



Jennifer M. Gidley

THE FUTURE

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

The Future: A Very Short Introduction

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
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First edition published in 2017

Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016954116

ISBN 978-0-19-873528-1

Printed in Great Britain by
Ashford Colour Press Ltd, Gosport, Hampshire

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Introduction

Introducing ‘the future’

The future we face today is one that threatens our very existence as a species. It threatens the comfortable urban lifestyles that many of us hold dear and the habitability of the earth itself. The times we are in are critical, and the challenges we face as global citizens are complex, intractable, and planetary. The impact of climate crisis alone is pointing 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 salination, and the mass extinction of species. Several Pacific islands have already disappeared, and in the USA, the first climate refugees are being resettled from low-lying islands to higher ground. And this is just the beginning.

Renowned theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking, Oxford philosopher Nick Bostrom, and billionaire entrepreneur and engineer Elon Musk have issued serious warnings about the potential existential threats to humanity that advances in ‘artificial super-intelligence’ may release. When we include the volatility unleashed by random acts of terrorism, growing economic disparity, and the global youth mental health epidemic, it may seem that this book is going to be a doomsday story. What a challenging time to write a *Very Short Introduction* to the Future.

But the trends pointing to future as time bomb are only one side of the picture.

In spite of the potential for catastrophe that current trends suggest, we are also in the best position ever to turn negative trends around through the means at our disposal. As a species, we 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 only the understanding, passion, and will can be engaged.

Regardless of the choices we make as a species on these challenging issues, the futures we create through our actions today will impact the entire future of humanity for thousands, if not millions of years to come. Humans have always influenced the future, as we will see when we explore the history of humanity's relationship with the future.

For thousands of years we have struggled to predict, control, manage, 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.

But the single, predictable, fixed future that the trend modelling proposes does not actually exist. Instead, what is out there is a multitude of possible futures. What lies at the heart of this changed perception is an evolution of human consciousness. Knowing this means we have the power to imagine and create the futures that we choose, bearing in mind that some people have much greater power and influence than others, depending on life circumstances. Undoubtedly social, political, and economic structures limit some more than others. We must also distinguish

between futures we can create and the futures of everyday certainties we rely on, such as the daily rising and setting of the sun, and the annual flow of seasons. We need to be aware that we use a kind of ‘everyday foresight’ in order to conduct our daily lives, based on certain assumptions, such as public transport being reliable, travel bookings being trustworthy, and weather forecasts being mostly right.

Until recently, social and cultural systems were built around our belief that life generally happens as expected. In the 21st century we are seeing many of our socio-cultural and ecological systems unravelling. Today’s world is complex and unreliable. Tomorrow is expected to be more so. The US Department of Defense coined a new term in the 1990s: VUCA, which stands for volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. The business world has enthusiastically adopted VUCA in its leadership narrative.

As the pace of change accelerates, the word ‘future’ is becoming ever more ubiquitous—in the popular media, in business literature, and in educational and academic spheres. Consultants everywhere call themselves futurists. 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. The now popular use of the term ‘future’ has led to a global proliferation of government departments, corporate agencies, consultancies, and trend-spotters all claiming to be future-focused. The word ‘future’ itself has become trendy and trend spotting has become a fad. It is now considered obligatory for schools and universities to include in their strategic plans terms such as ‘future-proofing’ and ‘preparing for the future’. And yet, paradoxically, short-termism thrives, in business, government, and education circles, with little evidence of engagement with the futures studies literature established over several decades.

From a personal view the future is mysterious and ever changing: sometimes it is like a rainbow with the pot of gold

always out of reach. Other times it rushes at us like a tornado or drowns us in a tsunami of chaos. The future is paradoxical: it is completely open and beyond our control and yet 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 nerds. The future can be short, ephemeral, and so full of surprise that it is over the moment after it happens, or it can seem to take forever to arrive. Haunted by nightmares or pregnant with hopes and dreams, our personal futures are strangely full of shadows and joys from our past and yet can always be created anew by courageous actions in the present.

In this *Very Short Introduction* to the Future I hope to throw some light on the multiple facets that I have discovered in twenty-five years of research into the fascinating field of futures studies. I flag some of the tensions one might expect when reading about the future, most notably between scientific prediction on the one hand and ungrounded speculation on the other. I discuss whether the future is a time or a place, the history of thinking about the future over 3,000 years, and attempts to steer a course between the extremes of Malthusian doomsday catastrophes and the panorama of Cornucopian techno-optimism.

While the book will include a gloss of populist approaches, the main focus of this VSI will be to introduce the curious reader to the diverse dimensions of the fifty-year-old transdisciplinary field of futures studies that counts among its experts thousands of professors, researchers, practitioners, and students, across all continents. Futures studies operates as a global academic field, on the assumption that consciousness has increased to embrace multiple future possibilities, and that we are free agents to create worlds of our choices and participate consciously in our own evolution. Introducing readers to the art and science of this pluralistic approach to understanding the world of multiple futures is a major focus of this book.