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“A Futurist Reviews Al Gore’s *The Future*”

By Michael Lee

Al Gore may not be a futurist but he must rank as one of the most literate, cultured, well-informed and visionary politicians since Winston Churchill. Following the global success of *An Inconvenient Truth* he has risen to become a leading social commentator, a voice we ignore at our peril. His latest book, *The Future*, reinforces this growing and well-deserved reputation. It’s an invaluable handbook for policymakers and strategists seeking a better understanding of emerging global society.

There are those who strive to forecast and foresee the social future while others help to shape and guide its evolution in practice. Gore’s book does not qualify as a futurological work as such, for reasons which will become clear, but *The Future* would enable governments and organizations to grasp the game-changing developments the world is undergoing in order to mitigate serious political, economic and social risks we face.

Gore identifies six drivers of global change but does not construct any scenarios or make any specific forecasts, framed within proper time-scales, to apply them in an imagined future world shaped by them. As a result, he becomes more of a social prophet admonishing the human race to change its ways – or else face doom. But readers who want a holistic picture painted of our evolving global world will find in its pages numerous nuggets of rich wisdom. This is a big book which gives us the big picture.

Al Gore’s picture of the world has deepened and broadened since his ground-breaking *An Inconvenient Truth* and I, for one, was suitably impressed that he has been able to follow that “hard act to follow” with another highly revealing study of what’s going badly wrong with global society. I closed his latest book hoping and praying that he will one day run for political office again. Our world needs his talents, values and knowledge for policy-making and the enactment of real systemic political change, as opposed to the speech-stoking, electioneering rhetoric of change (“Yes, we can!”, etc., etc.).

Speaking of rhetoric, the social drug of choice in our Twitterized, dumb-downed world of bytes and sound-bites, Gore's book identifies a vacuum of political leadership at a time when compounding, interconnected problems are calling out for stronger, more ethical and more scientifically informed public governance. Today's politicians, by and large, appear as hollow, telegenic celebrity toastmasters peddling political slogans while promoting a business-as-usual agenda in consultation with powerful figures in the media and business. Few thinkers would argue with Gore that there has been a widespread degradation of democracy in the West. In this context, *The Future* stands out as an important beacon of sound political logic and ethical thinking for our times.

Gore isolates six drivers of global change, which, when taken together, are bringing about revolutionary, self-reinforcing effects to the world:

- Economic globalization creating an interconnected but unequal world economy with growing divides between haves and have-nots.
- The internet and worldwide web linking billions of people and their various intelligent devices.
- The changing balance of global power from a unipolar post-Cold War world to a more complex network of powers from East and West, developed and developing countries, with markets and multinational organizations transcending the structure of modern nation-states ("More than half of the 100 largest economies on earth are now corporations").
- Unsustainable growth in population and resource consumption on an earth rapidly reaching its natural limits, i.e. the breakdown of the unlimited growth paradigm.
- New emerging technology leaps made possible by nanotechnologies, 3-D printing (including the capability to literally print a house in under 24 hours!) and the development of powerful materials such as graphene (one of the strongest materials ever developed), coupled with increased knowledge in the life sciences.
- Climate change producing a re-alignment, or misalignment, of civilization with its surrounding ecological systems, including the atmosphere.

Gore nails down these major drivers of global change and discusses in detail how they reinforce one another. He also meticulously puts these trends into their proper historical perspective. However, he may have underestimated the decisive role of industrial-scale energy in future economic development facing us all, and glossed over the crippling effects of government debt in major Western countries from the USA to the Eurozone. But the real problem with Gore's analysis, in my view, is that social change is actually manifested at regional, national and local levels, from the ground up rather than simply flowing top-down from global evolutionary trajectories.

Futurological scenarios based on these six drivers of change would need to identify the gatekeepers, stakeholders, change agents and roadblocks *within* regions and countries in order to fathom how these sources of change are likely to work themselves out on the ground within definite time frames. The way North Korea responds to them will be entirely different from how China, Japan, Russia and South Korea will change. The era of the nation-state is far from over. That is why I've chosen as a futurist to focus on *national* destinies in producing recent scenarios and social predictions. One should marry Gore's top down global change with specific, historically based national futurological analysis. This would help us to move from theoretical change to real change embraced by humans and integrated into actual social systems within nations.

One very serious problem today, beautifully articulated by Gore, is unemployment. He points out that the Great Recession of 2008-2012 resulted in a loss of 27 million jobs worldwide. And this is in an era in which "robo-sourcing", or automation, is leading to fewer available jobs, which as he points out, will depress consumer demand and exacerbate social inequalities. The Gini coefficient, measuring inequality of income and wealth, is rising sharply in countries from America to China, from Russia to the UK.

Consequently, job creation has already become a major challenge for governments worldwide. In the years ahead, unemployment is likely to become a life-and-death issue for most governing authorities. Along with rising prices, compounded by steadily depleting global energy supplies, a toxic socio-economic brew is being created. In many regions, when widespread unemployment, accompanied by economic pressures, produces social volatility, unrest is just one trigger-event away.

Conclusion

Social policies can shape the future in entrenched, long-term ways. Politics today needs huge doses of systems thinking and futurology in order to adopt balanced and sustainable policies in step with a complex, emerging global society. Al Gore's *The Future* is a powerful reference work no policymaker, strategist or thinking person concerned about citizenship in today's changing world can afford to be without.

Michael Lee's book *Knowing our Future – the startling case for futurology* is available at the publisher http://www.infideas.com/pages/store/products/ec_view.asp?PID=1804 or on Amazon.com.

Acknowledgments

Gore, A. 2013. *The Future*. New York: Random House Publishing Group.

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