic structures. Historically, social and cultural systems were built around our belief that life generally happens as expected. However, in the 21st century, we are witnessing the unraveling of many of our socio-cultural, geo-political, and ecological systems. Today’s world is complex and uncertain. Tomorrow is expected to be even more so.

In the 1990s, the US Defense Department coined a new term, VUCA: Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. The business world adopted VUCA in its leadership narrative. Some futurists use the term “post-normal” to characterize the chaos, complexity, and uncertainty of our present times. One could argue that the world has always been volatile and uncertain but that we were not as conscious of it as we are today. Regardless of whether it is the world that has changed or our conscious view of it, we do need to find ways to deal with the challenges we plainly see. In this chapter, I want to focus on the opportunities provided by the challenges of our times and how we can design and create worlds beyond them.

Since the turn of the 21st century, with the exponential rate of technological change, time itself seems to be speeding up, bringing “the future” ever closer. As the pace of change accelerates, the word “future” becomes ever more ubiquitous—in the popular media, in business literature, and in educational and academic spheres. Ironically, short-termism thrives in these circles, with little evidence of engagement with the futures studies literature established over several decades (Gidley, 2017). Consultants randomly call themselves futurists, but they are often just trend-spotters. Meanwhile, many experienced academic futurists have given up on the big-picture philosophical issues to join the consultants.
Jennifer M. Gidley

Grand global futures challenges and creative alternative futures

The times we are in are critical because the challenges we face as global citizens for near and long-term futures, span socio-cultural, geo-political, and environmental domains. Climate crisis alone points to frightening futures of rising seas, drowning cities, mass migration of climate refugees, drastic food shortages due to loss of arable land to drought, floods and contamination, and the mass extinction of species. We can read about this crisis of crises everywhere today, but what I want to focus on here is the creative, restorative, and regenerative pathways focused on turning things around.

Let us ask ourselves: “Is future as time bomb the only way forward?” In spite of the potential for catastrophe that current trends indicate, paradoxically, we are in the best position ever to turn negative trends around through the means at our disposal. Humans have never been more conscious, more globally connected, or more capable of radical positive change than we are today. With the instantaneous communications available, millions of people can be mobilized in an instant to act for good causes if we understand how to activate our creativity and our agency.

There is a whole raft of grand global futures challenges that we can find being discussed today. I have synthesized these into twelve clusters of issues across three broad domains: environmental, geo-political, and socio-cultural. My first mind-map (see Figure 3.1) includes current trends likely to create major problems for futures of humanity. In a second mind-map, I offer counter-trends, twists, and surprises (see Figure 3.2). These alternative futures have

Figure 3.1 Grand Global Futures Challenges (Gidley, 2017)
Humanity’s great creativity reset the potential to mitigate, disrupt, or even reverse the dominant trends and enable people to imagine, design, and create positive alternatives to the disturbing trends being forecast. It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with all the challenges and alternatives identified, so I have selected just some in each domain that I see as highly significant to illuminate in this discussion.

**Environmental trends and surprises**

In the broad environmental domain, climate crisis, energy systems, and ecosystems are inextricably interconnected. I include health because healthy human futures are so reliant on how we deal with the future of our atmosphere, biosphere, climate, Ocean, and other sentient beings.

The most disturbing global challenge is the climate crisis. There is a great deal of agreement among climate scientists that the planetary climate is changing in ways that increase the risk for a large proportion of the global population. It is widely agreed that this is a result of a century of industrialized human lifestyle and that it is potentially irreversible. The most significant devastating effects on global human society in the foreseeable future are expected to be melting polar glaciers and icecaps, leading to rising sea levels, flooding of many small island developing states, and inundation of low-lying countries and large coastal megacities (Gidley, 2016b). This is very likely to drive mass migration on a scale not seen for 10,000 years.

