The empty promise of Future Shock

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Alvin Toffler was a journalist before he was a futurist, and these skills are shown to bravura effect in the opening pages of *Future Shock*. The rhetorical phrases rattle off the page. He starts from the very beginning as he means to continue. "Change is the process by which the future invades our lives." It is "a roaring current", one which is "so powerful today that it overturns institutions, shifts our values and shrivels our roots" (p.11). The concept of "future shock", which Toffler had invented in a magazine article five years earlier, "is no longer a distantly potential danger, but a real sickness from which increasingly large numbers already suffer."

Compared to other futures books of the time, the rhythms of the prose are like hearing the early passages of *The Rites of Spring* for the first time.

Toffler sets out his argument with similar vigour in the opening chapters of *Future Shock*. One of the reasons for the book's success is that its narrative strategy follows the classic Hollywood "three act" structure. We are drawn into jeopardy; the world of that jeopardy is made visible as we venture into it; and then, finally, we find ways of escaping it. Everyone, these days, remembers the jeopardy itself (the idea of future shock), but less of the detail of that world, and almost nothing of the remedies that might help us escape—meaning the institutions and innovations that might help us to manage our "adaptive range" in response to the shock.

One of the reasons for this is that the early sections on the idea of "future shock" are by far the most compellingly written.

> "Millions of ordinary psychologically normal people will face an abrupt collision with the future." (p. 18)
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> "Western societies for the past 300 years have been caught up in a firestorm of change. This storm, far from abating, now appears to be gathering force." (p.18)
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> There is "a racing rate of change that makes reality seem, sometimes, like a kaleidoscope run wild." (p.19)
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> "Future shock is the dizzying disorientation brought on by the premature arrival of the future… [It] is a time phenomenon, a product of the greatly accelerated change in society." (pp.19-20)

All of this can get breathless after a while, and the rush of rhetorical tropes should give the reader pause as they fly by. Toffler deals with this by doubling down. "Is all this exaggerated?", he asks. "I think not" (p.21). Of course not. The proposition is then reinforced with quotes from

a line of distinguished academics who, in their different ways, assert that change is speeding up. This last is one of the oldest claims in cultural history, going back at least to the Romans, and Toffler elides the ground for us by switching repeatedly between the 300-year space of modernity and the immediate generational experience of the 1960s and the 1970s.

There is a simple enough case to be made that there was a social and economic acceleration from the 18th century onwards. Energy consumption increased, the rate of innovation (technological and social) increased, population started to grow. But when you try to make a more specific case within this broad timeframe, there are difficulties. By many objective measures, as Hirst and Thompson (1996) noted, the experience of change in the late 19th century was more profound than that of the second half of the 20th. Equally, Robert Gordon (2016) argues persuasively that the innovations of the first part of the 20th century (from the car to the washing machine) were far more transformational than those of the ICT revolution in the later part.

Toffler has to elide some of this as well. "How do we know that change is accelerating? There is, after all, no absolute way to measure change" (p.28). He answers his own question on the next page, after a whole list of caveats that ought to give the careful reader at least a moment of reflection.

> "Even with all these qualifications however, there is widespread agreement, reaching from historians and archeologists all across the spectrum to scientists, sociologists, economists and psychologists, that many social processes are speeding up—strikingly, even spectacularly." (p.29).

The whole story, in other words, becomes self-referential to the point of circularity.

Only the name

The poet Edward Thomas once wrote, famously, of a being in a train at a railway halt of which he remembered "only the name". *Future Shock* has, similarly, left behind only the name, swirled around with an affect about the speed and restlessness of change. The affect of the book has replayed itself, endlessly, in corporate keynotes about the future, in consultancy pitches, in Silicon Valley product propositions. Change, we hear, is speeding up. We are overloaded by information. We are living in exponential times. And on, and on, and on. We can be fairly certain that almost all of those channelling this idea of "future shock" have never read the book.

No matter, then, that in fact many of the world's problems are caused by slowing down, rather than speeding up. The rate of population growth has been slowing for almost 30 years; economic growth has been slowing for more than 50 years, and productivity growth for much of that time; even the rate of digital innovation is slowing, in the face of mature and saturated markets (Evans, 2019) and the end of Moore's 'law'. Of the big generational drivers of change, only the rate of environmental change is accelerating, catastrophically.

