



## Report

# Imagining After Capitalism

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## Keywords

Capitalism, Images of The Future

## Introduction

Reminiscing to the early days of my intrigue with the future, *Limits to Growth* (1973) was the first piece of foresight literature that truly resonated with me. The book's long-term forecast models projected a dozen scenarios that were generally quite negative. And they were severely criticized for being doom-and-gloom. The authors updated the model and the work at 20- and 30-years later (Meadows et al., 1993, 2004) and stuck to their conclusions. And here we are today at the 50-year anniversary and witnessing the reality of the *Limits to Growth* projections. No compelling alternative images have been developed.

Another early influence in my thinking came with Polak's (1973) work *The Image of the Future*. He found a common element linking the most successful civilizations of the past was that their actions were guided by a shared aspirational image of the future. He lamented the fact that in his own time – the 1950s – this notion of a guiding image shared by society at large was relegated to the fringes of the discourse. Fast-forwarding to the present day, the lack of guiding images remains.

The starting point of this work was to identify and describe candidate guiding images of the future. The specific economic focus emerged from the author's classroom discussions that resulted in a subsequent conference on *After Capitalism* in 2012. This exploration is framed around future alternatives to capitalism, which is the dominant operating system for most of the world today. Capitalism is defined very broadly here to encompass the supporting STEEP+ context -- social/cultural, technological, economic, environmental, and political/ideological -- and sub-systems. This exploration also confronts the quip that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. Fukuyama (1992) may have reinforced this notion with his popular "End of History" thesis following the collapse of the Soviet Union. He proposed that the "victory" of liberal capitalism in the Cold War's ideological conflict established it as the final form of human government.

The research questions are:

- Are there guiding images of alternatives to the current capitalist economic system developed or being developed?
- If so, can they be usefully catalogued and synthesized to stimulate discussion, research, and eventually action?

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This exploratory research is primarily a conceptual work of synthesis that organizes and builds upon available ideas about future alternatives to capitalism. The Framework Foresight method developed by the University of Houston Foresight program is used with variations noted as appropriate. The paper is organized into the following sections:

- Introduction
- Research Approach
- Findings: The Guiding Images
- Limitations and Future Research Directions
- Conclusion

The next section on the research approach describes the process that identified and formulated the guiding images.

### **Research Approach**

The exploratory research reported on here is part of a larger book project that aims to identify and describe potential guiding images for the future that would succeed or replace the current capitalist system. The research took as its basis the idea that there are indeed images, or components of images of the future after capitalism available, but they are relatively unknown or not widely distributed. The goal was to identify and synthesize them into broad themes where that proved practical to do.

The research was structured using the University of Houston's Framework Foresight method (Hines & Bishop, 2013; Hines, 2020). The method uses six steps, based on the Association of Professional Futurists' Foresight Competency model, to explore a topic, in this case the guiding images for After Capitalism (Hines et al, 2017). Each step in the method flows into the next, that is the deliverable of the first step, framing, is an input to the next step, scanning, and so on. The first two steps -- framing, and scanning and researching, -- describe how the resulting guiding images were developed. In the process flow, the guiding images are developed in third step, futuring.

Referring to Table 1 below, an important modification was a light treatment of the implications that are central to fourth step, visioning. Since the key purpose is to identify the guiding images themselves, the preliminary implications (visioning steps) are lightly discussed. Similarly, prescribing "how to" would be covered in steps 5 and 6 -- designing and adapting. But that is a substantial endeavor that would require a separate undertaking. Practically speaking, if the guiding images prove useful, then a follow-on work on "how to" will be developed. For this paper, a list of ten likely required shifts developed by the author is offered instead to provide a sense of the type of designing and adapting work ahead.

Table 1 lists Framework Foresight's six steps, briefly describes them, and highlights key deliverables for this exploration. Following the table, specific activities of each step are noted to help illuminate the approach.

