

TOO MUCH CHANGE: HUMAN NATURE RESPONDS TO THE MASSIVE SCALE AND SCOPE OF UBIQUITOUS CHANGE



CONTEXT & DYNAMICS

Change can cause a crisis, as when it enables nefarious forces to expand their range of activities or when it challenges an individual's identity and creates an inability to adapt. In the current era, change is causing confusion, anxiety and uncertainty because it seems to be happening everywhere and all at once – that is, there is a perception that society is enduring Too Much Change and it is happening too fast. The tensions have given rise to new levels of alienation, individual mental stress and workplace anxiety. Is this a new reality, or is it something that can be controlled and slowed? Change, which once seemed to signal advances in society's development, has started to be seen more like a disruption, something that threatens one's future more than makes the future better. Changes now seem to require more training, more education, more time and more effort to keep abreast of them and for society to keep moving forward. Human beings are responding in three ways: by accepting the changes as good; by protesting, often violently, against them; or by narrowing their focus to areas over which they have control and lowering the level of conflict they encounter.

IMPLICATIONS

- Friction between those advancing changes and individuals feeling left behind by those changes will escalate.
- Calls for regulation and a slowdown in technology will increase among certain sectors of society.
- The disconnect between what is actually happening and what Americans believe is happening will expand, leading to success for those spreading misinformation.
- Accelerating change will increase the number of Americans who feel alienated from society.
- Mental illness issues and violence will continue to erupt from time to time.
- More people will challenge changes that they think undermine their fundamental beliefs and rights, creating tense meetings of school boards and other community organizations.
- Questions around identity – national, institutional and personal – will become more widespread, creating another area of discontent.
- Individuals will increasingly seek out communities of like-minded people.
- Labor strikes and other measures that address dislocations brought about by change will become prevalent.
- Adaptation will become a valued skill for corporate management, and sustainability will move from a general objective to a requirement for companies.



I Can't Keep Up

"Too much is never enough," according to a pop culture icon of the 1980s. He was referring to wealth and fame, but what about change? Can many changes happening simultaneously become too much for the evolutionary individual to absorb? Can individuals get lost in a tangle of changes in invasive technologies, scientific breakthroughs, disease, climate conditions, artificial intelligence, education, social values, market values, social media, storms, floods, wildfires, work arrangements, financial systems, music, the visual arts, automation, murder, suicide, migration, robbery, political violence, immigration, and mental illness, all accompanying the "normal" kinds of change, such as inflation, economic cycles, elections and family stresses? Too much is never enough? Really? Society seems to be having trouble adapting to so many changes.

◆ Roughly one in five Americans suffers from diagnosable mental illness, and more than half of all Americans are experiencing measurable levels of loneliness. (*Health*, 11/29/22; *NPR*, 5/2/23)

◆ Last year, American society had 303 gun-related incidents at the country's schools, resulting in 273 people being killed or wounded. By the start of May this year, society had endured more mass shootings than the number of days that had passed – 202 mass shootings before May 7. During the July Fourth weekend, the country experienced 16 mass shootings, which killed 15 people and injured another 94. (*ABC News*, 5/8/23; *The Week*, 6/2/23; *Guardian*, 7/5/23)

◆ In 2020, Americans bought 22 million guns, up 64 percent from the prior year; subsequently, the number of lives lost to guns reached 48,830, up from 39,702 in 2019, with most of the increase coming from suicides; individuals who bought guns were most likely to agree with the statement "People can't be trusted." (*New York Times*, 6/23/23)

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◆ The Ku Klux Klan passed around flyers in Kentucky explaining, "You can sleep soundly tonight. The Klan is awake." (*Lexington Herald Leader*, 6/13/23)

◆ When high school honor student Ralph Yarl rang the doorbell at a home he mistakenly took for the place where his younger brother was being cared for, the 84-year-old resident, fearful of what the African American wanted, got his gun and shot Yarl through the door, a door he did not even open. (*The Conversation*, 7/12/23)

◆ After spates of violence against Asian Americans, Jewish Americans and African Americans, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security revealed that more than 350 attacks on members of the LGBTQ community had happened this year in the months prior to June's Pride Month. (*New York Times*, 6/23/23; *PBS*, 4/17/23)

◆ At the end of last year, the life expectancy of Americans declined to 76.4 years, the lowest in more than two decades; COVID-19, drug overdoses and shootings are the principal causes of the decline. (*Harvard School of Public Health*, 4/13/23)



"No matter how cynical I become,
I can't keep up."

