

SECTION V: The Personal

30.1 Living in the Future Tense

For 5,000 years, humans lived in the past tense: "Yesterday was the same as tomorrow." For the next 500 years people lived in the present tense: "Today can be whatever we want it to be." But now, for the next 50 years we must start living in the future tense: "Tomorrow's social, economic and political constraints must become today's reality."

"There is no purpose in returning to the past other than to fulfill the need for the sense of certainty that is itself the principle obstacle for dealing creatively with the uncertainties of moving forward into the 21st century."

Forum for a Future, Podcast 34

The concepts of capitalism and democracy served us well for 500 years. However, with the start of the 21st century we entered into a new era in which economic growth can no longer be the engine for human progress. As a result, capitalism and democracy alone are no longer adequate.

A transition to new economic, political and social structures will be required. Our challenge will be to let go of our old ways of thinking and behaving and to create new means for the continued improvement of the human condition.

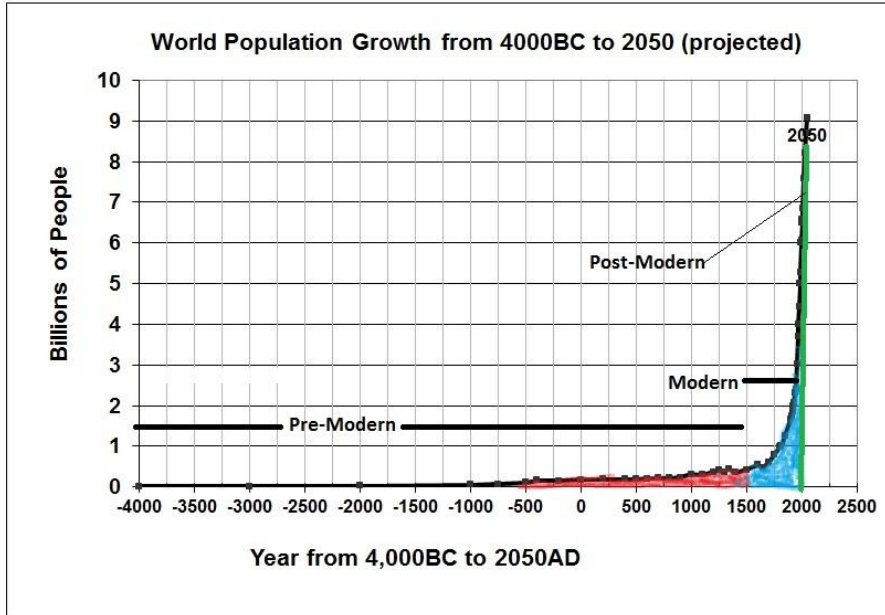
The first 5000+ years formed the pre-modern era. During this time the human condition was largely determined by fate, assumed to be in the hands of the gods. Accordingly, society was organized around those authorities who could mediate between the people and the gods. The end of this era was defined by the rise of religion and the formal authority of the church for determining the human condition. Land was the principal means for the accumulation of wealth and power.

The first inflection point marked the transition into the Modern Era, which began with the Age of Enlightenment. Over the next 500 years, from roughly 1500 to 2000 the emergence of science and technology allow for a gradual shift to take place in which the human condition was no longer seen as a matter of fate, but rather one of human control over nature. As a result, the Nation State began to replace the church as the formal authority for managing the human condition. Over this time period, land was gradually replaced by natural resources as the principal means for the accumulation of wealth and power.

The second inflection point marked the start of the Post-Modern Era. The 50 years between 2000 and 2050 will result in knowledge and information becoming the principal means for the accumulation of wealth and power, with economic and financial Globalizations replacing the nation state as the institutional authority for managing the direction of the human condition. What remains to be determined is whether globalization will be driven by growth or sustainability as the dominant social value.

Taking it to the Limit

Taking it to the limit is what defines the Post-Modern Era. This can be illustrated by world population growth which can serve as metaphor for wider generalizations. The planet can only

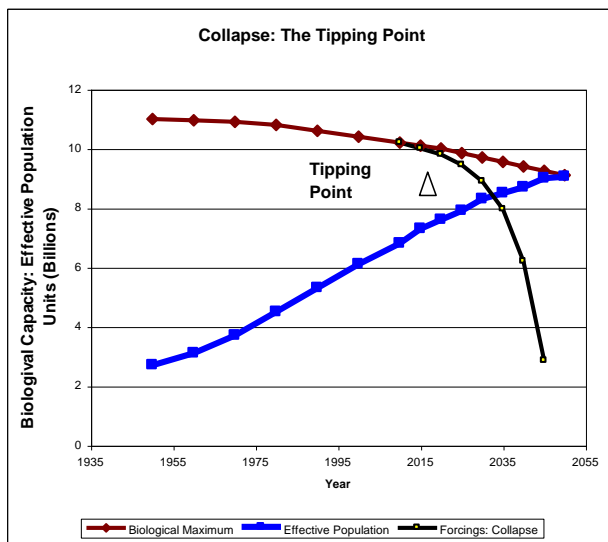


hold a limited number of people; this is known as the carrying capacity. The exact number depends on a variety of factors, such as how much energy people use on the average, and how much waste they produce. The limit is set by the biological capacity of the earth to replace the energy and to absorb the waste.

