

## THEME 01

# Our current future shock

SOCIAL CHANGE

ACCELERATING  
CHANGE

FUTURISM

Our modern societies and economies have a much higher degree of freedom than ever before. Although large systemic transitions, technological innovation and ideological revolutions establish these freedoms, they also alter the relatively stable equilibrium and pace of change that ruled traditional societies. As such, many people experience psychological difficulties dealing with the accelerating change of our time, but also in creating new practices to deal with our current future shock.

## Our observations

- In his book [Evolutionair Denken](#) (2006), philosopher Chris Buskes describes how the principles of Darwinian evolution theory, variation and natural selection, have long-lasting and deep effects on our modern worldview and culture. For example, our ideas about love and sexuality in evolutionary psychology (i.e. a good partner is one that maximizes the functionality of the offspring), evolutionary economics (i.e. the natural “survival of the fittest” dynamics reoccurs in competitive markets) as well as our evolutionary self-understanding (i.e. man is not a fallen angel but an ascended primate).
- In his book [Future Shock](#) (1970), futurist Alvin Toffler wants to develop a theory on “adaptation”. Toffler argues that daily life (in the U.S.) in the 20th century saw a huge acceleration of change: in terms of people (we have more means to connect with more people), places (we have more options to travel and live in other geographical areas), ideas (we have more sources of knowledge), and things (more things are produced and they are sold more cheaply in the economy). Future shock is the term he uses to describe the psychological stress and disorientation this accelerating change brings to most people, and the book aims to come to terms with the future: to help people psychologically cope more effectively with personal and social change.
- We have written on accelerated change on these four levels as identified by Toffler: that [knowledge](#) is growing exponentially in the Information Age, [business innovation](#) is growing exponentially in the sensor-based economy, we have an increased number of ways to connect with [people](#) in virtual worlds, and globalization has reduced the cost of moving from one [place](#) to another (whether in terms of [moving abroad](#), [traveling](#) or [migration](#)).
- Man in modern times also has to deal with ever-increasing disruption within the ideological domain and beliefs that have ruled our heads and hearts for centuries: religion, work, politics and philosophy (including morality and esthetics). Take the Netherlands as an example. Last year, for the first time, more than half of the population was not [religious](#), meaning the number of religious people has dropped significantly from almost 80% 50 years ago. Furthermore, the percentage of Dutch who are a member of a [political party](#) decreased from 11% to little more than 2% between 1960 and 2018, and the percentage of Dutch who are a member of a [labor union](#) decreased from more than 40% to less than 10%. These percentages are even significantly lower for younger generations. Furthermore, the “modern” search for an objective truth, the Good and beauty, was severely criticized in philosophy during the 20th century, as articulated in Nietzsche’s [nihilism](#) or Lyotard’s “[end of grand narratives](#)”.
- The book [Suicide](#) (1897) by the French Emile Durkheim is generally considered one of the first major sociological studies. Durkheim introduced four types of suicide, of which “anomic suicide” is the (sociological) result of an individual’s moral confusion and lack of social direction. This idea has been developed more broadly in sociological anomie theory, which looks at how individuals respond to societies that provide them little moral and social guidance that result from the collapse of social bonds, the fragmentation of social identity, a conflict between traditional and novel belief systems, and the entrance of new cultural elements into local communities.