**Table 1.** Framework Foresight (FF) method

Activity	Description	Deliverable
1. Framing	Scoping the project, defining the focal question, and mapping the domain	Domain description & domain map
2. Scanning & Researching	Finding, collecting, and analyzing signals of change	Scanning library
	Review relevant books/works using a common image analysis template	Image analysis templates
	Information synthesized into a set of key drivers	Drivers
3. Futuring	Identifying a baseline and alternative futures using archetypes (Baseline, Collapse, New Equilibrium, and Transformation)	Archetype futures aligned on Three Horizons framework (the guiding images are developed here and covered in Findings)
4. Visioning (Implications Analysis)	Identifying important and provocative implications of scenarios	Light implications analysis as the “how to” is beyond scope of this work
5. Designing & 6. Adapting (Conclusion)	Identifying options for action and implementing a strategic approach and ongoing monitoring	Concludes with top ten shifts to summarize key insights

**Framing: Timeframe**

The timeframe for the development of *After Capitalism* images was set using the popular Three Horizons framework. The basic framing is as follows: (Curry & Hodgson, 2008)

- H1, the current system, described as Neoliberal Capitalism, is projected to remain the primary system for roughly the next decade.
- H2, transition, is the space where alternatives compete to become the next system; two principal pathways are suggested, gradual or via collapse. The framing here follows H1 and is roughly estimated to take another decade.
- H3, new system, is where the positive guiding images are realized. Since it follows H1 and H2, it is set approximately 20-30 years in the future.

**Framing & Scanning: Domain map and scanning library**

The domain map is a visualization of the categories that are used to guide the search for signals of change. The signals are identified via horizon scanning and are used in developing the key drivers of change in a domain – in this case the domain is *After Capitalism* – and the images themselves.

The organizing scheme of the domain map aligned with the Three Horizons framework:

- The H1 categorization organized signals of change using the popular STEEP categories: social, technological, economic, environmental, and political.
- The H2 categorization organized signals of change around concepts that described possible transitions, further divided into those on a gradual trajectory and those on a collapse one.

- The H3 categorization organized signals of change directly relating to the guiding images. The signals of change came from articles, blog posts, videos, reports, etc., and are organized into a scanning library. The signals were identified manually by the author using the domain map categories as keywords in searching. A daily “Google Alert” was set up with capitalism as the keyword and it proved to be quite useful in identifying signals as well. In addition, colleagues occasionally contributed signals or pointed the author to leads. The cloud-based software platform Diigo was used to capture these signals. The screen shot in Figure 1 exhibits the link, a summary textbox, and a line for tags. The tagging system links back to the domain map categories to keep the scanning library organized, which assumes greater importance as the number of entries grows. Currently there are over 550 signals in the library. Furthermore, Diigo has a Top 10 tag counter that offers a convenient way to track what is being collected and ensure that the coverage of the domain map is balanced.

The screenshot displays two article entries in the Diigo scanning library. The first entry is titled "I Was a Useful Idiot for Capitalism - The Atlantic" with 1 view, dated August 20, 2020. The second entry is titled "More than 1,000 Extinction Rebellion activists taken to court | Extinction Rebellion | ..." with 1 view, dated January 21, 2021. To the right of these entries is a "Top 10 Tags" sidebar with a "View All" link. The sidebar lists the following tags and their respective counts:

Tag	Count
Signals	305
Economic	125
Images	72
Transitions	54
sustainable commons	44
work	37
UBI	36
political	33
social	33
inequality	33

Fig 3: Diigo scanning library example

**Researching: Analyzing books and reports**

A second considerable source of research inputs regarding the images stems from the analysis of books or reports. The primary search was for works focused on and relevant to a new economic operating system. The focus was on capitalism and alternatives to capitalism. The authors generally had economic backgrounds or were writing on economic topics. Long-term projections of the future in general, typically of interest to futurists, were not included to help manage the scope. That said, some of the authors in Table 2 might consider themselves futurist. And futurists have indirectly touched on the subject as well. Inayatullah (1999) explored a “Beyond Capitalism Symposium” and Fatehi (2021) recently explored “Shapeshifting Capitalism” in this journal. Fergnani (2019) applied the scenario archetype technique to look at futures of capitalism and very recently two Finnish professors looked at images of the future of the circular economy (Marjamaa & Makela, 2022) in the journal *Futures*.