![Diagram of Grand Global Futures Alternatives (Gidley, 2017)](BK-TandF-DONNELLY_9780367897185-220705-Chp03.indd)
The latest mitigation thinking is that while reducing GHGs is vital, it will not be enough to prevent the worst-case scenarios of the climate crisis. We need to focus on carbon capture or carbon sequestration. This leads us to regenerative practices on land and in the Ocean. The regenerative agriculture movement in Australia and elsewhere is a very important step in securing future food supplies in climate-vulnerable countries. The Agricultural Innovation Mission for Climate was launched at the 2021 Climate Summit. AIM for Climate will involve significant investment in agricultural innovation and Research and Development to reduce emissions in the agriculture sector (currently at 24% of all greenhouse emissions), increase food and water security. One of the best examples of carbon capture on earth is found in the Ocean in what is called “Blue Carbon.” In a 2021 UNESCO report assessing its 50 marine World Heritage Sites, it is noted that everyone knows that forests capture and store carbon. What is less well known is that the forests of the Ocean and rivers—seagrass meadows, mangrove forests, and tidal salt marshes—capture and store carbon 30 to 40 times faster than forest (Duarte et al., 2021).

Disturbing energy trends include peak oil and the crisis of fossil fuels, nuclear waste disposal, and overall resource depletion. Welcome counter-trends include the upsurge in renewable energy use, and the movement to end nuclear energy, because of the near impossibility of eliminating the dangers of waste disposal. The rise in renewable energies worldwide is encouraging, with Denmark and Scotland reaching, and often exceeding, 100% of their energy demands through renewables. The growing awareness of the need to reuse and recycle, particularly among young people, appears in the emerging trend of “slow fashion” to replace “fast fashion.”

The entire ecosystem of the Earth and Ocean is under severe strain threatening our planetary food and water security. We have known this for decades (Meadows et al., 1972). There are widespread concerns about food and water security for an expected global population of over 9 billion by 2040, based on the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA): World Population Prospects 2019. The 2020 World Economic Forum (WEF) Report claimed: “The number of people exposed to water stress could double by 2050 if efforts are not made to keep global warming below 2C above pre-industrial levels” (Dunne, 2021).

However, there are many weak signals globally that citizens want to take back control over their food and water security. Attempts to control global food supply by multinationals such as Monsanto are increasingly being resisted by national governments in response to popular demand. Farmers in both India and China are rebelling against plans to move them off their lands to create megacities. Twenty years ago, the Bolivian people successfully took back their urban water supply from corporates in a series of protests called the Cochabamba Water War.

Cities seeking to increase their food security are experimenting successfully with vertical gardens, bush food forests, and urban farms, which are part of the growing creative and ecocity movement designed to deal with food security. Cuba led the way in urban farming in its search for political and economic independence after the US embargo in 1960. Havana is now a world leader in urban agriculture with more than 50% of its fresh produce grown within the city limits, using organic compost and simple irrigation systems. The concept of eco-villages is not a new one, with some of the best-known eco-villages being over 50 years old (for example, Findhorn in Scotland, and Auroville in India). The Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) is a large global organization that spearheads and supports eco-village communities. They currently consist of 10,000 communities across 140 countries. They call themselves “a growing network of regenerative communities and initiatives that bridge cultures, countries, and continents.”
Finally, in the global health domain, new and resistant diseases have emerged, with the variants and mutations of the COVID-19 pandemic threatening to resist vaccination efforts. Furthermore, a global epidemic of mental health problems includes depression, anxiety, and suicide, particularly among the young. In April 2016, the World Health Organization cited depression as the leading cause of disability, affecting an estimated 350 million people of all ages globally. Counterpoints to these alarming trends include a renewed focus on healthy communities, wellbeing, futures visioning work with young people, alternative and traditional medicines to complement antibiotics, better sanitation in countries most in need, and, last but not least, global educational transformation, as we will see under socio-cultural systems.

Trends and twists in global power

As part of global power, I include the geo-political issues of governance and conflicts, economic issues, and technology. Digital technologies are so ubiquitous that we cannot isolate the power structures from the technologies they are embedded in.