## Connecting the dots

Variation and natural selection are important evolutionary principles in the living world. Variation means that organisms constantly develop new characteristics, leading to a higher degree of complexity and differentiation, as well as to whole new species. As such, variation is related to change and innovation. Natural selection, on the other hand, means that organisms who are able to adapt to the requirements of a specific milieu or ecosystem will have a higher chance of survival. Hence, selection principles tend to focus on the conservation of those characteristics and functionalities that establish a “fit” between the organism and external environment. Evolutionary dynamics are determined by the interplay of these principles of variation and selection, and are in equilibrium when adaptation changes along with the requirements of the external environment and selection principles result in a specific set of characteristics and functionalities among organisms. These evolutionary principles are not only active in nature, but also in the socio-cultural order that man creates himself. For example, companies adapt to changing market conditions (e.g. new consumer preferences) and develop new products, and we are often (unconsciously) attracted to those that maximize the survival chances of our offspring. However, modernity has brought a huge acceleration of change and innovation to our societies and economies, threatening the social equilibrium between variation and selection that characterized most of human history. In traditional societies, with tight-knit communities and private and public life organized by traditions (e.g. religion, collective morality, local habits, rituals), the pace of change and innovation was low, as they were only allowed when they tied in with the specific socio-cultural order: variation remained within the boundaries of tradition and the community. This made change slow and constrained innovation diffusion, but created relatively stable societies and cultures. However, modern societies and their corresponding higher degrees of freedom (e.g. free markets and trade, faster mobility, more sources of knowledge), yielded more room for variation: change and innovation were embraced as instruments for progression. However, this endangered the equilibrium between both evolutionary principles. When the pace of innovation and corresponding variation

accelerates, it evokes the principles of selection and conservation: when people are confronted with fast change, but are psychologically unable to embed them in their daily lives, they revert back to tradition and local communities. We have seen that our world is experiencing accelerated change. Externally, this is driven by changes in the material substrate and conditions of our daily lives, such as digitization, globalization, migration, urbanization. Internally, this is driven by developments that alter the ideological foundations and spiritual superstructure that organize our idea of ourselves, the world and relations between individuals in the world, such as secularization, nihilism, as well as political disaffiliation. Indeed, [traditional rhythms](#) that once guided our daily lives have become much less dominant and important, especially for younger generations. Many of our current problems and issues can be conceived of as “anomic reactions” to these accelerating changes that tilt the balance between variation and selection towards preservation and conservation, such as [populism](#) (against political and demographic change), nationalism and localism (against globalization), the rise of [angry societies](#) (against the breakdown of local communities and mass-scale urbanization), [reality apathy](#) (in response to the explosion in available information and sources that erode collective truths). More positively, new consumer practices and habits are emerging that explicitly embrace and acknowledge that our world is changing. On the individual level, people are actively looking for meaning and purpose in new activities, seeking [experiences](#) of ego-transcending and altered states or trying to establish a new kind of [social cohesion](#) in virtual worlds. On a social level, secular religions are emerging, such as [technology, sustainability](#) and sports (e.g. the Netflix trailer “[Sunderland](#)” clearly shows how deeply football and religion are intertwined), by which we are trying to inject collective purpose and a stable common cause into our daily lives. More fundamentally, a new spiritual awakening is upon us, such as [meta-modernist](#) lifestyles or [anti-reductionist](#) ways of thinking, and even a return to [utopian grand](#) narratives that articulate a new narrative to deal with accelerating change and cope with our future shock.

## Implications

- In the past, permanence was an ideal: things that lasted were considered valuable, such as clothing that could be worn for days, or a building or church that weathered storms and lasted long. However, this logic of permanence was replaced by an economics of transience, as advancing technology leads to lower costs of manufacturing, even lower than the costs of repairing and maintaining, making replacement cheaper than repair (e.g. in [fashion](#)). With the increasing backlash against this throw-away culture, many products need to acquire additional features and premium functionalities as they are expected to last longer (e.g. in [smartphones, cars, or PCs](#)).
- The acceleration of change and exponential innovation shorten the duration of situations – understood in terms of people, places, things and ideas – in a given interval of time. As we are experiencing more situations in our lives, we ourselves have more roles to play, places to visit, choices to make and people to connect with. In Hegelian terms, this freedom is experienced as “abstract”, or without substance. New [heuristic principles](#) and trustworthy partners are needed to bring guidance to our increasingly complex life, as well as a shift in politics from [negative to positive freedom](#) or a revival of [ethics in economics](#).
- Countries with high adaptability to radical change and disruption are more likely to benefit from the current future shock. For example, countries that adhere to [secular-rational](#) instead of traditional values (e.g. Japan, Sweden, Estonia, the Netherlands), or countries with a low degree of [uncertainty avoidance](#) (e.g. Singapore, Jamaica, Denmark, and Ireland). For example, populism is less likely to gain firm footing in these countries, and they are better prepared to work in a digital network society.