Table 2 shows twenty-eight H3 books/reports that developed concepts relevant to *After Capitalism*. At least twice that number were reviewed but not included for various reasons – they

may have duplicated other works, they may not have been sufficiently future-oriented, or the quality of the ideas was not judged to be satisfactory. Many more books that explored the possibilities for reforming capitalism, but these are not included here since the key focus of the exploration was to find works that provided insight about H3 guiding images. In several cases, works that purported to discuss the future, in fact, focused foremost on explaining the problems of the present without delving into what consequences might actually manifest from these in the future.

**Table 2.** *After Capitalism* H3 concepts for guiding images

#	Concept	Source*	Brief description
<b><i>Circular Commons</i> (environmentally driven concepts)</b>			
1	Betterness	Umair Haque (2011)	A real-world paradigm to update pursuit of prosperity as an aggregate balance sheet composed of higher-order wealth, new axioms for human exchange, and optimizing for living meaningfully well.
2	Circular	Macarthur Foundation (2013)	Today's goods are tomorrow's resources forming a virtuous cycle of durables designed for re-use, and consumables made of compostable materials that can be returned to the earth.
3	Commons 1	David Bollier (2014)	A commons is about the shared management of a resource by many. Suggests that enclosure, commodification, and financialization of nature are problems that need to be addressed and that a commons approach could be a vehicle for social and political emancipation and societal transformation.
4	Commons 2	Massimo de Angelis (2017)	A highly local model in which people self-organize socially and politically within communities to pool and govern resources in common
5	Degrowth	Giorgos Kallis et al. (2015)	Largely European movement seeking to abolish economic growth as a social objective and favoring grassroots practices such as eco-communities, co-ops, local currencies, barter, commons, etc.
6	Doughnut	Kate Raworth (2017)	A social foundation of well-being that no one should fall below and an ecological ceiling of planetary pressure that we should not go beyond.
7	Eco	Otto Scharmer (2013)	Describes switch from ego-centric leading toward planetary disaster to eco-centric that emphasizes the well-being of the whole.
8	Local	BALLE (n.d.)	<i>Business Alliance for Local Living Economies</i> idea for a global system of human-scale, interconnected local living economies
9	Post-Growth	Tim Jackson (2015)	Strengthening ecologically and socially sustainable practices given the physical limits of the earth
10	Sacred/Gift	Charles Eisenstein (2011)	Describes a gift economy concept based on rethinking the economy and money; basically shrinking the formal economy and shifting money away from being a store of value to primarily a medium of exchange, including the adoption of negative interest to discourage rents.
11	Steady-State	Herman Daly (2010)	Economy characterized by relatively stable size that that leaves room for nature and provides high levels of human well-being
12	Sufficiency	Sam Alexander (2012)	A degrowth approach that aims for a world in which everyone's basic needs are modestly but sufficiently met, in an ecologically sustainable, highly localized, and socially equitable manner
13	Well-Being	Lorenzo Fioramonti (2016)	Argues for shifting away from GDP as a "performance assessment tool" to more holistic measures
<b><i>Non-Workers Paradise</i> (socially and politically driven concepts)</b>			
14	Alter-Worlds	Ian Shaw and Marv Waterstone (2020)	Leverage movements of de-commodified and autonomous territories (e.g., Zapatistas) springing up outside or on the margins of the system such as temporary and permanent autonomous zones, worker's councils, community gardens, free schools, etc., that offer refuge and prefiguring new post-capitalist politics.

