

Five Steps on the Road to Recovery

Part One: The Great Acceleration

Amongst the devastation of Covid-19 and while many people are still fighting for their lives, others are developing proposals for 'doing things differently' when the present threat has passed. Issues concerning health, well-being and preparedness for future viral outbreaks are commonly cited. Yet many more will not be taken seriously, let alone implemented. Those in positions of wealth, power and influence are already working to return things to as close to 'normal' as possible. They may not entirely succeed but we can be sure that a vast number of well-intentioned proposals for constructive change will simply be forgotten. At the same time, it's clear that 'business as usual' is no more than a convenient fantasy.

From a futures viewpoint we need to appreciate that the current pandemic be seen not merely as a one-off inflection but as further evidence that the global system has been destabilised by human activity, especially since the mid-20th Century. Slowly at first, but now with increasing momentum, we know that it's moving beyond the relatively stable state that had existed for millennia. The benign conditions within which the human species developed and thrived are slipping away and will continue to do so until the planet reaches a new stable state sometime in the distant future.

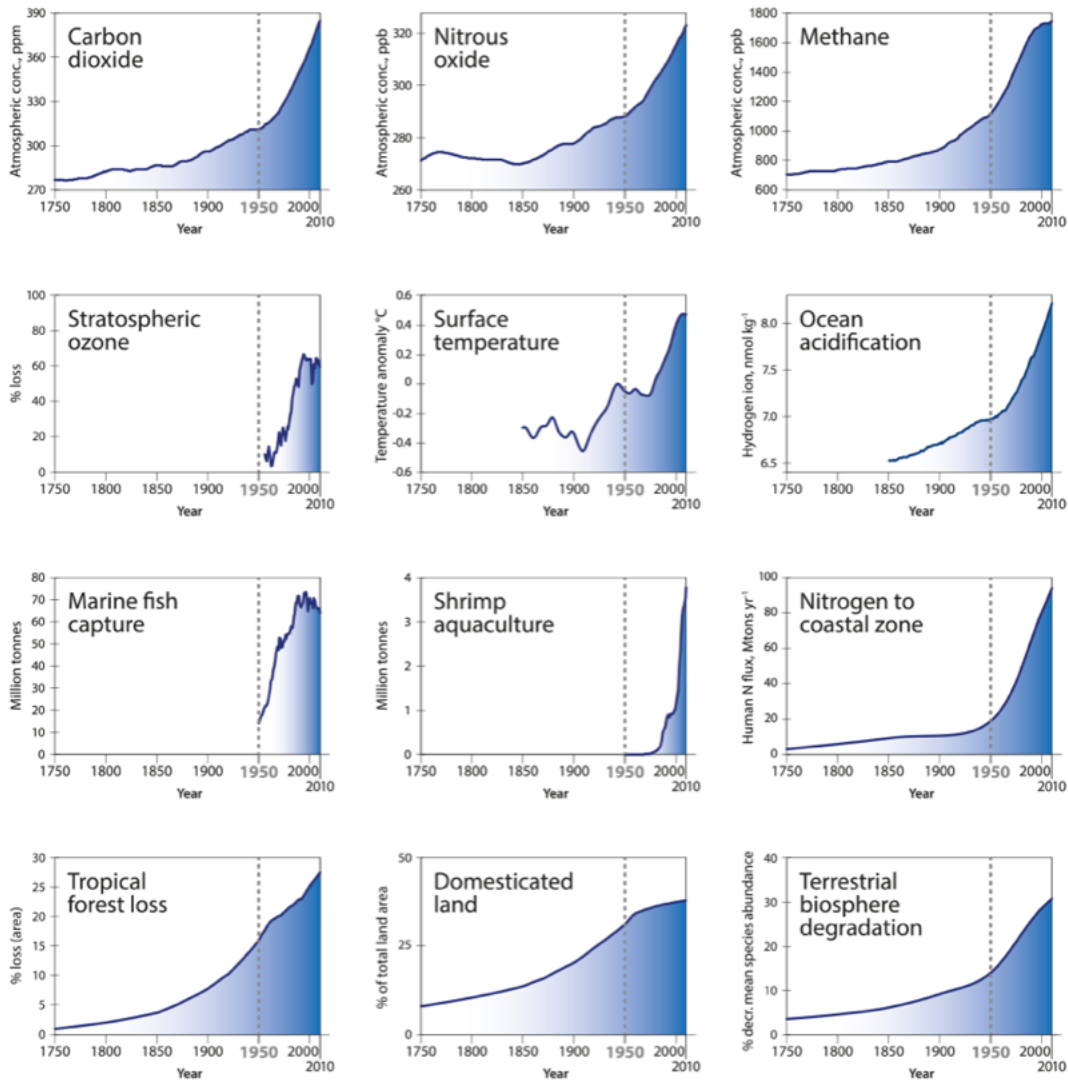
Given this context it makes no sense to consider the present crisis in isolation. Rather, it needs to be seen as not the beginning, but a continuation, of a long period of change and upheaval. The following is the first of a brief summary of five ideas, or idea clusters, that will go a long way toward determining how our collective journey into this dangerous and unstable future will proceed. Will it be guided by wisdom and clarity or undermined by other human impulses that quickly lead toward a new dark age?

