Desirable Futures—New Histories

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The COVID-19 pandemic, war, social tensions, political conflicts, and climate change have only amplified already existing fears about our collective futures. Amid these threat multipliers, actor William Shatner, famous for his role as Captain James T. Kirk in the original *Star Trek* series, traveled to space in 2021 with Jeff Bezos's company Blue Origin. Expecting to feel exhilarated and elated, Shatner instead wept for the Earth: "I realized it's dying." His response is part of a larger realization that the human history of the Earth—the Anthropocene—is believed by many to be approaching an end. Along with this recognition that we have devastated Earth, national and global trends have altered our communities and cultures for several decades, placing us at the end of a long and stable period, as American geopolitical analyst Peter Zeihan notes in *The End of the World Is Just the Beginning: Mapping the Collapse of Globalization* (2022). According to Zeihan, compared to what will happen in the near future, the period from 1945 until now has been the best possible era. Looking ahead, however, "The 2020s will see a collapse of consumption *and* production *and* investment *and* trade almost *everywhere*. Globalization will shatter into pieces. Some regional. Some national. Some smaller. It will be costly. It will make life slower. And above all, worse. No economic system yet imagined can function in the sort of future we face." Noticeably absent, though, from Zeihan's Cassandra list is an anticipated future and any cultural dimension. Along with this "catastrophic convergence" comes what could be called the end of history.

Our times, indeed, may indicate the end of a period. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, every generation of Americans and other Westerners became more productive, wealthier, better educated, and longer lived. That has changed. Incomes have declined, social stratification has increased, and life expectancy in America has fallen in recent years. As a result, many millennials are worse off than their parents. This acute sense of crisis ruptures our societies and undermines our ability to think about the present within the context of larger progressive histories. Furthermore, generative AI accelerates the collapse of inherited temporal frameworks. It places individuals in relation to knowledge that did not exist months earlier, occupations that did not exist a decade ago, and tools whose capacities change continuously. We no longer share the confidence and zeal of our forebears. Are we losing the capacity to tell stories about ourselves? In such a context, the past can no longer serve simply as a guide to action, but perhaps future making can. Historical thinking, attentive to contingency, context, change, and human agency, can help societies move beyond crisis narratives if it reorients itself toward the future.

Our current crises are not solely economic, political, or ecological; they are also cultural and human crises that unravel our ability to write a coherent history of our past.

Historical changes have brought together social, economic, and political transformations and given rise to new forms of historical consciousness of time. They have shaped personal experience, social, economic, political, and cultural change, as well as our concepts of time and philosophies of history. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, narratives about the past bridged accelerating changes by providing an evolutionary model. Reinhart Koselleck, an eminent German historian of the twentieth century, studied how historical change altered our sense of continuity, but also how narratives overcame the widening gap between realms of experience and horizons of expectation. Similarly, in his wide-ranging book *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (1983), Stephen Kern shows how technological change altered how people experienced and conceptualized time and space in Europe and America. He argues that "a series of sweeping changes in technology and culture created distinctive new modes of thinking about and experiencing time and space." The sense of the present was "distinctively new, thickened temporally with retentions and protentions of past and future and, most importantly, expanded spatially to create the vast, shared experience of simultaneity," in part due to the introduction of World Standard Time in 1884.

How does the period from 1989 to today compare with Kern's 1880–1918? Historians have already argued that 1979 represented a formative change, ushering in new global polarizations. In *Strange Rebels: 1979 and the Birth of the 21st Century* (2013), Christian Caryl argues that the Iranian Revolution, John Paul II's papacy, Ayatollah Khomeini's seizure of power, the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping, and Margaret Thatcher's rise pivoted our world in a lasting manner by unleashing free-market capitalism and politicized religion. Yet seeing our present times as merely a continuation of 1979 overestimates the lasting effect of those events and underestimates the profound social, economic, technological, and cultural transformations of the last decades and the ways they have affected our lives.