15	Communism	Peter Frase (2017)	Four scenarios based on uncertainties of scarcity/abundance and inequality, with automation a predetermined; includes a vision of communism.
16	Economic Democracy	David Schweickart (2011)	A socialist approach with market and democratic features centered on three key concepts of worker self-management, a market for enterprises, and social control of investment.
17	FALC Fully Automated Luxury Communism	Aaron Bastani (2019)	Advocates a break with neoliberalism, a shift towards worker-owned production, a state-financed transition to renewable energy and universal services -- aided by tech progress (my words) – and placed beyond commodity exchange and profit.
18	Pluralist Common-wealth	Gar Alperovitz (2013)	<i>Evolutionary reconstruction redistributes productive assets</i> , based on (1) democratization of wealth (2) community as a guiding theme (3) decentralization (4) substantial democratic planning to achieve economic, democracy-building and ecological goals
19	Post-capitalism	Paul Mason (2015) Srnicek & Williams (2016)	<i>Neoliberal Capitalism</i> declining and need to design the transition with I/T being a key driver to abundance  Folk politics approach of the left is ineffective; need to systematically create a vision or “new hegemony” of the future
20	Precariat*	Guy Standing (2014)	Describes a social class rather than an economic system per se
21	Solidarity*	Lol & Jimenez (Solidarity Economy Initiative) (2017)	Social justice movement among lower-income people of color seeking to go beyond socialism and communism by shifting consciousness, building [political] power, and creating economic alternatives
22	Utopia (for Realists)	Rutger Bregman (2017)	Suggests that reduction of work first has to be reinstated as a political ideal. Makes the case for universal basic income and the need for a massive redistribution of wealth
<b><i>Tech-Led Abundance (technologically driven concepts)</i></b>			
23	Abundance	Peter Diamandis (2012)	Technological progress is such that within a generation, we will be able to provide goods and services, once reserved for the wealthy few, to any and all who need them.
24	Homo Deus	Yuval Harari (2017)	Biology and robotics enabling the upgrading of humans into new species via any of three paths: biological engineering, cyborg engineering and the engineering of non-organic beings.
25	Singularity	Ray Kurzweil (2005)	Exponential technological change leads to machine intelligence surpassing humans and eventually no clear distinction between humans and machines
26	Super-intelligence	Nick Bostrom (2014)	Explores paths to beyond-human superintelligence, the strategic choices available to it, and what we could do to shape the initial conditions.
27	Transhumanism	Max More (2013)	An intellectual and cultural movement seeks to fundamentally improve the human condition through applied reason and technology development to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities.
28	Zero Marginal Cost	Jeremy Rifkin (2014)	Massive economies of scale provided by digitization push the cost of reproducing information to zero, thus enabling abundance, or an empathic civilization.

The concepts are clustered into the three guiding images: Circular Commons, Non-Workers Paradise, and Tech-Led Abundance that will be described below. The analysis for each of the twenty-eight H3 book/report concepts that were part of the guiding images was carried out using an Image Analysis template refined specifically for this work, shown in Table 3 below. The template drew on the work of Polak and of futurist colleague Wendy Schultz (2016), who developed and

taught an adjacent course on the Image of the Future for the University of Houston. The template approach provided a standardized framework and format that allowed for effective comparison of the various images.

**Table 3.** Image analysis template

<b>Category</b>	<b>Description</b>
<u>Author</u>	Who proposed it and why (purpose)
<u>Time horizon</u>	Stated, implied, or unclear
<u>Scope:</u>	Global/regional/national or affluent/emerging/poor
<u>Key drivers:</u>	<u>Bold relevant</u> <u>Other</u> Shifting values, Technology acceleration, Inequality, Automation, Stagnation, Climate and carrying capacity, Ineffective left
<u>Key ideas</u>	The most important ideas put forth by the concept
<u>Ideal or guiding values</u>	Something akin to an organizing principle/motivation, i.e., create a more just or fair society
<u>Emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual aspects</u>	Is it appealing or compelling?
<u>Personal</u>	How are individuals affected by this future? Who's bearing the most costs, who's accruing the benefits?
<u>Pathway or plan</u>	Rough sense of steps for achieving

