

Members' Newsletter



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The Future: Six Drivers of Global Change

by Al Gore

Book Review by Joseph Voros

When I tell people about Big History (actually, I usually tend to evangelise, but I'm gradually getting this under control) they sometimes consider it a bit odd that a futurist would be so enamoured of and concerned with history. But there is really nothing odd about this at all. One of the greats of the field of Futures Studies, the late Warren Wagar, was a historian, and considered futures work to be a specialised form of "applied history" (Wagar 1993)—which is to say that we are right now in the very process of creating the history that we will eventually look back on from some vantage point in the future. One hopes that, if we do this well—consciously, and with wisdom, humility and foresight—then our assessment of the then-present we will be living through will be a favourable one.

This view of Futures Studies as "the forward-looking equivalent of history" (e.g., Slaughter 1999) helps to place former US Vice-President Al Gore's latest book *The Future* into the appropriate context. In this book, Gore tries to answer a question he was posed by someone at one of his many public events: "what are the main drivers of global change?" As he thought more about it, he realised that a simple answer merely listing "several of the usual suspects" (as he puts it in the Introduction) was not enough, with the end result being a multi-year project to examine this question in detail and in depth. He ultimately came up with, as the book's sub-title suggests, six main drivers of

In this edition of the IBHA Members' Newsletter, we highlight Joseph Voros' review of Al Gore's *The Future: Six Drivers of Global Change*,

notice of the 2014 IBHA Conference at Dominican University of California,

and the highly anticipated first edition of *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything* by David Christian, Craig Benjamin, and Cynthia Brown, available August 30, 2013!

global change.* Gore has been very involved with serious futures thinking since his early days in the US Congress in the 1970s. There are few people so well placed to both understand the complexities of change at the global level, as well as the difficulties and challenges of addressing and responding to it meaningfully in the fraught political arena of public policy.

The book therefore consists of six main chapters, one for each of the drivers, along with an Introduction and a Conclusion. A skim-read of the Introduction will give the reader a good overall sense of the territory being covered. For the more visually-oriented, there are also graphical “mind maps” of the structure of the book as well as of each chapter. The drivers of global change are identified as:

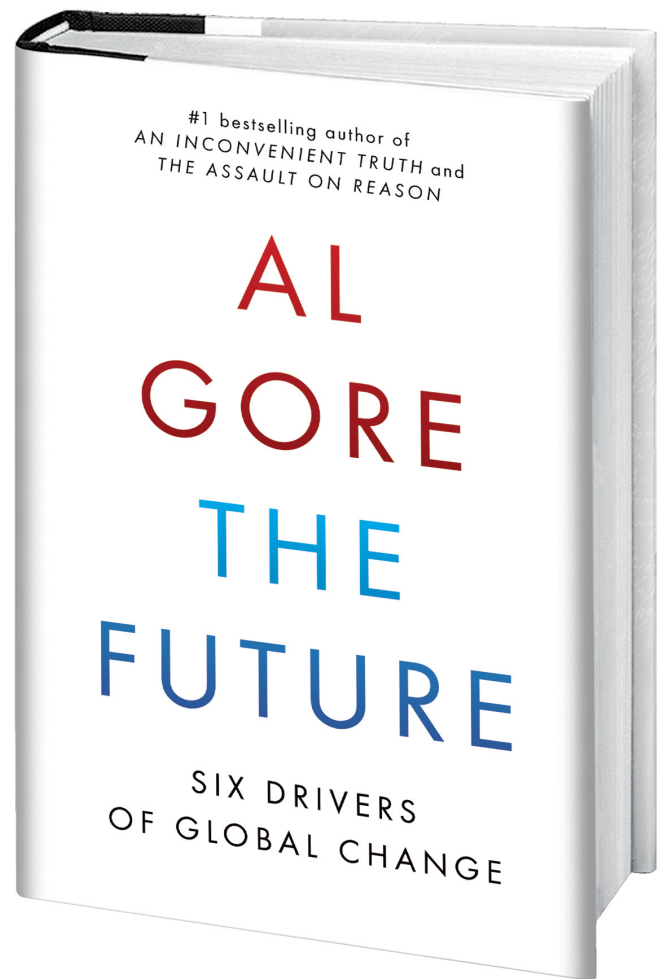
1. Earth, Inc. – the emergence of a deeply interconnected global economy;
2. The Global Mind – the emergence of a planet-wide electronic communications grid;
3. Power in the Balance – the emergence of a completely new balance of political, economic, and military power in the world;
4. Outgrowth – the emergence of rapid, unsustainable growth in a variety of areas, including population, resource consumption, and pollution flows, to name only a few;
5. The Reinvention of Life and Death – the emergence of a revolutionary new set of powerful biological, biochemical, genetic, and materials science technologies; and
6. The Edge – the emergence of a radically new relationship between human civilization and the Earth’s ecological systems.