The great acceleration

It's a truism to say that the context of human activity has changed since change has been a constant throughout human history. But less so to suggest that change itself has changed. Very briefly it has, over the last century or so, moved from being slow, episodic and local to being rapid, continuous and global. The implications of these shifts took some time to sink in. In fact, it was only during the post-WW2 period that the wider dimensions of change began to emerge and be understood. That is to say, shifts within the 'global system' began to show clear signs of being impacted by the growth of human and economic activity. As this process accelerated so the costs of rapid growth, expansion and the growing exploitation of natural resources became clear, especially to those who studied these changes over time. Acid rain, chemical pollution, the degradation of natural landscapes and the growing list of wildlife extinctions all pointed to one source: ourselves.

That is where things became more difficult because powerful interests (corporations, financiers, the super-rich, dictatorial leaders) saw that reining in growth would affect them directly. Those who sought to keep existing patterns of wealth and power pretty much as they were financed a powerful set of oppositional strategies that sought to block any attempt to reconceptualise growth and reconfigure economics. Despite numerous attempts to get around these 'special interests' their determined opposition succeeded in blocking many useful proposals and innovations. Hence any suggestion that humanity might need to pay attention to what this 'great acceleration' implied for the future was pushed into the background. Well-fed and effectively diverted consumers were led, in part by decades of saturation advertising, to believe that they did not need to listen to what the scientists were saying. When the question of 'limits to growth' came up those involved were ridiculed and effectively silenced. It's no surprise, therefore, that decades later humanity actually started hitting those limits and, in some cases, overshooting them. As the human footprint expanded, the natural world receded or was severely compromised. The ignorance and self-interest of a tiny subset of humanity had effectively placed the entire species and its world in peril.

Earth system trends



Source: IGBP 2015

Summary: to recognise the ‘great acceleration’ is to accept that the context in which humanity lives has changed and is slowly moving away from the ‘safe space’ it once provided.

Key references

IGBP (2015) Media release. Planetary dashboard shows “Great Acceleration” in human activity since 1950