Future global governance challenges stem from the shift from a bi-polar (Cold War) world to a multi-polar world (G-20); the rise of non-state actors such as terrorist networks, aided and abetted by the digital revolution; and organized crime and corruption across many levels of global society. There is a paradox with respect to the nation-state: on the one hand, there is an intensification of nationalism, which the WEF views as a demand for protection against the perceived economic disruption, and social dislocation caused by globalization.

On the optimistic side, an erosion of power of the nation-state to deal with the complexity of issues leads to a parallel rise in power of city mayors. The twists and counter-turns in the play of power include growth in high-level global nongovernment organizations such as the United Nations and its subsidiaries since the end of the Second World War; the emergence of regional geo-political and economic partnerships, such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa); and the explosion of civil society activism both on the ground and digitally. The Outrage movement, the Black Lives Matter protests, and the MeToo movement are powerful examples of the energy that can be mustered to counter the corruption and abuse of power experienced by everyday citizens.

The changing shape of global power not only reflects the geo-political tensions between globalism and nationalism, the growing economic disparity, and the rise of non-state actors. It also reflects the freedoms and shadows of the digital revolution and the rise of exponential technology. At the interface between the digital revolution and global conflicts, cyber-terrorism has both a geo-political and domestic face. As an example, terrorist group ISIS jumped in opportunistically to take advantage of the chaos of the British exit from the European Union. Lone wolf terrorists, who may be isolated psychopaths, can claim allegiance to Islamist jihad as a way to justify their crimes. And we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg in terms of the socio-cultural and economic impact of emerging issues such as cyber-bullying, cyber-stalking, and identity theft in the domestic arena.

The monopolization of the digital revolution by a handful of hyper-corporations has in itself changed the balance of power globally, such that some individual corporations have a higher net worth than many smaller nations. The BIG FIVE tech corporations (Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Microsoft) own the lion’s share of technology use between them. Their combined net worth in early 2020 was over $5 Trillion USD. They wield so much power, don’t pay taxes, and hold governments to ransom to give them free access to news outlets. It was recently reported in the Wall Street Journal that the “triopoly of Google,
Facebook, and Amazon increased their share of the U.S. digital-ad market from 80% in 2019 to 90% in 2020, as a result of COVID.”

Growing economic disparity is a sleeping giant in terms of potential conflict if disenfranchised populations decide to take united action. Such revolutionary energy of the disenfranchised was amplified digitally in the initial surge of the Arab Spring to overthrow despotic governments. It was largely orchestrated by the millennial generation in North Africa, using Twitter and Facebook, notwithstanding that the surge was too weak to sustain itself. So there are positive aspects to exponential technology, and there is a myriad way that we can mitigate the invasive impact that exponential technological development has on our lives.

The big challenge is how to “keep it human” in a world of unregulated, rampant technology, rising rates of cybercrime, and potentially ungoverned “autonomous” machines, including autonomous weapons. We need to become more conscious of and moderate our own relationships to technology. If we recognize the dehumanizing effects of digital addition on our lives, health, and social relationships, we can find ways to digitally detox our lives, our education systems, and our society. This may include embracing the “Slow” and “Retro” movements, “downshifting,” and “voluntary simplicity.” It is vital to find ways to rehumanize our lives in our techno-mediated world. There is much evidence now that humans can consciously evolve and advance without technological enhancement (Gidley, 2019). Further, we are discovering how human purpose, meaning and altruism can be integrated into digital environments. We have also discovered unexpectedly, with the disruption of COVID-19, that many schools have been able, almost seamlessly, to shift to virtual classrooms.

Economic crisis dominates the discussion on global futures challenges. While the media focuses on rising and falling share prices, interest rates, property values, and whether there will be another global financial crisis, the greatest economic crisis is largely invisible. In recent decades the disparity between rich and poor has increased exponentially, both within nations and across the globe. The WEF indicates that this is not just a problem for developed countries but rather, in most countries, “the poorest half of the population often controls less than 10% of its wealth.” The Oxfam 2018 Report tells us that the world’s richest 1% got 82% of the wealth generated that year. We also know that during the COVID period, the handful of billionaires got richer, while so many other people lost their jobs, lost their livelihoods, and lost their lives.