** In the parlance of Futures Studies, a “driver” is generally conceived of as somewhat larger and broader than a simple “trend” and usually consists of a number of often closely-related processes, some of which may be most visible or most easily perceived as the simple “surface” trends of much “deeper” dynamics (see, e.g., Voros 2006).*



The book reports on some of the most recent research available; there are nearly 2200 endnotes given, so, for those who are interested, each of these drivers and the evidence base for them can be further investigated in detail. On a side note, one finds in the Acknowledgements that the IBHA's own David Christian and Fred Spier spent a couple of days with Gore at a workshop discussing the outline of the book. And, in the spirit of Big History, Gore does frequently demonstrate a keen understanding across multiple time scales, considering events and processes in the distant and more recent past, and how they have set the context for and had an impact on the shape of the present.

The scale of the task the book is attempting is daunting, to say the least. It tries to examine and consider important connections between and among the six major drivers of change identified above, any one of which could be the subject of its own dedicated monograph. This kind of wickedly non-linear system of interconnections is extremely difficult to reduce to a simplified linear format, such as a book. The dynamics of the drivers, and their many interactions and interdependencies with the others—and more widely with other social dynamics—are each explored at some length. The complexity of these many dynamical processes means that each chapter has to cover a lot of ground and sometimes revisits ideas from earlier chapters or telegraphs material from later ones. This style of writing conveys pretty well the correct insight that realistically charting one's way into the future is not a linear tick-box decision to be agonised over once and then dispensed with, but rather an ever-evolving, always-unfinished and unavoidably tentative process, which frequently needs to re-consider previous analyses and assessments in the light of new information as it arises. What emerges therefore is less a detailed prescription about exactly what to do—although there are certainly passages where Gore makes very clear prescriptive policy recommendations—so much as a contemplative exploration of some of the important things we will need to keep in mind as we go about charting our collective course into an imperfectly-sensed future.



When viewing history we often have the great good fortune of seeing “from a distance” (as it were) how complex social processes have played out over long time scales, and we may therefore be able to make some plausible abridged assessments of what the main causal relationships were and why things turned out the way they did. By contrast, when we are right in the very middle of and living through those processes it is extremely difficult to generate the sense of “distance” that a historical perspective can provide. The best we can do is attempt to look beyond our usual time-bound “present bias” and to really see the current state of the world as the interim temporary configuration, subject to inevitable change, that it is—something which is made significantly easier by an ability to take a Big History perspective. And this therefore may be perhaps one of the most important cognitive skills our species now needs to develop if it seriously intends to survive into the long term future. We can

no longer afford to have what Edward O. Wilson called “a Paleolithic obstinacy” (2003, p23).

The Future is probably not something to take away on holiday for some light reading. Rather, it is an opportunity to immerse oneself in the “mindspace” and thinking processes of someone who has been involved in policy-making up to the very highest levels of government, as he attempts to fathom the complexity of global change, and how we may need to respond to—or better yet—guide it. The book is very strongly focussed on a US audience, which some readers will find incongruous considering the global breadth of the issues addressed, but the ideas for policy reform and development are nonetheless applicable much more widely. Gore spends a lot of time outlining the many challenges and dangers we face. Yet he still remains an optimist, believing that we do indeed have the wherewithal to take control of our fate, and to succeed in not only averting the climate crisis he has frequently spoken and written about elsewhere, but also to effectively address the challenges he has described. I do hope he is right, because, in the words of the late Warren Wagar (Marien 2005):

We are the link between the traditional civilizations of a well-remembered past and the emergent world civilization. We stand between. If we break under the strain there will be no future. All posterity is in our keeping.

Perhaps it is this sense of profound responsibility to future generations that may actually be the most important driver of global change, whose emergence we so urgently need to encourage, nurture and support. I think Big History has an important role to play in fostering this vitally needed future-responsive global awareness. And that’s one reason why, as a futurist, I am so keen on Big History.

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*The Future* is published by Random House in hardcopy, e-book and 15-CD audiobook formats (the unabridged audiobook is read by the author himself, without the endnotes, for which you will need one of the other versions).  
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Please plan on participating in the second

IBHA conference

Teaching and Researching Big History: Big Picture, Big Questions

August 6 - 10, 2014

Dominican University of California

Wednesday, August 6, 2014

Registration

Chabot Space and Science Center Excursion

San Francisco City Tour

Saturday, August 9

IBHA Conference Day 3

Sunday, August 10

California Academy of Sciences

Excursion Wine Country Tour

Thursday, August 7

IBHA Conference Day 1

Friday, August 8

IBHA Conference Day 2





McGraw-Hill Education is proud to announce the highly anticipated first edition of *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything* by David Christian, Craig Benjamin, and Cynthia Brown, available August 30, 2013!

What is Big History? Big History incorporates findings from cosmology, earth and life sciences, and human history, and assembles them into a single, universal historical narrative of our universe and of our place within it. The first edition of *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything*, written by the pioneers of the field, presents a framework for learning about anything and everything. It encourages students to think critically about our cumulative history and the future of the world through a variety of lenses.

Hear the authors discuss the first edition of *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything*! The focus of this webinar will be on introducing the content and helping you to teach Big History in your classroom.

Big History:

A BIG Course for the 21st Century Student

David Christian, Macquarie University
Craig Benjamin, Grand Valley State University
Cynthia Brown, Dominican University

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