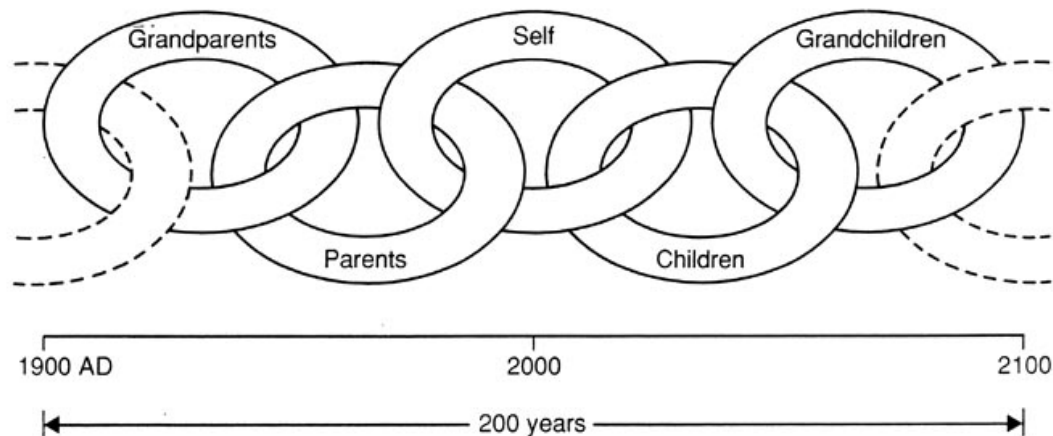
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Higgs, K. (2015) *Collision Course: Endless Growth on a Finite Planet*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press. Review of the book [here](#).

Part Two: Different Timeframes for Different Purposes

Human beings, we are often told, are ‘hard-wired’ by evolution to pay closest attention to dangers and threats that are right in front of them. This is said to have worked well enough when earlier generations were confronted with natural hazards and wild animals far stronger than themselves. The pattern of threats and dangers facing humanity in the early 21st Century is clearly different. Yet those apparently ‘baked in’ responses remain very much in place.

Economists and futurists are two distinct groups familiar with the phenomenon of ‘future discounting.’ In simple terms this is the idea that ‘a dollar today is worth more than a dollar tomorrow, next week, next year’ and so on. But the former view this quite differently. They regard it as an established and unproblematic fact. Futurists, on the other hand, tend to frame it as a restrictive but unconscious choice from a wide range of options. They are aware that different time frames can be evoked for many different purposes. But in societies with default short-term views about almost everything enacting broader and longer time frames can appear difficult. This apparently simple feature of human psychology therefore carries huge implications. It means, for example, that for something to be seen as a real threat requiring immediate purposeful action, it needs exert powerful here-and-now effects. Otherwise people will find a thousand reasons to set it aside and perhaps return to it later. Which is what occurred with Covid-19.



The 200-year Present

Source: Slaughter 1996 ©

Once the threat was recognised, and once people were dying in significant numbers, so the necessary social and economic responses began to occur. Those quick off the mark were able to limit the damage while those slower to act reaped much high rates of infection and morbidity. Even when such threats are known to be direct and immediate, human minds must change accordingly and effective responses still need to be undertaken in a timely fashion. It is profoundly unfortunate for our species that when a danger is perceived to be more distant in time and space it's generally framed as ‘of no great concern to me and mine right here, right now.’ A solution, however, is at hand.

Some years ago Elise Boulding suggested that a sequence of five generations (grandparents, parents, self, children, grandchildren) can be understood to represent what she regarded as ‘our space in time.’ I called this ‘the 200-year present’ and used it as the basis for workshops and teaching Futures in schools and beyond. To think in terms of this ‘extended present’ changes everything because instead of reinforcing notions of isolation and separateness, it emphasises connection and relationship,

including the flow of life and meaning through generations, connection with the wider world. As such it counters the sense of what's important being confined to here and now. Yet this is just the beginning. Once you begin to think of timeframes in relation to specific human activities it's immediately clear that the default short term 'creature present' is a social artefact. As such it was created by people and can be readily reinterpreted by them as well. Moreover, a moment's thought reveals that we use different timeframes all the time. For example, playing music, driving a car and taking part in any sporting activity requires close attention to the here and now. But buying a house, purchasing solar panels or planning a utility requires a longer-term view. Then when it comes to ecosystems and restoring landscapes, well, we are already looking at centuries.

Summary: Short term thinking is a restrictive cultural habit that can be changed. Different timeframes are appropriate for different uses. This fluidity of choice is needed more than ever in a rapidly changing world.

Key References

Hansen, J. (2009). *Storms of my Grandchildren*. Bloomsbury: New York.

Slaughter, R. (1996). Long term thinking and the politics of reconceptualization. *Futures*, 28, 1, 75-86. Original paper [here](#).

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Part Three. Technology is Not the Answer.