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# Future Shock

by  
**Alvin  
Toffler**

AUTHOR OF THE THIRD WAVE

# **Future Shock** by **Alvin Toffler**

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## INTRODUCTION

This is a book about what happens to people when they are overwhelmed by change. It is about the ways in which we adapt—or fail to adapt—to the future.

Much has been written about the future. Yet, for the most part, books about the world to come sound a harsh metallic note. These pages, by contrast, concern themselves with the “soft” or human side of tomorrow. Moreover, they concern themselves with the steps by which we are likely to reach tomorrow. They deal with common, everyday matters—the products we buy and discard, the places we leave behind, the corporations we inhabit, the people who pass at an ever faster clip through our lives. The future of friendship and family life is probed. Strange new subcultures and life styles are investigated, along with an array of other subjects from politics and playgrounds to skydiving and sex.

What joins all these—in the book as in life—is the roaring current of change, a current so powerful today that it overturns institutions, shifts our values and shrivels our roots. Change is the process by which the future invades our lives, and it is important to look at it closely, not merely from the grand perspectives of history, but also from the vantage point of the living, breathing individuals who experience it.

The acceleration of change in our time is, itself, an elemental force. This accelerative thrust has personal and psychological, as well as sociological, consequences. In the pages ahead, these effects of acceleration are, for the first time, systematically explored. The book argues forcefully, I hope, that, unless man quickly learns to control the rate of change in his personal affairs as well as in society at large, we are doomed to a massive adaptational breakdown.

In 1965, in an article in *Horizon*, I coined the term "future shock" to describe the shattering stress and disorientation that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short a time. Fascinated by this concept, I spent the next five years visiting scores of universities, research centers, laboratories, and government agencies, reading countless articles and scientific papers and interviewing literally hundreds of experts on different aspects of change, coping behavior, and the future. Nobel prizewinners, hippies, psychiatrists, physicians, businessmen, professional futurists, philosophers, and educators gave voice to their concern over change, their anxieties about adaptation, their fears about the future. I came away from this experience with two disturbing convictions.

First, it became clear that future shock is no longer a distantly potential danger, but a real sickness from which increasingly large numbers already suffer. This psycho-biological condition can be described in medical and psychiatric terms. It is the disease of change.

Second, I gradually came to be appalled by how little is actually known about adaptivity, either by those who call for and create vast changes in our society, or by those who supposedly prepare us to cope with those changes. Earnest intellectuals talk bravely about "educating for change" or "preparing people for the future." But we know virtually nothing about how to do it. In the most rapidly changing environment to which man has ever been exposed, we

remain pitifully ignorant of how the human animal copes.

Our psychologists and politicians alike are puzzled by the seemingly irrational resistance to change exhibited by certain individuals and groups. The corporation head who wants to reorganize a department, the educator who wants to introduce a new teaching method, the mayor who wants to achieve peaceful integration of the races in his city—all, at one time or another, face this blind resistance. Yet we know little about its sources. By the same token, why do some men hunger, even rage for change, doing all in their power to create it, while others flee from it? I not only found no ready answers to such questions, but discovered that we lack even an adequate theory of adaptation, without which it is extremely unlikely that we will ever find the answers.

The purpose of this book, therefore, is to help us come to terms with the future—to help us cope more effectively with both personal and social change by deepening our understanding of how men respond to it. Toward this end, it puts forward a broad new theory of adaptation.

It also calls attention to an important, though often overlooked, distinction. Almost invariably, research into the effects of change concentrate on the destinations toward which change carries us, rather than the speed of the journey. In this book, I try to show that the *rate* of change has implications quite apart from, and sometimes more important than, the *directions* of change. No attempt to understand adaptivity can succeed until this fact is grasped. Any attempt to define the "content" of change must include the consequences of pace itself as part of that content.

