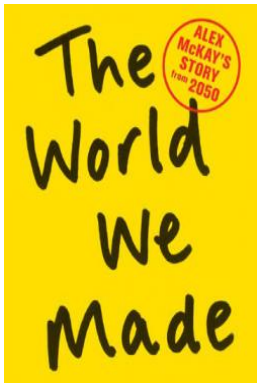
1. Essential Reading



"The world we made. Alex McKay's story from 2050" by Jonathon Porritt

By Javier Caletrío (Sociologue)
21 May 2015

The World We Made is an original contribution to the literature on environmental futures that seeks to inspire positive action by conveying a sense of possibility while at the same time illustrating how radical systemic change may unfold in the coming decades.

Imagining environmental futures

At the end of the 1990s some environmental commentators noted with disappointment how sustainability discourses tended to begin with an analysis of the current state of affairs only to jump immediately into a description of how the world ought to be. Missing in this value-driven view of sustainability was a sense of movement that could take us from our bleak present to a desired future. The situation today is somewhat different. Initiatives such as Transition Towns and academic debates around sustainability transitions are addressing precisely that sense of movement practically and theoretically, often aided by the field of future studies.

The World We Made is part of a burgeoing literature about environmental futures seeking to facilitate the identification of transition pathways. As compared to other studies and besides its undeniable value as a detailed description of a specific scenario, the book is of special interest for two reasons. The first is the way it conceives of a transition path as a sequence of interlinked, cascading events or 'shocks' rather than merely the result of purposeful action. The second is the way it avoids painting possible distant horizons with the broad brushstrokes of macroeconomic variables, technological trends, or tectonic geopolitical shifts that leave only the narrowest leeway to imagine the fine-grained texture of banal routines, fears, hopes and pleasures that are the essence of ordinary lives. The narrative style of the book helps in conveying this sense of the quotidian. The book is a diary with the fictional memoirs of a future past, that is, the personal account of the everyday life of an individual born in 2000 – a school teacher named Alex living in

Ashton Vale (a real place near Bristol) – recollecting how the world came to be the way it is (in 2050) through a series of 50 short, thematic chapters or snapshots.

Tempered hope

The World We Made is explicitly written to bring hope to a field –future studies– often associated with bleak perspectives, by showing that sustainability is not necessarily about the renunciation of earthly pleasures, lower quality of life or limiting one's cultural and geographical horizons, and that the experience, the knowledge and the technologies (at least the basic versions) needed to begin making the world a more sustainable reality are already there. In the case of technologies, many are already being commercialised or existing as prototypes or in embryonic form. Drawing on a wide survey of current technological and social innovations, Porritt's argument is that the ferment for a different world is active and rising. This sense of possibility is reinforced by contextualizing these technologies within daily life. And the result is a future that appears less of a foreign country –there is an air of familiarity in the material, sensuous and emotional textures of quotidian spaces, routines and relationships recreated in the book through photomontages.

This optimistic tone is however tempered by constant allusions to a three-decade period of declining standards of living, mounting social, political, security and environmental crises and successive catastrophes that triggered cultural and political tipping points, creating the right market, cultural and political contexts for low-carbon innovations to dominate the technological landscape.

Another way to think about transitions

This is, in my view, an original angle for thinking about sustainability transitions. Sustainability transitions are often conceived of as long, complex and multidimensional processes involving gradual changes energised by some combination of top-down (e.g. governmental) and especially bottom-up (e.g. NGOs and social movements) action. In Porritt's account these forces also find their place in the analysis, especially an avant garde of civil society actors and scientists in experimenting with a range of social and technological innovations to transform societies. But rather than assuming, as much of the environmental movement and many transition scholars do, that social movements on their own could transform consciousness, practices and policies, what overwhelmingly sets the pace and the nature of change in Porritt's analysis are a set of concatenated disasters and crises. These dramatic events create a window of opportunity for the visions, values and practices of this avant garde to become legitimate and normalized. So vast is the scale of this transformation in Porritt's eyes that only major disasters can awaken people around the world to the challenges ahead.

