

HUMAN FUTURES

Insight for the Futurati



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KEEPING OUR EYES TRANSFORMATION:

BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY



IMAGINING AFTER CAPITALISM

By **Andy Hines**

A **KEY** goal of futurists is to identify potential transformation futures. I've never forgotten Frederik Polak's (1973) lament about the lack of positive guiding images of the future. His call rings even more true today as we are tempted to get stuck in the mud of reacting to current events. I submit that now is the time to re-double our efforts to develop positive guiding images ... and leave it to others to battle in the mud.

My contribution to Polak's call is a new book *Imagining After Capitalism* that synthesized three such positive guiding images (Hines, 2025). Pertinent to today's muddy situation, I talked about the pathway to these guiding images, which I set at roughly 20-30 years into the future. It's going to be a long, difficult road ahead.

We futurists know that we under-estimate how clever the current system is at saving itself at our peril. At Houston Foresight, we did some research that looked at 78 historical sets and how the domains actually played out over time, and we were struck by how slowly they actually evolved (Hines et al, 2024) It is fascinating to see how many times a potential transformational future is identified, but the existing system "fights it off." In particular, existing system stakeholders are very good at adapting reforms – often the bare minimum they can get away with – as a way to deflect and buy time – and avoid transformation.

I actually believe a collapse of the current system would be disastrous, as we have no alternatives ready to replace. I submit that we should not waste time and energy "fighting" the existing system but get busy developing pathways to the longer-term goal of transformation.



Source: A Hines
& D. Worrell

The After Capitalism research identified three major themes of environmentally, socially, politically, and technologically driven futures. 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). A brief summary is below:

■ **Circular Commons.** Expands the concept of sustainability to embrace circular principles as part of a social, political, and economic commons.

■ **Non-Workers Paradise.** A play on the attributed-to-Marxist idea of a worker's paradise, but in the After Capitalism world we are not working in paid jobs as a means of sustenance.

■ **Tech-Led Abundance.** Technological progress drives and leads to an abundance of wealth that fixes the core distribution problem of capitalism.

There is good news. The three guiding images of After Capitalism were synthesized from existing thinking. They are not inconceivable or hypothetical, but many of 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. 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.

We need to bring rigor to discussion about transformation. For the After Capitalism work, each of the major concepts was analyzed using an Image Analysis template developed specifically for this work. The template drew on the work of Polak and our own 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.

Image Analysis Template	
Category	Description
<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

I hope we can finally put Polak's lament to rest. We have lots of work to do in the present to develop transformative futures that are appealing and credible. Let's get to it!

REFERENCES:

¹ Hines, A. 2024. *Imagining After Capitalism*. Triarchy Press.
Hines, A., Benoit, H., Leong, L., Worrell, D., Schlehuber, L. and Cowart A. 2024. Mapping Archetype Scenarios across the Three Horizons. (2024). *Futures*, 162, 103418.
Polak, F. 1973. *The Image of the Future*. Elsevier.
² Schultz, W. 2016. "Images of the Future." Lecture Series, University of Houston, Summer 2016. *European Journal of Futures Research*, 12, 15. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40309-024-00238-0>

THE AUTHOR
Dr. Andy Hines is Associate Professor and Program Coordinator for the University of Houston's Graduate Program in Foresight and is also speaking, workshopping, and consulting through his firm Hinesight. His most recent book (just released) is Imagining After Capitalism.