**Researching: Drivers**

A pivotal juncture in the research phase of Framework Foresight is the synthesis of the key drivers of change. A driver is defined as “a thematic cluster of related research inputs that is driving or shaping change in a domain.” There is not necessarily a correct number of drivers. Rather, experience suggests between a dozen and half-dozen is adequate to encapsulate the most decisive drivers in any domain. Please note, however, the drivers are not the sole sources of change, just the major ones. Table 4 below shows the seven of these drivers were identified for the *After Capitalism* project. A concerted effort was made to incorporate at least one driver from each STEEP (social, technological, economic, environmental, political) category. Given the economic focus of the *After Capitalism* domain, it is not surprising that the influential drivers designated to the economic category exceed those contained within the other STEEP categories.

**Table 4.** Seven drivers

STEEP Category	Driver	Description
<b>Social</b>	Shifting values	Values are shifting from traditional and modern to postmodern and integral.
<b>Technology</b>	Technology acceleration	Technological capabilities continue to increase rapidly, often exponentially, in a wide range of sectors.
<b>Economic</b>	Inequality	Growing economic inequality is threatening the social order.
<b>Economic (work)</b>	Automation	Automation, driven by AI, is increasingly replacing jobs.
<b>Economic</b>	Stagnation	Economic growth is slowing in part due to inability to pay.
<b>Environmental</b>	Climate and carrying capacity	Climate change and humanity's growing ecological footprint are threatening the ecosystem.
<b>Political</b>	Ineffective left	The far left continues to be ineffective in catalyzing change.

The drivers provide an accessible way to outline key changes to explore in the domain. Additionally, they function as building blocks to construct scenarios or images of the future. A core message emerging from the research was that the current Neoliberal Capitalist system is indeed disintegrating. The time horizon was suggested at 10 years, but one should not rigidly adhere to that projection. While the signs of the disintegration are substantial, as a futurist, it would be a disservice to suggest that it is inevitable. Taking this into consideration, it should be noted the prospect of disintegration rests on a number of key assumptions:

- The capitalist structure produces levels of inequality that are no longer tolerable (Piketty, 2014).
- The capitalist growth imperative threatens the viability of the planetary ecosystem (Wackernagel & Beyers, 2019).
- Modern values emphasizing growth and competition perfectly befitting capitalism are shifting to postmodern and integral values that are not well-aligned with capitalism (Hines, 2011).
- The problem of scarcity contradicts the reality of growing abundance (Reese, 2013).
- GDP as a metric of progress is no longer suitable (Fox, 2017).
- Recent “explosion” of reform and alternatives concepts (from the author’s scanning).

A source is offered for each assumption for readers wanting to dig deeper. It is hoped that the readers can accept the plausibility of each assumption, even if they do not necessarily agree with each.

### **Findings: The Guiding Images**

The purpose of the research was to search for and identify potential guiding images of alternatives to the current capitalist economic system, and if they were found, to see if they could be usefully catalogued and synthesized to stimulate discussion, research, and eventually action. An indirect contribution of this work was the development of the Image Analysis Template shown in Table 3 above. The template emerged in response to the need for a mechanism for comparing the various images. It may provide a useful mechanism for other work on future-oriented guiding images.



The three guiding images were crafted by clustering the research streams below and looking for key themes.

- The 500+ scan hits clustered and analyzed using the tagging system in the Diigo scanning library
- The 50+ book/reports were cluster and analyzed using the Image Analysis Template
- The seven key drivers were projected into the 2040-2050 timeframe.

The three major themes of environmentally-, socially- and politically-, and technologically-driven came through clearly. The process of characterizing these themes took several iterations to arrive at the three guiding mages: Circular Commons (environmentally-driven), Non-Workers Paradise (socially- and politically-driven), and Tech-Led Abundance (technologically-driven).