What do these kinds of actions say about American society? One inference is that individuals feel they are losing control of their way of life and many are looking for scapegoats for that loss of power. Those with power, whether in finance, politics, government, academia, the arts or the media, are leading the country “in the wrong direction,” according to a portion of frustrated Americans. Catherine Liu, professor of media studies at the University of California, Irvine, captured this perspective in her book *Virtue Hoarders: The Case Against the Professional Managerial Class* (2021). She avers that this special class “finds in its particular tastes and cultural proclivities the justification for its unshakable sense of superiority to ordinary working-class people.” They “hoard” their personal “virtues” – that is, their tastes and values – to enhance their self-worth. (*Guardian Weekly*, 4/21/23)

A few examples reveal how such a perspective colors the personal assessment of seemingly everything, including political leadership, education, the military, the courts, business and even nonprofits.

◆ As of the first of June, the so-called Misery Index (inflation plus unemployment) sat at a modest 7.7. By way of comparison, when Ronald Reagan won re-election, it was 11.4; George W. Bush’s re-election survived a Misery Index of 9; and Barack Obama won re-election despite a 9.5 figure. Meanwhile, despite the relatively low Misery Index today, 74 percent of Americans think the country is headed in the wrong direction. (*New York Times*, 6/30/23)

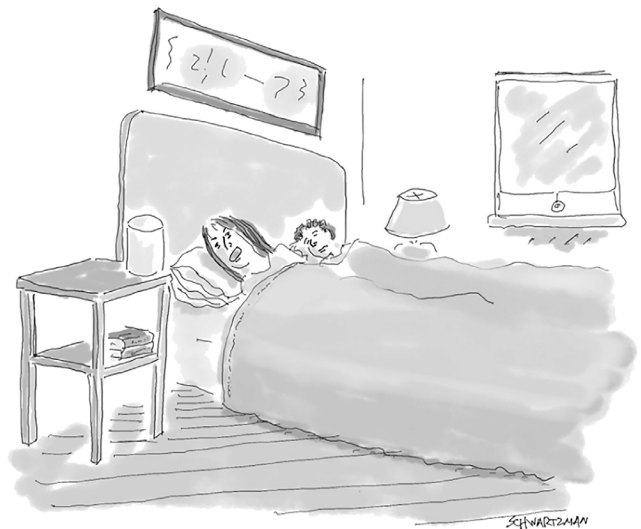
◆ Americans’ trust in higher education dropped roughly 20 percentage points in the past eight years, with only 36 percent saying they have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust in colleges and universities. (*Inside Higher Education*, 7/11/23)

◆ Americans’ trust in the military, the Supreme Court and big business hovers around 27 percent. (*New York Times*, 6/15/23)

◆ Only 21 percent of Americans say they trust the government in Washington, D.C., comprised of “just about always” (two percent) and “most of the time” (19 percent). (*Pew Research Center*, 6/6/22)

◆ Only 20 percent of Americans think that nonprofits – those institutions that serve society’s needs without a profit motive – are on the “right track.” (*Journal of Philanthropy*, 5/23)

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“Alexa, what fresh hell are we in for today?”

The elites might be Republicans; they might be Democrats; they might be corporate leaders, professors, theater professionals or anyone with a specialty that grants them more ability to move society than they “deserve.” Moreover, many of the elites have been acting strange themselves:

◆ Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg have challenged each other to a “cage fight,” a match like those of the Ultimate Fighting Championship.

◆ Senator Markwayne Mullin (R-OK) challenged Sean O’Brien, president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, to a mixed martial arts (MMA) fight, after the two exchanged personal insults.

◆ A new study of language in politics reveals that the level of vitriol in political rhetoric in the U.S. has increased 400 percent in the past six years, reaching the highest level since the Civil War, 160 years ago. (*New York Times*, 7/6/23; *The Conversation*, 7/12/23)

Elites are targets because many in society assume the favored few are responsible for the accelerating pace of change, including in places they would prefer remain unchanged: gambling, marijuana, gender identity, literature, movies, advertisements, environmental protections, abortion, social bias and on and on. Many claim they are victims of some nefarious force working to destroy the life they had. What does that mean? And why, after decades of accelerating change, are such reactions happening now? A close look at the issue of change and why people resist it can provide answers to these kinds of questions.