On the alternative futures horizon for economics, we find the rise of the sharing economy, micro-finance, alternative currencies, ethical banking, and the circular economy. None of these will overcome the ethical and moral vacuum lying under the greed of the grasping billionaire minority who ignore the common good. Only individual moral awakening can achieve this. Another promising economic counter-trend is the emerging movement to replace GDP growth with growth in social and environmental wellbeing as a societal goal. This is generally referred to as the Triple Bottom Line (Economy, Society, Environment).

The idea of a new metric for measuring growth and success is also being applied to the world of investing. The terms Impact Investing and Responsible Investing have arisen in response to the wide dissatisfaction with the single Bottom Line for investing and GDP for measuring economic success. A significant application of this view is that investments should give equal weight to environmental, social, and governance (ESG) aspects. ESG is a particularly successful form of the general idea of Impact Investing or Responsible Investing. ESG is an expression of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). A more recent iteration, which prioritizes the Ocean, is Corporate Ocean Responsibility (COR).
Socio-cultural trends and counter-trends

Perhaps the greatest global challenge in the socio-cultural domain is rapid urbanization. The second greatest challenge is global education (or lack of). Some socio-cultural challenges are less obvious because they are so entrenched that they are nearly invisible. These include racism, as found in ethnic and racial profiling; gender inequality; neglect of the rights of future generations; and the erosion of leadership.

Urbanization, the movement of people from rural areas into towns, cities, and, more recently, megacities, has been a growing global trend since the beginning of the 20th century. In 1900 only 10% of the global population lived in cities. In 2010 the global urban population tipped beyond 50%. The UN DESA Population Division projects that by 2050, 66% of the global population will be urbanized. Growing urbanization means that rural agricultural land is shrinking, leading to serious food shortages. Key drivers of old urbanization over the past 50 years were industrialization and globalization, both motivated by the desire for economic growth.

The drivers of the new urbanization include sustainability and the creativity required to build a post-industrial urbanism that values people and planet over profit. Many emerging industrializing nations of Africa, Asia, and Latin America do not want to merely copy what the old urban zones were doing 50 years ago but to embrace the new urbanization drivers: sustainability and creativity. The greening of established cities, like Berlin, Manchester, and New York, can be models for planners in Nigeria and western China, so they do not repeat the old mistakes. There is an urgent need for old, regenerative urban environments to develop and share their urban policies so that newly urbanizing regions can benefit from the experience of the old industrialized nations. Cities can form alliances and digital networks to disseminate research and knowledge about more socially and politically equitable forms of urbanization, as we find in Scandinavian countries.

The creative city movement, supported by the Creative Cities Network—a UNESCO partner—is a counter-trend that will shape the way cities urbanize in the coming decades. Maurizio Carta points to three design dimensions of culture, communication, and cooperation, which support the development of a creative class, and contribute to urban regeneration and sustainability (Carta, 2007). Creativity is central to transforming cities from Black and dirty industrial wastelands to green and regenerative creative cultural hubs. The post-industrial counter-trend is welcomed by millennials with its creative, green, and collaborative values. Paradoxically, the pandemic with its urban lockdowns has caused a reversal of the attraction to the urban, leading to an exodus in Australia from cities to regional and rural areas, which are perceived as safer, and affording a better lifestyle.

Global education (or lack thereof) is an ongoing challenge in the socio-cultural domain. The Education for All (EFA) project, now run by UNESCO, has had some success in increasing access to schooling for many children and improving literacy rates overall. In 1990 when the EFA was created there were 100 million children out of school. By 2010, 40 million more children had gained access to primary schooling. But this meant that 60 million children still had no access to primary schooling. Other major challenges remain for the Education for All Agenda.

Firstly, there are serious cultural implications of importing one system of education (largely Euro-American) into other cultures. Secondly, it is difficult to assess whether the increased attendance at school is actually increasing learning and life opportunities. Thirdly, it is doubtful that the imported education model will meet the needs of diverse cultural futures in a rapidly changing world. The EFA project may in the long run overcome the challenge of
global illiteracy but was never designed to deal with the subtle cultural challenge of imposing the Anglo-European industrial era education model on other cultures.