The emphasis of this work is centered on crafting the guiding images. The approach does include, at a high-level, what form the potential paths might assume such that one could plausibly imagine those realities manifesting. The Three Horizons framework introduced earlier proves useful for this purpose. In our research at Houston Foresight, we adapted University of Hawaii futurist Jim Dator work on archetypes to identify four of these major archetypes, or patterns of change, and arrange them in accordance with the Three Horizons. The four archetypes are:

- *Baseline*: the current system is continued into the future without any significant disruption
- *Collapse*: the structure and rules of the current system fail; it may be more helpful to think of this as dysfunction to avoid associations with post-apocalyptic science fiction
- *New Equilibrium*: there is a disruption to the baseline that shifts it, but the baseline power structure reacts to preserve itself and minimize the change; a degree of change results but nothing which fundamentally alters the structure
- *Transformation*: the current system can no longer be saved and a new system with new rules and structure emerges.

An interesting observation that has come to our attention whilst making use of the archetypes over several years was that they seemed to align rather nicely with the Three Horizons framework:

- The baseline archetype is concordant with (or corresponds to) H1 as the current system, which is Neoliberal Capitalism in this exploration.
- Collapse and New Equilibrium are two major patterns of change in the H2 zone of transition; while scenarios for these were developed as part of the larger research, they will not be included in this piece to keep the focus on the guiding images.
- Transformation represents the new system of H3 – the primary focus of this work, with the three guiding of Circular Commons, Non-Workers Paradise, and Tech-Led Abundance.

The intended effect is that these images, each embodying a unique emphasis, will broadly appeal to an array of varying ideological groups and demographics. Environmentalists, for instance, might be predisposed to embrace Circular Commons, social and political activists are likely to be drawn to non-Workers Paradise, and technophiles are apt to gravitate to Tech-Led Abundance.

### **Circular Commons**

The Circular Commons image expands the concept of sustainability to embrace circular principles as part of a social, political, and economic commons. The circular qualifier denotes that the goods used in the present can be reused for the benefit of the future -- forming what the MacArthur Foundation defines as a “virtuous cycle of durables designed for re-use.” There were 13 book/report concepts comprising this image, the highest total among the three images.

To succinctly summarize the key aim of a shift to a Circular Commons future: it is to cultivate

*environmental stewardship for the purpose of saving humanity from potential ecosystem collapse.*

The key aspects of Circular Commons are:

- Climate and carrying capacity: There are perhaps no greater threats to the long-term survival of humanity than these twin, inter-connected components. One could argue if this challenge is not promptly addressed, other potential obstacles will not matter.
- From sustainable to circular: To some degree the sustainability concept may be tainted by its association with the current capitalist system. Many would say, for example, that sustainable development is an oxymoron. As proposed policy solutions like the Green New Deal are still market-oriented in nature. The introduction of the circular economy concept is a tantalizing advance that has extraordinary potential to catalyze systemic change.
- Commons approach to resource management: The idea that people are capable of collectively and cooperatively managing resources is likely to face stiff resistance from champions of private property and laissez-faire ideals. The standard critique is that this presumption is naïve and directly opposed to the inherent self-interestedness or selfishness of humanity, but the existence of cooperative societies is not unheard of in human history. My own work suggests this self-interested emphasis represents modern values, which are currently predominant, but are increasingly giving way to postmodern and integral values (Hines, 2011).
- Degrowth: Growth is framed on a continuum composed of continued expansion, steady-state, and degrowth. The conclusion from the research is that the urgency of the environmental crisis necessitates degrowth as the only presently viable option.
- Reintegrating with nature: People's separateness from nature has led to a situation where nature is something to be avoided, feared, and conquered. Similarly, the commodification of nature accompanying the expansionist tendencies of capitalist markets has led to the perpetuation of human and nature dichotomy – in which humans are seen as separate, and often superior to nature. To transcend this divide requires rethink our relationship with the natural world beyond viewing it as another form of capital.
- Grassroots & local: The local theme is quite prevalent here as in *Non-Workers Paradise*, but there is also a recognition that local efforts have to connect and scale appropriately. There is some ambiguity on how exactly this would work, suggestive of the fact much work remains to be done.
- Gift economy: There were several variations revolving around this theme, but gift economy seems to best embody the key notion that contributions to the collective good are made without expectation of direct “reimbursement.” There is a faith in the collective that one will be provided for when needed. Work is done for the intrinsic value of mutual aid rather than the prospect of extrinsic reward. Again, another aspect that requires much effort to translate into effective action.
- New measures of success: New measures would be reflective of this modified sense of purpose – a society focused on pro-social and pro-environmental outcomes. There are already many ideas and proposals in this area, such as the Triple Bottom Line and the GPI (Genuine Progress Indicator); perhaps the most challenging aspect is to gain consensus on which of the many schemes is best.