It is, therefore, worth briefly unpacking Toffler's argument to understand the overlapping forms of change that he identifies to justify his "supercharged language" (his term). He makes a number of claims. The first is the growth of cities, which he dates back to 1850. The second is the growth in the consumption of energy, again measured back to 1850. The third is "the acceleration of economic growth", where Toffler changes the time frame, and concentrates on the post-war boom—from 1948 to 1965. "Today, growth rates of from 5 per cent to 10 per cent per year are not uncommon among the most advanced industrial nations" (p.31), with the implication that the output of goods and services will double every 10-15 years.

One of the problems with this, inasmuch as *Future Shock*'s assumptions can be teased out, is that Toffler builds a significant argument on the edifice of economic growth. The rate of acceleration on production and consumption, he asserts, leads to "an electric impact on the habits, beliefs, and self-image of millions." In retrospect, 1970 was almost the last moment at which one could make claims about such growth rates, or their effects.

The fourth element of the case for "future shock" is about technology. Toffler focuses on transport. Technology: speeds of 100 mph were achieved only with the steam train in the 1880s; by 1938 airplane speeds had reached 400 mph; by the 1960s "rocket planes approached speeds of 4,800 mph, and men in space capsules were circling the earth at 18,000 mph… the line representing progress in the past generation would leap vertically off the page." (p.33) Even on the basis of what was known at the time of writing, it is possible to observe that this is not comparing like with like. Since then, of course, the 1960s expectations that supersonic travel would become the norm have evaporated, and transport speeds (and notably aviation speeds) have stagnated.

Beyond this, he references the increasing size of the science base, makes an argument about the increasing speed of the diffusion of innovation, and references the way in which knowledge has grown. He uses the acceleration in the production of books as a metric.

The end of modernity

The timing of *Future Shock* is relevant. We are at the end of a long 250-year wave of modernity (Albrow, 1998) that has been characterised by ceaseless growth and expansion. Curry and Tibbs (2010) observe that,

> At the beginning of the modern era the entire globe represented the basic geographic space for expansion. Now that modernity is operating at a global level, globalisation proves not to be the next expansion stage for modernity, but its saturation point.

The point at which we became aware of this saturation can be debated, but at a cultural and environmental level it Rachel Carson (1962) 's book *Silent Spring* was certainly a weak signal of change, and by 1972, with the publication of *The Limits to Growth* in 1972 it had become rather

more. In this respect, the index of *Future Shock* is telling. There is no entry for 'Environment'; 'Environmental Pollution' has a handful of references.

Counter-cultural critiques of the limits of capitalism are seen in the writings of the Situationists and intellectuals and the social movements associated with *les evenements* of'68. In particular, the mood about the future changed in the space of a few years. The optimism of the 1960s, characterized by the excitement about space travel, quickly gave way to scepticism about environmental change and energy. One emblem of this is the shift in tone from Kubrick's 1968 film *Space Odyssey* to John Carpenter's low-budget *Dark Star* in 1974, with the space ship crippled by Congressional budget cuts.

In other words, it is significant that the book was published in 1970 and written, therefore, at the end of the 1960s. The timing has a significant influence on how Toffler constructs his argument.

But there is more here. Stein's "law" reminds us that "if something cannot go on forever, it will stop." Basic systems thinking suggests that systems have patterns in which reinforcing loops accelerate the dynamics of a system, but balancing loops represent constraints on these dynamics (Meadows, 2009). S-curves or logistics curves, one of the basic building blocks of much futures thinking, show an acceleration in the first part of the S-curve, and then a deceleration in the second part.

Much thinking that writes about exponential change, as Toffler does here without using the word, imagines that the rapid acceleration seen in the second quartile of the S-curve, when growth is at its fastest, is a new normal, rather than a system that is about to start meeting its limits. This is what Toffler does in *Future Shock* as he jumps between the long S-curves of modernity, and the far shorter one of post-war economic growth.

Used futures, empty futures

Not all futures are equal. Sohail Inayatullah (2007) writes in his Six Pillars paper of "used futures," without precisely defining it. It is an image of the future that "is unconsciously borrowed from someone else", which imitates "what everyone else is doing". Jose Ramos (2016) suggests it is "an image or idea of the future that someone else created in some other context, but to which we are unconsciously holding on to, blinding us to other more authentic and empowering ideas of the future."