William Ogburn, with his celebrated theory of cultural lag, pointed out how social stresses arise out of the uneven rates of change in different sectors of society. The concept of future shock—and the theory of adaptation that derives from it—strongly suggests that there must be balance, not merely between rates of

change in different sectors, but between the pace of environmental change and the limited pace of human response. For future shock grows out of the increasing lag between the two.

The book is intended to do more than present a theory, however. It is also intended to demonstrate a method. Previously, men studied the past to shed light on the present. I have turned the time-mirror around, convinced that a coherent image of the future can also shower us with valuable insights into today. We shall find it increasingly difficult to understand our personal and public problems without making use of the future as an intellectual tool. In the pages ahead, I deliberately exploit this tool to show what it can do.

Finally, and by no means least important, the book sets out to change the reader in a subtle yet significant sense. For reasons that will become clear in the pages that follow, successful coping with rapid change will require most of us to adopt a new stance toward the future, a new sensitive awareness of the role it plays in the present. This book is designed to increase the **future-consciousness of its reader**. The degree to which the reader, after finishing the book, finds himself thinking about, speculating about, or trying to anticipate future events, will provide one measure of its effectiveness.

With these ends stated, several reservations are in order. One has to do with the perishability of fact. Every seasoned reporter has had the experience of working on a fast-breaking story that changes its shape and meaning even before his words are put down on paper. Today the whole world is a fast-breaking story. It is inevitable, therefore, in a book written over the course of several years, that some of its facts will have been superseded between the time of research and writing and the time of publication. Professors identified with University A move, in the interim, to University B. Politicians identified with Position X shift, in the meantime, to Position Y.

While a conscientious effort has been made during

writing to update *Future Shock*, some of the facts presented are no doubt already obsolete. (This, of course, is true of many books, although authors don't like to talk about it.) The obsolescence of data has a special significance here, however, serving as it does to verify the book's own thesis about the rapidity of change. Writers have a harder and harder time keeping up with reality. We have not yet learned to conceive, research, write and publish in "real time." Readers, therefore, must concern themselves more and more with general theme, rather than detail.

Another reservation has to do with the verb "will." No serious futurist deals in "predictions." These are left for television oracles and newspaper astrologers. No one even faintly familiar with the complexities of forecasting lays claim to absolute knowledge of tomorrow. In those deliciously ironic words purported to be a Chinese proverb: "To prophesy is extremely difficult—especially with respect to the future."

This means that every statement about the future ought, by rights, be accompanied by a string of qualifiers—ifs, ands, buts, and on the other hands. Yet to enter every appropriate qualification in a book of this kind would be to bury the reader under an avalanche of maybes. Rather than do this, I have taken the liberty of speaking firmly, without hesitation, trusting that the intelligent reader will understand the stylistic problem. The word "will" should always be read as though it were preceded by "probably" or "in my opinion." Similarly, all dates applied to future events need to be taken with a grain of judgment.

The inability to speak with precision and certainty about the future, however, is no excuse for silence. Where "hard data" are available, of course, they ought to be taken into account. But where they are lacking, the responsible writer—even the scientist—has both a right and an obligation to rely on other kinds of evidence, including impressionistic or anecdotal data and the opinions of well-informed people. I have done so throughout and offer no apology for it.

In dealing with the future, at least for the purpose at hand, it is more important to be imaginative and insightful than to be one hundred percent "right." Theories do not have to be "right" to be enormously useful. Even error has its uses. The maps of the world drawn by the medieval cartographers were so hopelessly inaccurate, so filled with factual error, that they elicit condescending smiles today when almost the entire surface of the earth has been charted. Yet the great explorers could never have discovered the New World without them. Nor could the better, more accurate maps of today been drawn until men, working with the limited evidence available to them, set down on paper their bold conceptions of worlds they had never seen.

We who explore the future are like those ancient mapmakers, and it is in this spirit that the concept of future shock and the theory of the adaptive range are presented here—not as final word, but as a first approximation of the new realities, filled with danger and promise, created by the accelerative thrust.

## **Part One:**

# **THE DEATH OF PERMANENCE**