Arguably, the biggest educational futures challenge is not just access. It is how to transform education so it is culturally appropriate and designed to develop whole human beings who are futures-focused and can think creatively about how to deal with emerging challenges. The old fragmented, mechanistic, and materialistic ways of thinking are not capable of dealing with the growing complexity of global environmental, economic, and societal change. Much that is called new knowledge is not-so-new knowledge repackaged in new technologies. Creativity, imagination, critical thinking, and complexity are important higher-order cognitive capacities (Gidley, 2016a). They are needed to enable the radical rethinking of education that the 21st-century demands if it is to adequately prepare young people for exponential change, uncertainty, and complexity.

Education, along with thinking, needs a complete overhaul, as Edgar Morin argues.

One of the greatest problems we face today is how to adjust our way of thinking to meet the challenge of an increasingly complex, rapidly changing, unpredictable world. We must rethink our way of organising knowledge.

Morin, 2001, p. 5

Not only futurists but also leading thinkers in many fields (complexity science, ecology, education, integral studies, philosophy, psychology, spirituality studies, and systems theory) attempt to grapple with these challenges. Like Morin, I believe that more complex, self-reflective, organic ways of thinking will be vital in reshaping education so that young people are better equipped for the complexity, paradox, and unpredictability (Gidley, 2016a).

There are also some promising cultural counter-trends. In addition to affirmative action regarding gender, ethnicity, and age, there is a growing awareness, especially among younger generations, about the need to find meaning and purpose in life. This renewed focus on meaning has, in turn, given rise to social innovations such as new business models that include purpose businesses, social entrepreneurship, coworking hubs, and impact investment. These initiatives are largely driven by young people wanting to create better, fairer futures. Social entrepreneurship has become a popular way for many young people to do business in ways that they can make a living and also make a positive difference in the world, socially or environmentally.

Another vital socio-cultural futures issue is how we care for future generations, the children of our children’s children. What kind of earth, environment, tangible, and intangible resources are we bequeathing to them? This includes food and water security, safety from war, violence, and toxic environments, and, of course, quality education. Taking a cultural futures lens to future generations, we find the 7th Generation Principle of Indigenous peoples, especially of Turtle Island (North America). This principle means that elders are guided in their decisions and actions by considering the needs of their descendants, seven generations into the future. This is a wise, futures-oriented principle that has clear benefits for human and earth futures.

Finally, the WEF Outlook 2015 ranked “lack of leadership” in the top three challenges facing humanity. This crisis of leadership stems from the shift from old hierarchical, militaristic leadership models to new generation collaborative, digital, networked approaches; the rise of millennial post-industrial values; and the sheer complexity of life. Alternatives such as transformational, millennial, and postformal integrated leadership are arising but will leave a leadership vacuum for some time. Postformal leadership, like postformal education, integrates higher adult reasoning qualities—known as postformal reasoning—such
as complexity, creativity, complex thinking, dialogue, higher purpose, integrative thinking, intuition, and self-reflection (de Blonville, 2013). These are the leadership qualities we need to see in individuals who will be able to lead us forward into humanity’s great creativity reset.

Concluding reflections

Essentially, the future is a paradox. Although completely open and beyond our control, it is the object of trillions of dollars in government expenditure aimed at controlling it. It is both the playground of science fiction and the raw material of town planners and policy writers. The future can be short, ephemeral, and so unexpected that it is over the moment after it happens, or it can seem to take forever to appear. Haunted by nightmares or buoyant with hopes and dreams, our personal futures are a strange mix of shadows and joys from our past, and yet they can always be created anew by courageous actions in the present.

Regardless of the choices we make on these challenging issues, the futures we create through our actions today will impact the lives of the entire future of humanity for thousands, if not millions of years to come. Even though all these challenges are complex, planetary, and systemically interconnected, this chapter locates multiple positive futures that are spearheading humanity’s great creativity reset.

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