One Planet, Many Possible Futures

Stephen Kraus

Chakrabarty's *One Planet, Many Worlds* is a thoughtful meditation on the future that underscores the inherent difficulty in predicting the future. In the era of "The Great Acceleration," when climate and technology and ideas are changing faster than ever, the future becomes even more of a moving target than usual.

Certainly there are long-brewing "mega-trends" – like climate change – that can be extrapolated into the future. But that extrapolation is not simple or linear. Climate change doesn't mean a uniform global increase of two degrees in temperature. Climate change means chaos and new extremes and heat waves and polar vortexes and atmospheric rivers and flash floods and bigger hurricanes and more wildfires and mass migration and so on and so on. It is a classic example of what professional trend watchers mean when they say "the future is VUCA" – Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous.

Mega-trends are multi-faceted, and instead of evolving in isolation, they interact in complex and unpredictable ways. In the first chapter ("The Pandemic and Our Sense of Time"), Chakrabarty details the myriad ways climate change is interacting with our increasingly disease-prone world to make pandemics more frequent and more severe. The complexity he explores is referencing the analysis of primarily two among many mega-trends (climate change, and the increasing prevalence of pandemics). If you add in globalization, wealth concentration, various demographic shifts, and advances in AI and robotics, the complexity of envisioning the future increases exponentially, particularly when you then factor in the interactions among those trends.

Many Possible Futures

The complexity of future systems has led most futurists to essentially abandon the effort to predict "the future" – instead, they hope to articulate a variety of possible outcomes, and then engage in "scenario planning." There are just too many variables and too much uncertainty to identify a definitive future. Our projections of the future are not singular but probabilistic. As you develop a strategy for how you (or a company, or a country) will approach the future, it must be stress-tested to hold up in alternative future scenarios, ranging from more to less likely.

One benefit of envisioning various possible futures is that it allows for the conceptualization of positive, optimistic futures. Let's face it: today's efforts at envisioning the future typically evolve down a dark path. Chakrabarty's exploration of climate change and a pandemic-ridden future (at least to my reading) doesn't portray a joyous future. AI takeovers and other apocalyptic scenarios dominate popular culture and entertainment media. Human short-sightedness and self-centeredness got us into this situation, but despite their flaws, humans are obviously intelligent and resilient. There are possible futures where technologies for carbon capture could take a great leap forward. It is not without precedent. The hole in the ozone layer has largely been reversed through technology advancements and global action. We don't need Pollyannas or Voltaire's Professor Pangloss telling us that we live in the best of all possible worlds. But we do need to conceive of positive outcomes in order to achieve them. Consider the quote often attributed to Henry Ford: "Whether you think you can, or think you can't… you are right." Conceiving optimistic future scenarios draws our attention (and effort and motivation and investment) in the right direction, in the same way that novice race car drivers are told to "look at the road, not the wall" because where the eyes go the attention and body will follow. For the sake of humanity, we need visions of the future that are more Star Trek and less Hunger Games.

From the Macro to the Micro

As a social-scientist-turned-marketer, my particular interest is more micro – how will individual behavior and daily lives evolve? How will people think, live and buy differently in the future? These questions are crucial both in a descriptive sense (what are people likely to do) and a normative sense (what SHOULD people do for a more sustainable future).

These are not easy questions, as forecasting future behavior is notoriously difficult. Historically, futurists and other members of the "prognost-erati" have a relatively strong track record of predicting technological change, but not social or behavioral change. Trend watchers of the 1950s accurately predicted an oven that could cook a meal in two minutes. But they expected the main benefits of this invention would be time savings for so-called "housewives" who could spend extra time curling up on the couch and reading magazines. Absent from their predictions was the broader cultural emancipatory trend promoting gender equality: the fact that women could be seen as doctors, lawyers and CEOs, not to mention as leaders of households and decision-makers for most household purchasing decisions. This meant their predictions regarding the microwave–as a technological promise–were right, but not the broader cultural meanings within which it served emancipatory movements. It is precisely these emancipatory movements that lay at the heart of Chakrabarty's conception of modernity itself.

Nested within the mega-trend of climate change are a range of social and behavioral trends that contribute to today's pace of change. They set the cultural tone and daily mood of society.

Wealth inequality spurs a progeny of sub-trends, including political polarization, the urban/rural divide, and the resurgence of populism. Mental health concerns are rising amid the seemingly paradoxical combination of the ubiquity of social media and an epidemic of loneliness. Trust has fallen in institutions of all types, including government, media, medicine and science. Women are outpacing men in every metric of educational attainment (e.g., women outnumber men among college graduates, law/medical school students, and valedictorians), leading many futurists to proclaim "the future is female." Each social trend is individually complex, and interacts with the

others in myriad ways. When layered on top of climate change, the result is VUCA on top of VUCA. We will live in a VUCA-squared future.

Lifestyles and Mindsets of Tomorrow

Ironically, a VUCA-squared future seems the only prediction about the future that can be made with certainty. And in a world that will increasingly seem unpredictable and out of control, particularly on the climate front, trends related to reasserting control will come to the forefront. Expect trends like the "new nesting" – a revived focus on the home and controlling one's personal environment. Expect a more near-term mindset and a "live for today" mentality, with less focus on retirement and enjoying far-off (mythical?) golden years. Financial aspirations will shift from risk-taking and wealth replaced by dreams of security and risk-avoidance.

In a world of external uncertainty, controlling one's inner spaces will become a greater focus. Mental health will become a cultural priority. Being stress-free and happy will become new status symbols. The glorification of growth and hussle culture will give way to aspirations of serenity and contentment. Those seeking altered states will shift preferences toward "mind-expanders" like marijuana, psychedelics, and meditation. "Big Booze"—and the sedating effects of alcohol—will join the list of cultural evils along with big tobacco and big soda.

Perhaps the most crucial element of our attempts to reassert control will be whether we as a species assert more control over our future. At the ballot box, do we prioritize candidates who support sustainability? And when we spend, is it with brands that truly embrace sustainability, rather than just greenwashing for appearances? In the final analysis, perhaps that is the ultimate question – will we exert control by retreating inward, or exert control externally, aspiring to have greater agency over our future?