When Everything Changes

When the Supreme Court issued its decision in the 1954 case *Brown v. Board of Education*, saying that the “separate but equal” policy of school segregation was unconstitutional and that desegregation of schools would be mandatory, the South went into social convulsions that would last decades. Cornell University historian Jason Sokol told the story of the revolution in values and the violence and conflict that spread across the South in *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945–1975* (2006). Sokol writes: “Few white southerners ever forgot the day they first addressed a black person as ‘Mr.’ or ‘Mrs.’; the time their maid showed up for work, suddenly shorn of her old deference; the day they dined in the same establishments as black people; the process by which their workplaces became integrated; the autumn a black man appeared on the ballot; or the morning white children attended school with black pupils. Taken together, these changes amounted to a revolution in a way of life.” Being forced to acknowledge and accept those kinds of changes “all of a sudden – at least it seemed sudden to us,” explained one planter in Greenwood (MS) in 1964, “that’s asking too much of human nature.” And indeed, the violence and tensions that spread across the country as desegregation challenged the *status quo* were examples of people feeling that they faced too much substantive change coming too fast, and especially change imposed by an elite group beyond their control as well as change that challenged their cultural and personal identity.

That analogy fits the way many Americans view today’s societal changes: too much change coming too fast, causing a “revolution in a way of life” that is being foisted on them by others. This triggers a crisis because the challenges threaten what cognitive historian Jeremy

Lent calls an individual’s “underlying worldview,” a “set of assumptions about how things work, how society functions, its relationships with the natural world, what’s valuable and what’s possible.” Such a worldview is fundamental to a person’s identity and guides them through their interactions in society. When their “underlying worldview” is challenged, an individual’s own identity is challenged. (*Institute of Arts & Ideas*, 1/28/22)

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Desegregation challenged white Southerners’ “underlying worldview” in the years following the 1954 Supreme Court decision. That is what many Americans are experiencing today: a sense that their way of life is being forced to change, that their fundamental view of how society operates is being undermined and, more psychologically, that their place in the new social reality is uncertain. The stories they have told themselves about how society functions and how their lives fit with those functions is “under attack.” They ultimately are forced to consider a basic question: Who am I in this changing world?



“If you don’t have weights at home, try using canned food or the psychological burden of simply existing in this world!”

These Americans’ experience of uncertainty, like that of their Southern counterparts in the last century, is provoking many of the violent incidents in this new century cited earlier, as anger over forced changes finds expression in direct violence against society. Yet this new kind of experience is also causing less violent but nonetheless curious behavior among other Americans.

◆ The Survey Center of American Life, a project of the American Enterprise Institute, revealed that roughly two-thirds of liberal and conservative singles would “swipe left” – that is, reject – a potential match on a dating service if the person did not share the searcher’s political beliefs. (*Atlantic*, 6/11/23)

◆ In May, Bud Light faced a market backlash after it featured a transgender influencer, Dylan Mulvaney, in

an online posting; Bud Light sales subsequently fell by more than 40 percent. (*Robinhood*, 6/5/23)

◆ Target, which for ten years had created displays and merchandise in support of Pride Month, pulled such items this year because of threats from anti-LGBTQ activists against Target employees. (*New York Times*, 6/13/23)

◆ Police had to separate parents throwing punches and scuffling with each other at a Glendale (CA) school board meeting called to decide whether to recognize June as Pride Month in the schools. (*Education Week*, 6/14/23)

A 2012 examination of why people resist change offered several reasons: **loss of control**, meaning loss of self-determination in daily life; **uncertainty**, meaning loss of a sense of direction for society and the individual; **loss of face**, meaning what was once believed to be correct is now seen as wrong; **surprise**, meaning that the changes had not been foreseen; and **differences**, meaning that the changed realm is uncomfortable. (*Harvard Business Review*, 9/25/12)

Uncertainty – perhaps the most common phrase attached to conditions in today's society and economy – drives the brain to distraction. The brain wants certainty so it can attend to its function: keeping the body alive. This can lead to individuals being quick to anger, short of patience and long on anxiety.

◆ A recent study of people who bought guns found that, even though the most common reason for their purchase was "self-defense," they typically added another motivator: "fear of uncertainty." (*New York Times*, 2/27/23)

◆ Researchers on gun violence have discovered what they are calling "gun embodiment," a condition in which armed people assume perceived adversaries are themselves armed and respond as if they are personally threatened. (*New York Times*, 6/27/23)

◆ In the six weeks ending in the middle of June, half of all Americans faced an extreme weather alert, "a very troubling sort of threshold," according to Juan Declet-Barreto of the Union of Concerned Scientists. (*Guardian*, 6/21/23)

◆ Artificial intelligence (AI) has launched a new area of uncertainty around job displacement, economic

inequality, an AI arms race, misinformation, bias, lack of transparency, privacy and a whole range of unintended consequences. (*Forbes*, 6/2/23)



"Try to think of being hopelessly lost as less of a weakness and more of an opportunity."

