



**SOIF**

Practitioners in planning, strategy and  
policy for future generations.

## Black elephants, grey rhinos, and the future that has already happened

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# A better future starts with better decisions today

Taking a longer term view of what *could* and *should* lie ahead isn't a distraction from the present.

It sharpens your perceptions of the present.

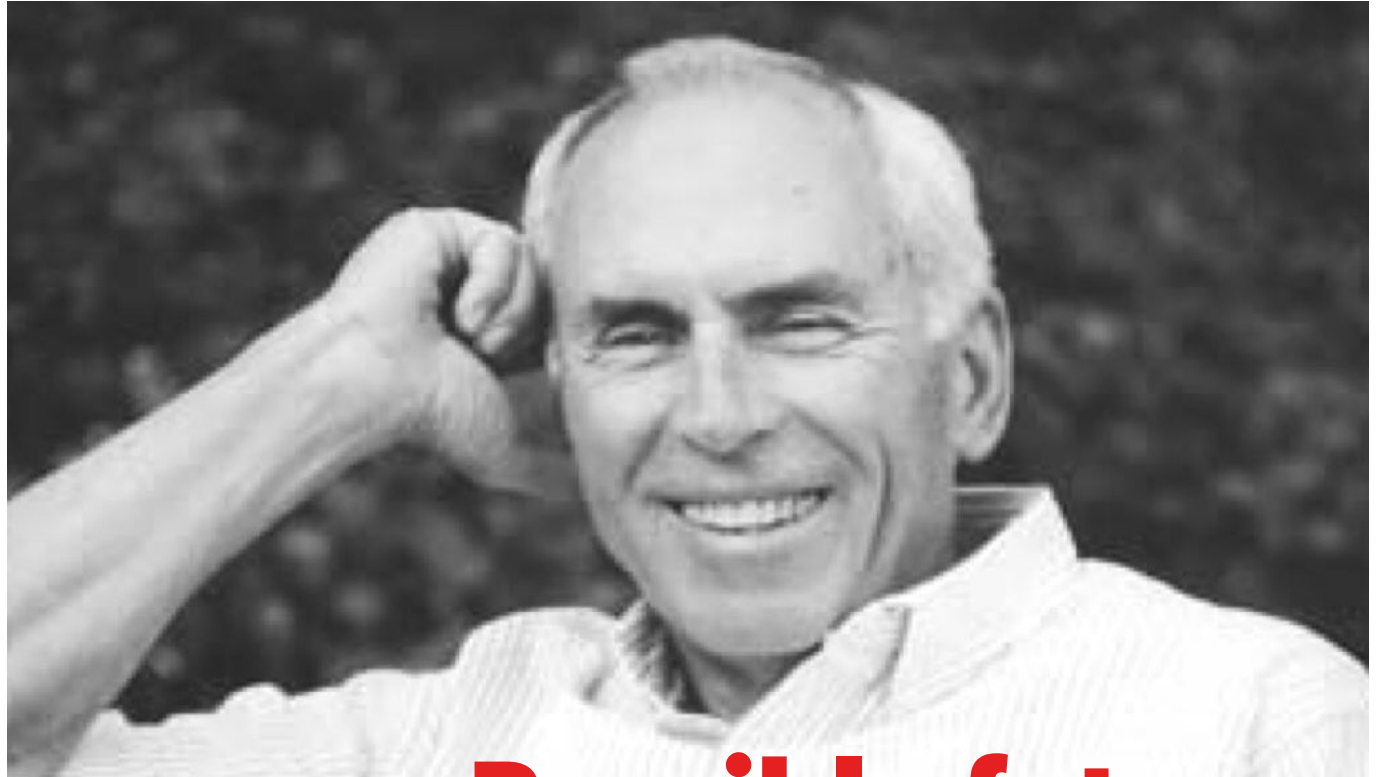
It improves your ability to act.





