

Towards Four point Nine

Marcus Barber
Looking Up Feeling Good Pty Ltd
Australia

Using a pessimism/optimism scale for assessing the future poses a challenge when considering the future of the species homo sapiens sapien (the one who knows they know). In being asked to make a selection of probability of any of the four scenarios we must, be default, assign the same outcome for one as to everyone.

I find this approach workable though problematic for even within dystopic or utopic future scenarios, there can typically be found people who might be defined as 'winners' (people positively impacted) or 'losers' (people negatively impacted).

By design I'm an optimist, often able to identify the good and beneficial in most situations, a believer that the average person is inherently 'good', a social animal understanding implicitly that co-operation is the best path forward. It is difficult not to be excited by the potential seen in the great leap forward, a world in which technology has freed many, where shared values come to the fore and the world becomes an inherently better place for all.

Yet I am also a pragmatist and currently I am pulled toward the more pessimistic view of our future. Collectives of our species have proven they will put self interest ahead of broader needs and right now we see this in sharp focus. Halal and Marien paint plausible views, though their broad brush, one size fits all might be said to ignore the variations across geography. There is certainly a sense that a US centric lens shades their assessment. This is neither good nor bad, it just is.

What the authors have identified shaping the world (a confluence of factors - climate change, ecological and economic collapse, technological advances, lack of water and food) fits the definition of a Cascading Discontinuity Set (CDS) (1) – events that of their own are challenging yet to a lesser or greater extent manageable and yet as more of them appear and more resources are absorbed dealing with them, the system for coping is being overwhelmed. The CDS confronting humanity is largely of our own making.

Describing 'decline to disaster' as a 'future' environment ignores that it is already a current reality for around 1 billion people on the planet today. As such it would seem that we are being asked to consider a dystopic view based on it becoming a **new reality** for those who've enjoyed the benefits of a deferred payment plan in creating their societies – the developed world.

Equally plausible, though to a perhaps to a lesser extent in sheer volume, there are already those who are experiencing the benefits of shared values, of high technology usage and a generally well maintained and enjoyable approach to living. 'Rise to Maturity' would be a significant departure for the greater majority of people on the planet, many of whom still face subsistence lifestyles. Whether those with the advanced technology are:

- a) willing to share it with those who do not for a greater good, and
- b) have moved beyond knowledge to the sorely lacking 'wisdom' is a point of significant concern.

In 'Increasing the rate of Sustainable Change' (2), the authors hone in on a key factor impeding sustainable progress – the myth that more knowledge will be sufficient to help us overcome our current trajectory. The authors suggest wisdom to understand how knowledge can be best applied is sorely lacking. Despite Halal's belief in technology, I see few signs that there is sufficient wisdom available to guide humanity away from our current trajectory.

One sign for hope is the few million people with both shared values and high technology usage (likely to be found in Scandinavias (Finland, Sweden, Denmark etc.) with pockets of others scattered around the world) evolving socially and technologically well ahead of most other parts of the planet (though recent events show they are not immune from self interest impacts). For the past few years I have been tracking the emergence a concept I've called 'Enoughness'¹ among mainly the Scandinavias. Not mentioned in the four scenarios, 'Enoughness' provides a panacea to the 'consume at all costs' mantra upon which much of the developed world's deferred payment plan rests. The shared values approach separates them from those who have high technology but individualistic models of behaviour.

And right now, Enoughness in a few small pockets will not be enough to stave off Gaia's call for payment of humanity's debt. Nor will new technology rescue us from the path. The owners of incumbent technology (in say energy) will do everything to first deny, then delay and finally defer the introduction of technology that makes theirs redundant. New technology in medicines is first 'accessed' by the very poor and once 'proven', access is denied, becoming the purview of the very rich. Profit trumps need. As indicated in 'A drop in the Ocean' (3), our use of water in developed nations ignores the life and death struggles around the world – Lifestyles are being placed above Life. It is suggested that in places like the US, Japan, UK and Australia around 30% of all edible food is thrown out before its use-by dates². This is at a time when around two billion people face starvation when simultaneously, almost half of all the US and Australian citizens are considered obese³, highlighting how easily societies put self interest ahead of need.

In 'A brief history of the world' (4) we see there are few smooth transitions – development is often forced upon us which typically means the collapse of the incumbent model.

The world is facing its 'Easter Island moment'⁴ in which self interest and ignorant behavior sees us running out of basic resources. We face starvation and social dysfunction. We are I believe facing the modern day version of the Black Death wherein a third of the world's population could perish over coming years and perhaps leave a global population of 4.9 billion. I hope we don't head down the path before us for surely if a company is deemed to be 'too big to fail'⁵, our world must be a bigger priority? I remain always hopeful but not currently optimistic.

Decline to Disaster 15%; Muddling Down 65%; Muddling Up 15%; Rise to Maturity 5%.

Correspondence

Marcus Barber
Suite 326, 500 Centre Rd, Bentleigh 3204 Australia
Email: desiredfutures@netscape.net

Notes

1. Enoughness - is a mode of thinking that is different from altruistic behaviour which sees an individual choose to give up something for the good of another; it is not philanthropic in the sense that someone chooses where they might spread their largesse based on personal interests; instead it is simply a recognition and acceptance that the goods they have in their life are sufficient for their needs and any further additions or upgrades are wasteful or unnecessary.
2. Food Waste: There are multiple references for food waste that any search engine will generate using the phrase 'how much edible food do we throw out?' This phrase generated results for Canada, Japan, UK, Australia and the US with numerous research reports cited.
3. Obesity: Using the phrase 'Obesity in Australia' (and other countries) in a search engine generated thousands of websites detailing the extent of obesity in many (mostly developed) countries.
4. In 'Collapse: How societies choose to fail or succeed', (2004) Viking Press; author Jared Diamond details the demise of Easter Island, now a bare, grass covered rocky outgrowth that was once covered in tropical rain forest and was stripped bare by the chieftains and their egos!
5. 'Too big to fail' is a term that refers to an economic theory that certain companies within a single economy provide a fundamental underpinning to the rest of an economy and as such, must be supported from collapse. In such circumstances, taxpayer funds are shifted out of the public domain and into the private domain in order to prop up the failing private enterprise.

References

- Barber, Marcus P. (2006). "Wildcards: Signals from a future near you." *Journal of Futures Studies*, 11(1), 75-94.
- Goncz E, Kleizen H, Skirke U, & Barber M. (2006). "Increasing the rate of sustainable change." *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 15, 2007, 525-537. Canada: Elsevier.
- Barber, Marcus P. (2006). "A Drop in the Ocean" *Journal of Futures Studies*, 11(3), 61-78.
- Geoffrey Blainey. (2002). "A Brief History of the World." Melbourne, Australia: Penguin Books. (This book provides an exceptional insight to the stop nature of progress and demise. At best a 'muddling up' of societies.)