Uncertainty makes the human brain uncomfortable, encouraging it to latch hold of any idea, concept or belief that is useful enough to permit it to set aside the uncertainty and move on, even if that certainty is based on something that is false or inaccurate. An example of accepting an unusual perspective to relieve uncertainty

can be found with the recent renewed appeal of a 1997 book, *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy – What the Cycles of History Tell Us About Americans' Next Rendezvous with Destiny*, by Neil Howe and William Strauss, the opening line of which resonates with many today: "America feels like it's unraveling."

The book suggests that U.S. history follows historical cycles of roughly 80 to 100 years, and at the end of each four-part cycle – the high (everything is fine), the awakening (spirituality and rebellion), the unraveling (distrust

and individualism reign) and the crisis (extensive damage and substantial change) – is a period of great disruption, in which some kind of revolution takes place. America, the book asserts, has repeatedly passed through those four phases and was entering the later stages when the book was published.

As any historian will explain, history does not happen in cycles, yet such an "elite" historian's perspective

fails to meet the needs of people who are looking for acceptable and accessible explanations for why so much change is happening now and what it means. And so, many have found acceptable answers in a book that was popular more than a quarter century ago. (*New York Times*, 7/8/23)

Extensive and simultaneous changes are risky business, especially when their pace and scope challenge individuals' "underlying worldview," generate widespread uncertainty, undermine individuals' sense of belonging in society and, ultimately, alter their personal identity.

Most individuals have trouble dealing with so many changes all at once in their lives – generating too much uncertainty in too many areas of society.

Ferretti, Roberto Cavalli, Elie Saab, Christian Louboutin, Zuhair Murad and Anish . . . all in one performance. While Swift's concerts and songs tell elaborate stories, they also reflect on society. In this instance, change is a necessary theme. If you do not make such changes, according to Swift, "You're out of a job." (*New York Times*, 4/27/23)

Constantly changing costumes in entertainment is, well, entertaining. Constant changes that challenge an individual's identity have

psychological effects of a different order of magnitude. Such changes of public personas on stage can reflect changes underway in society, but most individuals have trouble dealing with so many changes all at once in their lives – generating too much uncertainty in too many areas of society. And they especially have trouble changing their identity – changing their looks via hairstyles and clothes might be welcomed, but changes in an answer to questions such as Who am I? and How do I fit with society? are more troubling.

In this context, many individuals become more sensitized to changes taking place around them, including gender identity, demographics, "our" culture, legalizing hallucinatory drugs, work, abortion, financial standing and religion, among other changing areas. Protests have even erupted over changes in fairy tales, such as Disney making Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* Black and using a Latina actress to play Snow White. (*Guardian Weekly*, 6/9/23)

Psychologist Robert Coles, in his study of Southerners during the Civil Rights movement, said what mattered most to the troubled whites was not the threat to their relations with Blacks but "the continuity of their lives." They did not want to deal with the disruptions and changes in their daily routines that advocates of civil rights insisted were necessary. Historian Sokol, in his book on Southern whites during the struggle for integration, observed three kinds of reactions: Some whites said the changes were "fine" and claimed they were "liberating" for them as well; others found ways to resist the change, including extreme intimidation and violence; and one more segment "clung to any sense of normalcy they could salvage, at times willfully ignorant of the tumult around them."

Individuals today have revealed similar kinds of reactions: **some welcome the changes as examples of society's advances; others push back against**

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But Change Is Good, Right?

David Bowie, Madonna and Lady Gaga join a long line of entertainers who have focused on shifting identities. They changed their images and personas several times in their careers, and, in the instance of Lady Gaga, changed outfits and personalities during individual performances. In the most recent iteration of this change-is-fast-and-necessary mindset, Taylor Swift, in her current arena shows, dons outfits by Oscar de la Renta, Versace, Alberto

those changes, even to the point of violence; and many ignore society-wide challenges and narrow their focus to things over which they can still exert some control and where they can lower the level of conflict in their personal lives (see [inThought 3/30/23](#)).