New technologies are changing our sense of the world and our experience of ourselves. Communications technologies, such as 5G cellular service, and beyond create new temporal structures defined by constant presence. As techno-social humans, we no longer live in one place at one time. In our world, there is time within time and space within space, where times and distances are linked into a new homogeneity. All text, images, and sounds that have ever been recorded are linkable; we can save every moment, report on it, and play it back. Shared on social media, these moments bestow social capital and increase the embeddedness that networks and nodes have with each other. These technological advancements shape our sense of time as much as continuous ideological struggles and a sense of crisis do. Together, they have contributed to the shrinking of temporal vision to the here and now and to the fleeting moments of social media.

How can we regain a wider temporal perspective? At a moment when inherited narratives of progress no longer organize historical experience, historians must recover their capacity not only to interpret the past but also to imagine desirable futures. Roman Krznaric, in *The Good Ancestor: A Radical Prescription for Long-Term Thinking* (2020), reminds us of what has been called deep time: the realization that our own temporal being in the world as humans makes up only a short blip in the vast time of the world. Moreover, in thinking about our times within a multigenerational context, we must strive to be good ancestors, as the American virologist Jonas Salk noted, and "show future generations how we coped with an age of great change and great crises."

Futurity is distinctly different from contemporaneity. Future thinking can offer an alternative lens to the growing sense of the constant now. The future is, as the German Jewish émigré American philosopher Hannah Arendt argues, the consequence of our action. Thinking about unpredictable and unforeseeable futures restores agency and responsibility to us and makes us face our predicaments without absorbing them into an evolutionary model of progress. Our current crises are not solely economic, political, or ecological; they are also cultural and human crises that unravel our ability to write a coherent history of our past. In *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (2016), Yuval Noah Harari associates storytelling with

what makes humans unique. Indeed, without commonly accepted stories about ourselves, no complex society can function. Our ability to imagine, create stories, and make meaning allows us to organize ourselves flexibly in large numbers, Harari notes. To regain this ability, we might have to begin by letting go of an idea of history that will no longer serve us unless we want to continue mapping future crises onto preexisting maps of past social, economic, and global conflicts.

From its inception, historical writing has always extended into the future. The German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel called historians "backward-looking prophets." Nineteenth-century historians believed that the historical forces they observed would extend into the future. There is already a growing scholarly field that investigates how societies imagine futures and how those imagined futures shape action in the present. The German historian Lucian Hölscher calls this, in *Die Entdeckung der Zukunft* (*The Discovery of the Future*, 1999), the "history of the future." According to him, early modern Europe gradually developed a distinctly future-oriented society in which planning, progress, reform, and anticipation became central features of political and social life.

The psychologist and futures researcher Jennifer Gidley, in her *The Future: A Very Short Introduction* (2017), introduces future studies, while exploring how people have imagined, predicted, and attempted to shape what is ahead of them. She contrasts techno-optimistic with human-centered approaches to the future and distinguishes between probable futures and preferable futures. Can we write histories of futures whose events have not occurred, explore biographies of institutions that do not yet exist, and craft narratives of futures that remain open? For David J. Staley, historians have the necessary skills to imagine futures, as he argues in *History and Future: Using Historical Thinking to Imagine the Future* (2007). Among these is an understanding of contingency, context, path dependence, and change. Future-oriented historical narratives entail an ethical commitment and responsibility. To write as historians of the future is not to predict what will happen; it is to narrate what becomes possible if institutions, communities, and individuals act differently. Such writing asks us to imagine, from the vantage point of a desirable future, what transformations made that future possible. In futures studies this is known as backcasting. History becomes less an explanation of what happened and more an exploration of possible and desirable futures.

Historians could become the curators of possible futures. A simple prompt such as this opens us to possibilities: "You are a historian of the future looking at the transformation of universities between 2025 and 2050 as one of the most important institutional reinventions of the twenty-first century. What made that transformation possible? What historical events, practices, and ideas ultimately led to it? What were the challenges, and what were the opportunities?" *A*