A political tipping point

In Porritt's fictional account of a future many of the crises and events happening since the early 2000s are described as small but significant turning points in the way things are seen and done in one's personal life, in one's relations with others and with the environment, in politics and in the economy. What finally puts environmental degradation at the top of the political agenda, what becomes the political tipping point in this troubled unfolding of events, is what becomes known as the Great Famine, caused by the collapse of the food system and involving the death of more than 10 million people, as well as riots in the streets of more than 70 countries. Occurring in 2025, this catastrophe is the

outcome of the chance combination of six simultaneous crises (what is often referred to as a ‘perfect storm’): climate change (a severe drought), energy prices (making fertilizers unaffordable for small farmers), speculation (large parts of grain production being under the direct control of speculators), meat consumption (up to 50% of world grain being consumed as animal fodder), biofuels (diverting agricultural uses of land), population (food demand and population growing faster than grain yields). In this dramatic context a fungus known as ‘black stem rust’ destroyed wheat harvests in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Porritt’s choice of a food-crisis to exemplify the major event that will trigger a political turning point is not random. The ‘black stem rust’, discovered in 1999 and named Ug99 by scientists, already exists and it is predicted to cause serious trouble in the near future –its virulent return is believed to be simply a matter of time (‘when’ rather than ‘if’). The choice of a famine is pertinent too for illustrating interdependencies between different systems, in this case the so-called ‘water-energy-food nexus’.

Everyday life and its mobilities

An interesting aspect of The World We Made is the way it showcases a stunningly wide range of little known technologies as well as social and cultural innovations that could change often the way we go about in our everyday lives in small but significant ways. Topics covered range from water, food, energy, biotechnologies, health, the rich, and artificial intelligence, to nuclear power, biodiversity, the cooperative movement, manufacturing, cyber-terrorism, and religion. Although explicit discussion of transport technologies and practices is only a small part of the analysis, it is precisely this panoramic portrayal of work, leisure, shopping, meeting friends and relatives, all requiring some form of mobility, that enables the book to portray a vivid and nuanced picture of how different but not entirely alien mobile lives could look in the future.

Still moving …

In Porritt’s analysis of a world in transition, the world has not come to a halt and mobility is still an integral part of Alex’s life in 2050. The needs and pleasures of dealing with distance, however, are satisfied by different forms and combinations of physical and virtual mobility. People do move to other cities and countries in search of work, but less frequently. Some forms of ‘local’ mobility such as commuting or travel for shopping have been drastically reduced. Work is closer to home -Alex’s school is a short walk from his house-, food is often cultivated in urban orchards (in 2050 40% of food is produced in or around cities) and, in general, everything needed for daily life can be found within one kilometre. Shipping is still important in international trade – despite calls for autarchy in the early 2000s – and while the volume of trade is the same as in the 2030s, the length of the journeys is shorter and most trade is intraregional instead of intercontinental. Flying has also been limited and rationed through personal quotas of carbon emissions which can be sold or given as presents to friends and relatives. So people still fly but it has become a more exotic activity than it was at the beginning of the century. Other forms of mobility, however, have been expanded – most significantly, virtual mobility.

… and fully cosmopolitan

The experience of distant places and communication with people is routinely mediated by screens animating many private and public spaces and there is less need to travel –in fact some people have given up holidays away from home and their experience of the world is completely screen-mediated. Companies offering virtual travel have become a successful business story and routinely enable enhanced experiences of place (known as virtual

travel experiences or VITES) that sometimes can be more satisfactory than the ‘real’ experience (although what is real and digitally mediated has become indelibly blurred). Thus, although most life takes place in the neighbourhood, the outlook of the place and people’s experiences of friendship, learning, work, and cooperating with other neighbourhoods in finding solutions to common challenges, are extensively cosmopolitan. People move more slowly in daily life, but lead more fulfilling lives through face-to-face communication in the neighbourhood and with distant others digitally.