Uncharted, Indeed

Last year, we issued a *Briefing* entitled “Moving Through Uncharted Territory,” in which we outlined numerous major and dramatic structural changes that were happening at once, including climate change, the global pandemic, a livestreaming war and the weaponizing of finance. Their overlapping effects led to extreme uncertainty: “No one understands how and in what ways so many changes advancing simultaneously will interact and what impacts such interaction will have on the overall effects of these changes. For that reason, historic models are not helpful. . . . Uncertainty, insecurity, lack of clarity, confusion and conflict – those conditions are not prompting rational responses . . . anger, fear, worry, anxiety and other feelings provide only haphazard reactions to risky situations” (see [IF 4315](#)).

Another way to envision the increase in uncertainty is through one of the large changes underway: permeable borders. Since we introduced this concept 25 years ago, it has triggered problems and pushbacks. The attacks of 9/11, the failure of financial instruments that caused financial damage around the world, and the pandemic that crossed sovereign borders with impunity are large effects of transgressable borders.

The ability to cross borders, boundaries and barriers has been encoded into the language of business innovation with the word “disruption,” which is typically

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seen as positive for society. The Harvard Business School offers an online course entitled “Disruptive Strategy.” And many changes forced on society by the spread of digitization have been positive, and even amazing in some instances. But disruption can be favorable for some and still have extremely negative effects on others, and when disruption becomes widespread and seemingly ubiquitous, the gap grows between those who see disruption favorably and those who

become victims. In the current world, that gap has been one of the principal causes of the political vitriol that is the worst since the Civil War; society’s experience of mass shootings; and mental illness as a national healthcare issue (see [inThought 1/4/20](#)).

Add to that list of significant changes the constant run of smaller but politically charged areas of change, including gender identity, social bias, books, movies, abortion and technology. Such simultaneous and troubling changes – what could be called the synchronicity of mounting changes – are creating an uncertainty that keeps individuals anxious. Some are accepting and adapting to those changes; others are fighting them, even violently; and some are pulling back and focusing, as Voltaire said, on cultivating “our own garden” – that is, focusing on nurturing interactions over which they have control and on activities that provoke less conflict in their personal lives, including travel, learning, social engagement and personal fulfillment.

Over the months ahead, we will be monitoring society’s era of uncertainty. We anticipate that, eventually,

Americans who adapt to the changes and who identify controls to lessen conflict will further the cause of stability, while those fighting the changes will lengthen the era of uncertainty. This is human nature responding to Too Much Change coming too fast.



“Look, I can’t promise I’ll change, but I can promise I’ll pretend to change.”

Some of our previous looks at this topic:

- inThought 3/30/23** Making One's Way - A Quotidian Pivot: Institutions, Individuals And A New Focus On The Routines Of Daily Life
- inF 1805** Seeking Mental Health: Actions To Look Good, Smell Good And Feel Good, 3/20/23
- IF 4401** Settling Down: Society Gradually Shifts From Extremes To Moderation, 1/3/23
- inF 1717** On The Front Burner: Mental Illness Crisis Requires New Kinds Of Treatments, 12/22/22
- IF 4319** Young People Are Different: The Under-30 Cohort Is Separating From The Herd, 12/12/22
- IF 4315** Moving Through Uncharted Territory: A Realm Where Models, Certainty And Specialties Prove Unhelpful, 9/12/22
- IF 4314** Seeking Stability: Individuals Find Ways To Sustain Themselves In An Uncertain Environment, 8/24/22
- IF 4311** The World Runs Through Social Media: Despite Frequent Warnings, Social Media Move To The Center Of Societal Activities, 7/14/22
- IF 4310** The Great Pandemic Hangover: Long-Term Effects Of Near-Term Infections, 6/1/22
- inThought 5/11/22** Sucker Punched By The American Dream: The Quest For A Satisfied Self In An Era Of Uncertainty
- inF 1706** Americans Go Outdoors, 3/23/22
- IF 4303** A Series Of Next Normals: Adjustments Will Be Made (Often), And They Will Take Time, 3/2/22
- inThought 2/10/22** Busted Trust And Truth Decay: The Effects Of Individuals Willfully Embracing Falsehoods
- inThought 11/18/21** Shifts In The International Order: The U.S. Checks Its Identity And Others Make Moves - What's Next?
- inThought 4/23/20** Busted Trust: Undermining Trust And Finding A Way Back
- End of 2010s Decade, 1/4/20** How Did We Get Here? An Assessment Of A Decade Of Inferential Focus-Identified Changes And Where They Are Taking Us, 1/4/20