### Non-Workers Paradise

The Non-Workers Paradise image is a play on the attributed-to-Marxist idea of a worker's paradise, but the world of *After Capitalism* has moved beyond the exchange of wage-labor for market access as a means of sustenance. A hallmark of this image is that the needs of economy have been subjugated to needs of society. One's job is no longer the defining characteristic determining status in society and ability to access goods and services. There were nine concepts comprising this image. The idea of a post-work future is perhaps the most central one here, but it also represents an outcome in how people relate to one another in the future.

The purpose, succinctly stated, is reducing inequality to creating a more just and fair society.

The key aspects of Non-Workers Paradise are:

- Society over economy: Capitalism puts the economy and work first, and everything social second. This image flips that and refocuses life such that the economy supports social life rather than the other way around.
- Inequality reduced via redistribution: Perhaps the most inflammatory issue focused on by this image is reducing the tremendous inequality gap. This necessitates rethinking the distribution of wealth. While there exists ideas on how to approach this, it still requires a great deal of work.
- UBI (Universal Basic Income): UBI may not be the ultimate right answer, but it is a concept that has generated much discussion and is in the spirit of this image. At minimum, it provides a starting point to initiate further discussion.
- Confronting the laziness lie: A major concern, indicative of the extent to which the "work ethic" mythos has been ingrained through capitalism, is that without working, people will lose purpose. Research suggests that this may be true for some, but certainly not all.
- Left gets it together: It is not unthinkable that the political left-wing reexamines and modifies its approach to the future. Hopefully, it will not demand another round of defeat at the hands of right or a possible social collapse or even civil war before rethinking its strategy.
- Tech acceleration as enabler: Post-work still requires the creation of wealth and the ability to complete tasks and activities of daily life. Tech acceleration and the advances in automation it enables can produce this wealth bounty in a way that can be distributed more equitably.
- Organizing: Local and Direct [Democracy]: As with Circular Commons, there is an emphasis on mobilization at the local level and employing more direct, democratic approaches to decision-making. The technical approaches for enabling direct decision-making are feasible, but developing the necessary political will is likely to require a great deal of time and effort.

### Tech-Led Abundance

The focus of the Tech-Led Abundance image centers on the potential for technological progress to drive the creation of an abundance of wealth that resolves the core distribution problem ingrained in capitalism. Goods and services, once reserved for the wealthy few, would now be available to all who need them. While this image is composed of just six concepts, the smallest number of the three images, the immense popularity of most of these concepts conveys they have already resonated with wider audiences. For instance, The Singularity, Abundance, Homo Deus, and Super-Intelligence have already broken through the mainstream and assumed high esteem among both experts and the public. In brief, the aim of this image is to bring about a bountiful abundance that eradicates the

world's most pressing problems through sophisticated new technologies.