Hence the world unfolding in the early decades of the 21st century is not one gradually retreating into tribal identities and conflicts as many feared in the 2000s. On the contrary, the growing number of threats and challenges experienced directly in one’s place of residence or witnessed through the media, from the mighty hurricane ravaging tropical cities to the decline of the humble bumble bee, nurture a cosmopolitan outlook that sparks and facilitates transnational collective action. This global conscience inaugurates a new phase of international cooperation between governments (‘a family of nations’). Internet and especially the new and enhanced opportunities to communicate and experience places at a distance through screens multiplies routine contacts and cooperation between citizens worldwide. Religion plays a key role in this process after the leaders of major faiths produce the Lasha declaration highlighting care for the Earth as a foremost religious duty. This provides the necessary collective leadership for many environmentally concerned individuals with a strong faith.

Credible fiction?

Obviously this is a book of fiction and the future scenario it presents is not by any means a prediction. Nonetheless it is designed to inspire. The extent to which it does so may be open to discussion. But in making its case, a virtue of the book is the way it showcases in a clear way and in a single text the everyday uses of a panoply of technologies and social innovations that, in combination, could facilitate different but still familiar and more sustainable worlds. This strong emphasis on technology is rare among environmentalists and certainly new in this specific author. Although many of the technologies cited are currently known only to engineers and specialists and therefore the reader may find it difficult to assess whether the optimism in the argument is well-founded, Porritt does note that most of his assumptions about likely technological developments stay within what is currently feasible or expected to be reasonably possible in the near future.

The book’s argument is also premised on a number of assumptions about the nature, implications and chronological order of likely or possible events and processes. Seen from today’s perspective, some of these seem far-fetched, such as the end of competitive shopping and status seeking, the conversion of the super-rich into philanthro-capitalists, or the main religions declaring it a sin to destroy the environment. Porritt is aware that his book will come under criticism for some of these assumptions. At the same, however, he rightly notes that many existing initiatives aiming at sustainability go under the radar of mainstream media and most researchers and this is obscuring the real scope for change.

As noted earlier a virtue of this book is the way it conceives of transitions paths as significantly influenced by cascading set of crises and catastrophes. Being this a book aimed at inspiring hope, Porritt presumes that these events end up having benign consequences, especially the growth of a cosmopolitan conscience. But the set of interlinked catastrophes that many other thinkers and institutions have also predicted for the coming decades could also have less benign outcomes. To name but one example, there is also the possibility that the huge global catastrophes that he describes provide the perfect ground for the emergence of millennial sects seeking apocalypse. In that case

and with biotechnologies becoming more available, one could suggest that the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995 by the Aum Shinrikyo sect could also provide a taste of the things to come.

About the author

Jonathon Porritt is an influential British environmentalist and writer. He has been advisor to many institutions on environmental matters, was co-founder of the Forum for the Future and has been president of the UK branch of the Friends of the Earth.

References

The world we made. Alex McKay’s story from 2050

Jonathon Porritt

Phaidon, 2013

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Diversity of lifestyles
- Futures
- Digital technologies
- Crises

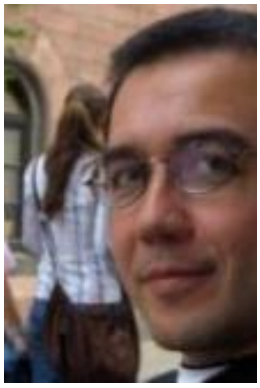
Policies

- Ecological transition

- Cities & Territories

Theories

- Methods



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Javier Caletrío is the scientific advisor of the Mobile Lives Forum for the English-speaking world (BA Economics, Valencia; MA, PhD Sociology, Lancaster) . He is a researcher with a background in the humanities and social sciences. In adittion, he also has a strong interest in the natural sciences, especially ecology and ornithology. His research lies broadly in the areas of environmental change and sustainability transitions, especially in relation to mobility and inequality. Javier was based at the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University from 1998 to 2017.

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