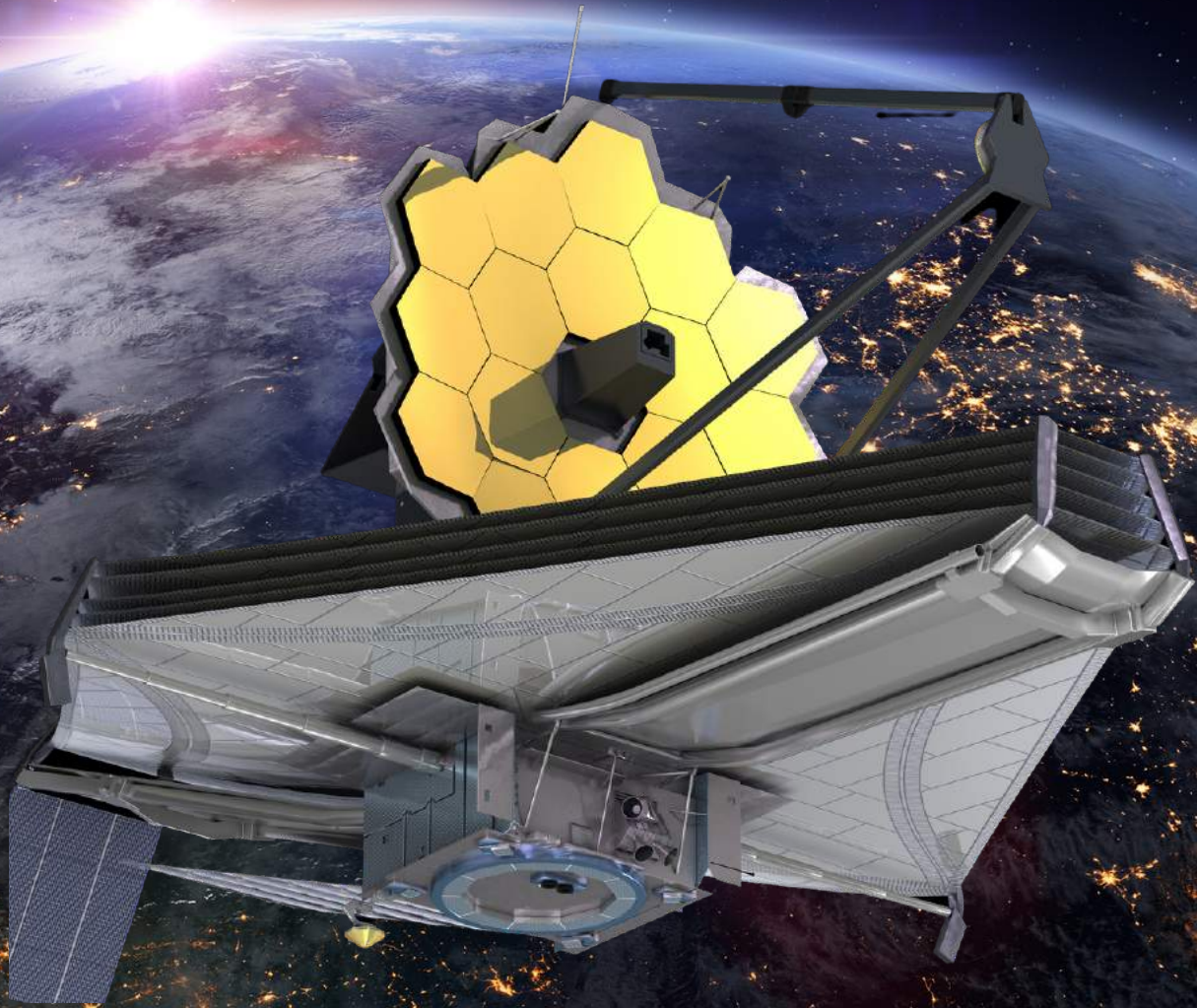# COMPASS

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IMAGINING AFTER CAPITALISM

By Andy Hines

Frederik Polak's (1973) admonition about the lack of positive guiding images of the future rings as true today as when he first made it more than 50 years ago. It was one of my first and favorite books about the future. When my students prompted a Spring Gathering on After Capitalism ten years ago, I took the opportunity to honor Polak's request and see if I could come up with positive guiding images of the future after capitalism. This also fit with my rule of always having at least one fun personal topic to work on. Like most book projects (mine, at least), it ebbed and flowed over the last ten years, but picked up steam a couple of years ago and a manuscript is now in the hands of a publisher.