Barbara Adam and Chris Groves (2007) describe "empty futures", in which the future is an open space awaiting colonisation.

> Once emptied, the future can be filled with anything, with unlimited interests, desires, projections, values, beliefs, ethical concerns, business ventures, political ambitions… Emptied of content and meaning, the future is simply there, an empty space waiting to be filled with our desire, to be shaped, traded or formed according to rational plans and blueprints.

The used future may once have been rooted in a theory of change, but has become disconnected over time. The empty future has never been thus connected. Instead, it is just a space in which the present is able to write cheques that the future will have to pay.

In summary, then, an empty future is one that never had a theory of change attached to it, while a used future is one whose theory of change has been found to be wanting when it makes contact with the changing world that it is attempting to describe.

While ideas of theories of change are taught in the handful of futures schools we have worldwide, they are scarce in the literature. One exception is work done by Wendy Schultz and Richard Lum on the future of education, in which each scenario was underpinned by a different theory of change.

One of the reasons that this matters is that assertions about futures outcomes are not generally falsifiable, which is why futurists also say that "there are no futures facts" (Bell, 2003). Without facts, there is no falsifiability. This may, as it happens, be a narrow view of what we can know about the future, and one which is epistemologically contestable, but that discussion is beyond the limits of this article.

The point is that futures projections based on a clear theory of change *are* falsifiable. We are able to observe events unfolding and assess whether a theory of change that has been proposed to explain them has less or more explanatory power as a result.

Adam and Groves make a similar point about futures when they contrast empty futures with contextual or embedded futures. Such embedded futures require us

> to recognise connections and implications, to appreciate things in their continuity and emergence, to know the future as embodied in things and events, embedded in processes and as carrying forth the deeds of the past.

In contrast, *Future Shock* skates across the surfaces of the world that it describes, piling up anecdote and data, playing fast and loose with timescales. This may be the reason for its success; the single idea about "future shock" morphs endlessly, shape-shifting as we go through the book. Does it have a theory of change? Arguably, it is that everything is accelerating, and that this will then have deep and drastic social consequences. Even as he was writing, much of this was contestable. *Future Shock* has become a strange futures text that turns out to be a used future, blinding us to the actual material futures unfolding in front of us, but also an empty future, used to make claims on the future that profit particular groups and interests in the present.

Maps of the world

Of course, Toffler's purpose is not merely descriptive. He says that he is describing both the "accelerative thrust" and the issues this causes in terms of the "adaptive range," which he proposes as a kind of index of human ability to respond, building better social institutions and

social routines to do so. There is no reason to disbelieve him. He was a lifelong progressive who had worked in a factory before he became a journalist to better understand that world of work. A long section at the end of the book is full of recommendations for social innovation.

The thing is this: Toffler does care about theory. Quite early in the book, when he is still setting out the stall of *Future Shock*, he writes, "In dealing with the future… it is more important to be imaginative and insightful than to be 100% 'right'. Theories do not have to be 'right' to be enormously useful. Even error has its uses. The maps of the world drawn by the medieval cartographers were so hopelessly inaccurate, so filled with factual error, that they elicit condescending smiles today when almost the entire surface of the earth has been charted. Yet the great explorers could never have discovered the New World without them. …

"We who explore the future are like those ancient map-makers, and it is in this spirit that the concept of future shock and the world theory of the adaptive range are presented here." (p.15)

In his excitement, he populated his map of the future with all kinds of fantastical creatures, some of whom were never sighted again. Islands were joined together to create whole new continents. Claims were made about the creatures found inland by explorers that were compelling enough to have survived down the decades as myths.

And the map created in *Future Shock* did turn out to be useful, even to Toffler. His next book, *The Third Wave* (1980), offered a testable proposition about the future, and specifically about the rise of the service economy. Toffler even seems to acknowledge as much in his introduction to the later book: "I concentrate less on acceleration, as such, and more on the destination towards which change is carrying us." (p.17-18] *The Third Wave*, and its theory of change, have survived 40 years of scrutiny (Curry, 2017).

The seeds of that book can be found within the pages of *Future Shock*. *The Third Wave* is neither an empty future or a used future. Indeed, it still sheds light, even now, on our contemporary crisis of politics and populism.

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