The key aspects of Tech-Led Abundance are:

- Sharp focus on tech: This image is perhaps the most sharply focused as one driver and one solution, namely technology. There is an almost religious faith in the continued dazzling progress of technology. It covers a wide range of application areas, from renewable energy to the automation of work, and all the way to the nascent possibility of remaking the human species.
- Scarcity to abundance: Technology is the principal enabler of a shift that promises to end the reign of economic scarcity -- a fundamental feature of capitalist logic -- and deliver a new age of abundance.
- Automation: Automation starts by replacing cheap, labor-intensive work that brought little satisfaction to any relegated to those tasks and allows for our new AI-guided machines to do the dirty work. Improvement in AI is a prerequisite here as it must grow to be capable of analyzing data from multiple sources, develop decision-making capabilities, and conduct physical tasks with little or no human input.
- People and machines: The relationship between people and machines functions as a partnership. In this image more responsibility is given to the machines. In order to keep up, people have begun to modify themselves to become more machine-like, using various augmentation methods and enhancement approaches including wearables, implants, smart prosthetics as well as using biological means of genetic engineering via CRISPR and stem cells.
- Most risky: geoengineering and species modification: While the more enthusiastic and dogmatic supporters of these concepts minimize the potential for risks, others are more inclined to voice their concerns. The various geoengineering proposals for addressing climate change, for example, carry serious potential downsides, as do the AI and augmentation technologies which could also threaten the survival of the human species.
- Zero marginal cost: Another pivotal factor facilitating abundance is the advance in digital technology which promises the ability to reproduce copies at near zero cost. This disrupts conventional capitalist economics to the core and opens the door for alternative conceptions.
- Incentivizing entrepreneurs: Of the three images, this one is most compatible with the present. While technology is the key, the human element is also indispensable to the cultivation of these technologies. The entrepreneurs of this budding world of technology need to be properly incentivized, but in a way that avoids the appropriation of wealth to a select few.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

A limitation, noted earlier in the paper, is that the focus of the search for guiding images was primarily economic. There may be additional images or components of images that were missed if they fell outside this scope. Even staying within this economic-centric framing still led to an enormous number of potential sources, not all of which could be adequately covered. In many cases, representative works on a topic were selected that resulted in less attention to similar works.

Another limitation was the choice to synthesize into a smaller number of image themes, resulting in three. It would have been possible to identify a larger number of more granular images, but the choice was made for a smaller number primarily for memorability.

Finally, it is recognized that the author is offering up their interpretation and choices. While a large range of sources were consulted, one could also see the value of a more participatory or crowdsourced approach. The author encourages such efforts.

Some future research directions were in the explanation of the methodological approach where it was noted that the paper emphasized the first three steps of framing, scanning and researching, and futuring (the guiding images). The visioning (i.e., implications), designing, and adapting steps were only lightly addressed in this work. They are obvious candidates for future research. Taken together, these last three steps address the “how to” question, that is, given the three images, how might we get there. Identifying more detailed pathways to the images and all the accompanying recommendations may have a scope equal to or perhaps greater than the work that went into identify the guiding images themselves.

## Conclusion

The inspiration for this work was to take up the call to develop guiding images of the future put out by Polak more than 50 years ago. The specific quest was to identify and synthesize guiding images of the next economic system after capitalism. The research indeed identified images and components of images. Putting them together in a useful fashion required the development of an Image Analysis Template that specified a set of consistent components or criteria for a guiding image.

The analysis and synthesis resulted in three guiding images: Circular Commons, Non-Workers Paradise, and Tech-Led Abundance. It was interesting to note that while the primary focus of the research was economic-centric, the resulting guiding images each had a theme or emphasis that complemented the economic. Circular Commons was environmentally-driven, Non-Workers Paradise was socially- and politically-driven, and Tech-Led Abundance was technology-driven. It remains to be seen if these suggested guiding images will prove useful in stimulating discussion, further research, and eventually action. It is hoped that this paper will help provide a start.

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