A rowboat can safely hold only a limited number of people. If the boat is overloaded, the risk of

sinking increases. If the boat is loaded further, at some irreversible number – a tipping point -- it will take water and sink, even in the best of conditions; so too with the planet. Since 1985 we have been overloading the earth. Each August the population of the world has used all of energy and created all of the waste that can be replaced or absorbed in a given year; this is called “overshoot.” To avoid sinking the earth, we have to lighten the load; this means some immediate combination of using less and limiting the number of people. If we cross the tipping point we will irreversibly force the boat sink.

This is the Third Inflection Point. It is the point where the Post-Modern Era meets the future. If the effective size of the population and the biological capacity ever reaches a tipping point the planet collapses. No one knows exactly where that point is. We do know we are now in the process of pulling the ceiling down on our heads while we are rapidly racing toward the limit. The simple truth is that within our lifetime, the 50 year span that forms the Post-Modern Era, we will have to make some fundamental adjustments to how we live.



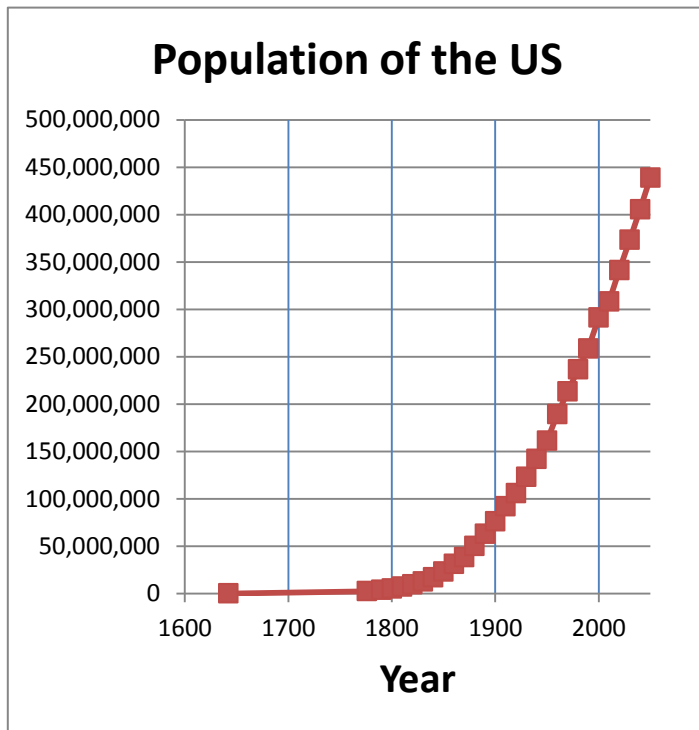
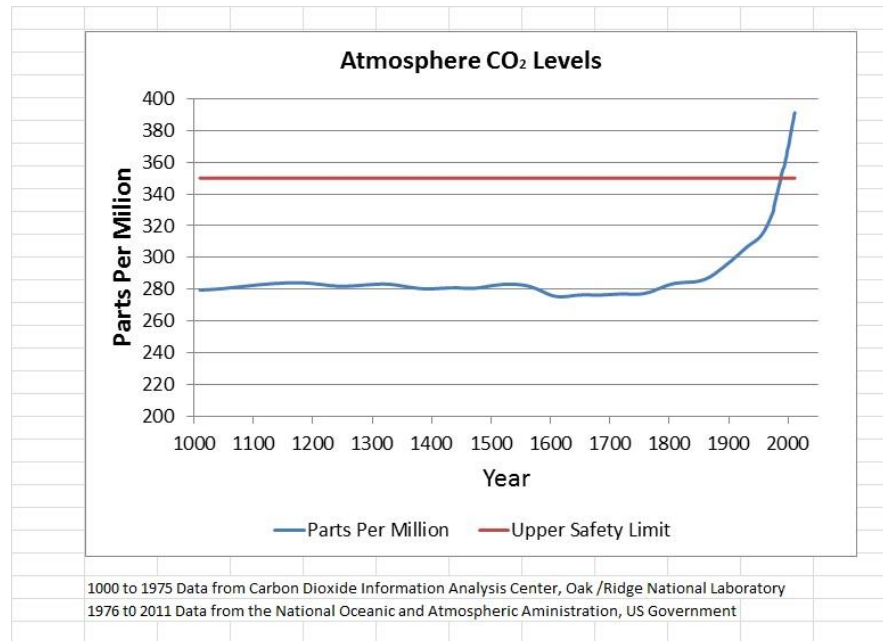
The Defining Moment

It is this third inflection point -- when “reality meets the limit” -- that is the *defining moment* of the Post-Modern Era. This moment is roughly a 50-year time interval that encompasses the life span of the majority of people who are alive today. It is in this sense that “today is tomorrow” for those of us living in the Post-Modern Era. The possibility of an “unsustainable” future is the joint function of continued population and economic growth. This possibility is at one and the same time a

specific example of what it means to live in the future tense, and a metaphor for a wide variety of other issues that will require comparable re-construction of most, if not all, of our social, political and economic institutions.