So, what did I find?

1.**Capitalism is cooked.** I started the research with an open mind on whether capitalism might be fixed. It's become clear to me that it simply no longer fits the current and emerging context. While it was never perfect, one could argue that it did its job in delivering economic growth, and that job is done. I take this position because I think the very abundant demonizing of capitalism for all the world's problems is counter-productive. It keeps us complaining and arguing in the problem space, rather than exploring the solution space.

2.**Reform efforts won't work, but they buy us some time.** There are far more proposals for how to fix capitalism than there are for replacing it. Far, far more. Most are genuine, some perhaps less so. The simplest explanation for why they won't work is a fundamental axiom of systems thinking – a system's behavior is a function of its structure. Capitalism produces inequality and growth. That's what it does. And we need to move on from both of these. "Buying time" seems off-kilter as the world melts down around us. The more radical ideas (and they're out there) for burning down the system are premature without a viable replacement. It would be a disaster. We need time. I'm guesstimating 20-30 years to transition to the image(s).

3.**Three guiding images can be synthesized from existing thinking.** The ideas are already here, but they are scattered in bits and pieces, treatises and manifestos, concepts and full books -- and most focus on a particular problem of capitalism. The approach I settled on was organizing, synthesizing, and enhancing three thematic clusters that emerged. We are not starting from scratch. It's not just ideas, but pilots, experiments, and actual progress being made already. There are some really exciting things happening, but they are typically disconnected and not at scale.

THE RESEARCH

The research was structured using the University of Houston's Framework Foresight method with some modification.

ACTIVITY	DESCRIPTION	DELIVERABLE
Framing	Scoping the project, defining the focal question, and mapping the domain	Domain description & domain map
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
Futuring	Identifying a baseline and alternative futures using archetypes (Baseline, Collapse, New Equilibrium, and Transformation)	Archetype futures aligned on Three Horizons framework
Visioning (Implications Analysis)	Identifying important and provocative implications of scenarios	Light implications analysis as the "how to" is beyond scope of this work
Designing & Adapting (Conclusion)	Identifying options for action and implementing a strategic approach and ongoing monitoring	Concludes with top ten shifts to summarize key insights

Table 1. Framework Foresight (FF) Method

The three guiding images were crafted by clustering the research streams below and identifying the key themes:

- The 500+ scan hits clustered and analyzed using the tagging system in the Diigo scanning library.

- The 50+ book/reports [that made the cut] were clustered and analyzed using an Image Analysis Template.

- The seven key drivers were projected into the 2040-2050 timeframe.

The analysis for each of the major concepts that were part of the guiding images was done using an Image Analysis template developed specifically for this work. The template drew on the work of Polak and futurist colleague Wendy Schultz (2016), who developed and taught an elective course on Images of the Future for the University of Houston. The template approach provided a standardized framework and format that allowed for effective comparison of the concepts comprising the images.

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

Table 2. Image Analysis Template

A pivotal juncture in the research phase of Framework Foresight is the synthesis of the key drivers of change. A concerted effort was made to incorporate at least one driver from each STEEP category.

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

Table 3. Seven Drivers

THE GUIDING IMAGES

The three major themes of environmentally, socially, 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 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 is to cultivate environmental stewardship for the purpose of saving humanity from potential ecosystem collapse.

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.

Image credits: Denise Worrell

Image credits: Denise Worrell

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

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.

The aim of this image is to bring about a bountiful abundance that eradicates the world's most pressing problems through sophisticated new technologies.

Image credits: Denise Worrell

For the purposes of this brief piece, we'll stop at the images, but note that the larger work does include sets of suggestions for getting to the three guiding images. The goal here is to suggest that there are positive guiding images of the future *After Capitalism* that emerge using a foresight approach and generate some conversation in the present about what's next.

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