A Family of Curves

There are many other indications that we live in exponential times in addition to the growth of the world population. The most obvious is the emission of greenhouse gases that threaten an increase in global warming that will prohibit the planet from support the current population because of an irreversible reduction in carrying capacity. This is a potential tipping point.



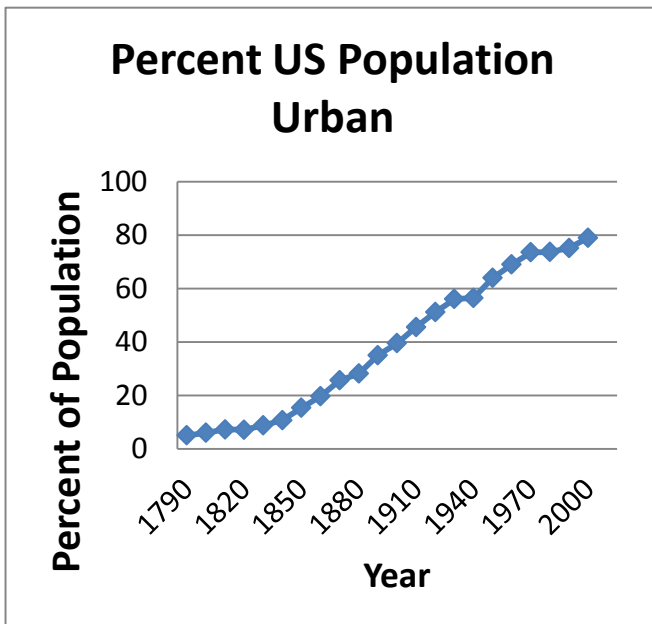
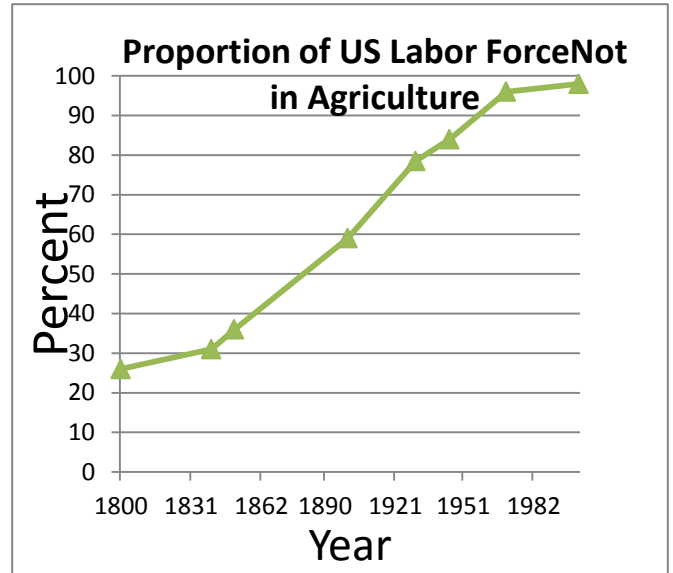
But there are other factors within just the United States that are also approaching a limit. They, too, are demanding that we start living in the future tense, by understanding that today is tomorrow. While the population growth of the US is slower than much of the world, we are still pushing the limits of what our geography and our social institutions can sustain given our lifestyle.

The challenge is not simply the number of people, but in the details of population demographics. As a result of industrialization, manufacturing and commerce, fewer and fewer people work in agriculture. Now, less than 2% of the labor force is farmers; we have already reached that limit.

The migration from farming to manufacturing dramatically increased the proportion of the population living in urban areas. But, increasingly, the manufacturing jobs which brought them

to the cities are now moving to other less developed countries where labor is less expensive. Yet, there is no clear indication of how the new growing urban surplus is to function in the future.

These are also *defining moments*. They are additional illustrations of “racing toward a limit.” They will all require some sort of response with the next 50 years. For those who are alive today, an array of many similar defining moments are in the future, encompassing all aspects of the human condition. Inflection points, by definition, are when fundamental change takes place, when what has worked in the past is what is causing the problems now.



The impending Third Inflection point will be the *defining moment* for our generation – the Post Modern Era. What legacy will mark the end of this era? We will crash unsustainable economic growth into the ceiling, or will we find a way to live sensibly together on a crowded planet?

The only thing that is clear is that living in the past or in the present tense is not the answer.

Psychologically, living in the future tense will mean finding new ways to discover and maintain a coherent sense of self direction in the face of exponential change. In the

Pre-Modern Era a coherent sense of self-direction lasted for generations, in the Modern Era, a life time, and in the Post-Modern Era self-direction must become developmental stages within a single lifetime. This is huge psychological challenge. This helps to explain why the *cliche* “take America back” is, unfortunately, so popular. But, reclaiming a secure future requires going forward into new ways of thinking. If the metaphor of racing toward the limit applies over a wide range of events, as I will suggest that it does, then the challenge is not just sustainability of the physical world, but also of creating alternative social, economic and political institutions, and finding a new psychological sense of coherent self-direction in the process of change.