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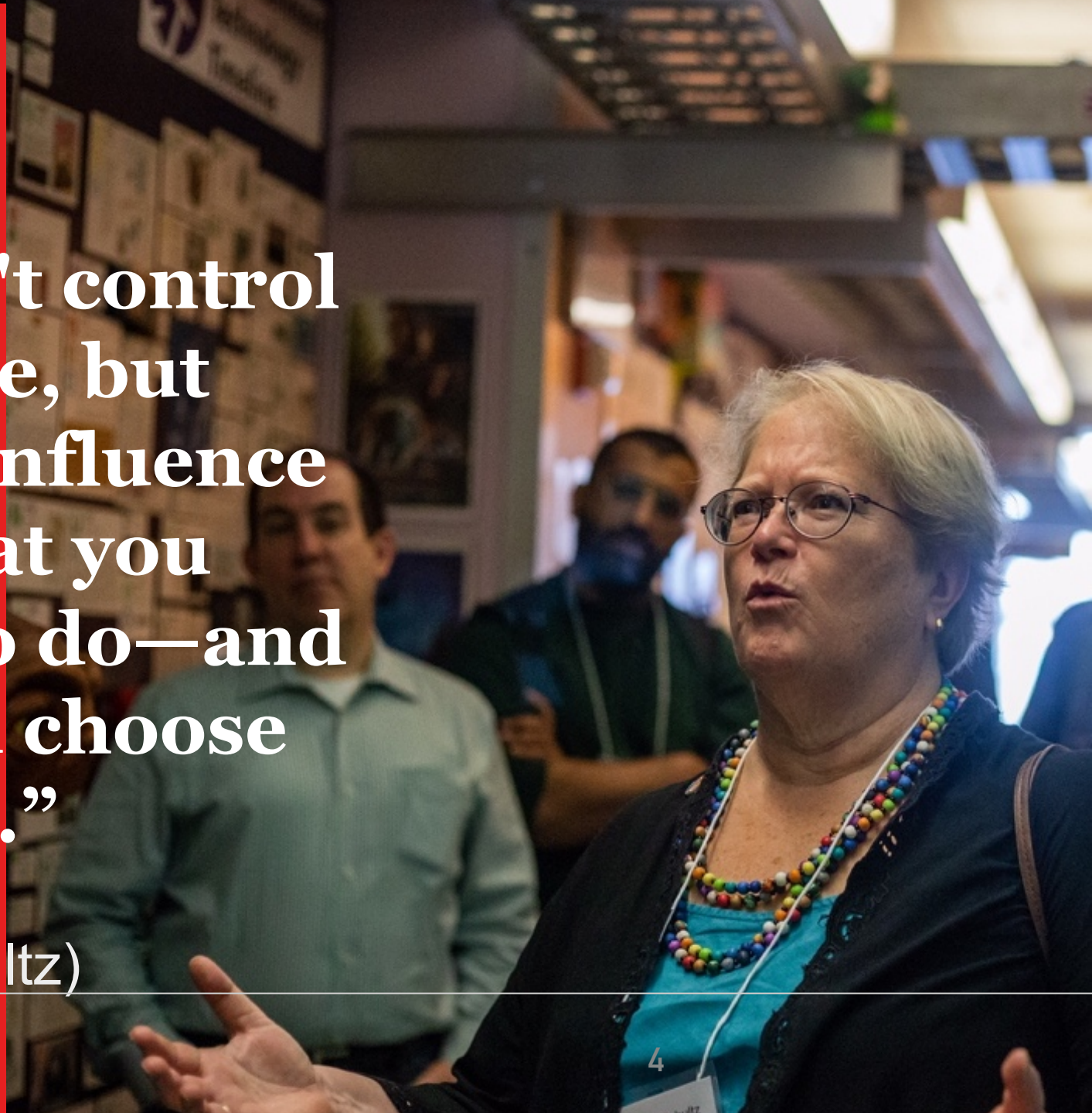
*Roy Amara*



**Possible futures**  
**Probable futures**  
**Preferred futures**

**“You can't control  
the future, but  
you can influence  
it, by what you  
choose to do—and  
what you choose  
not to do.”**

**(Wendy Schultz)**





# Five operating principles of futures work

1. Time
2. Open systems
3. Patterns of change
4. Perspective
5. Agency

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**2. Open systems**

**3. Patterns of change**

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**5. Agency**

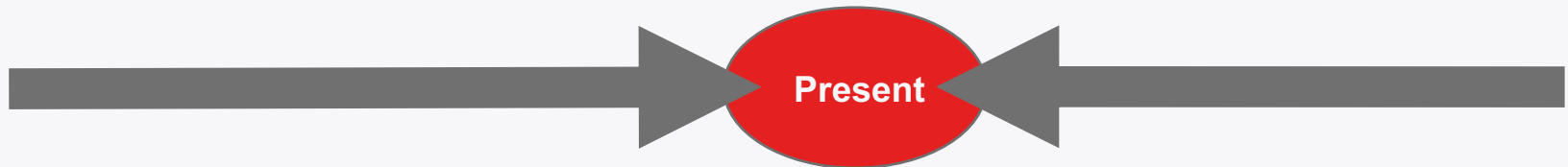


# 1. Time: a futurist needs to be an historian

“you should look backwards twice as far as you are looking forwards”

*(Paul Saffo)*

Images of the future are mirrored by images of the past

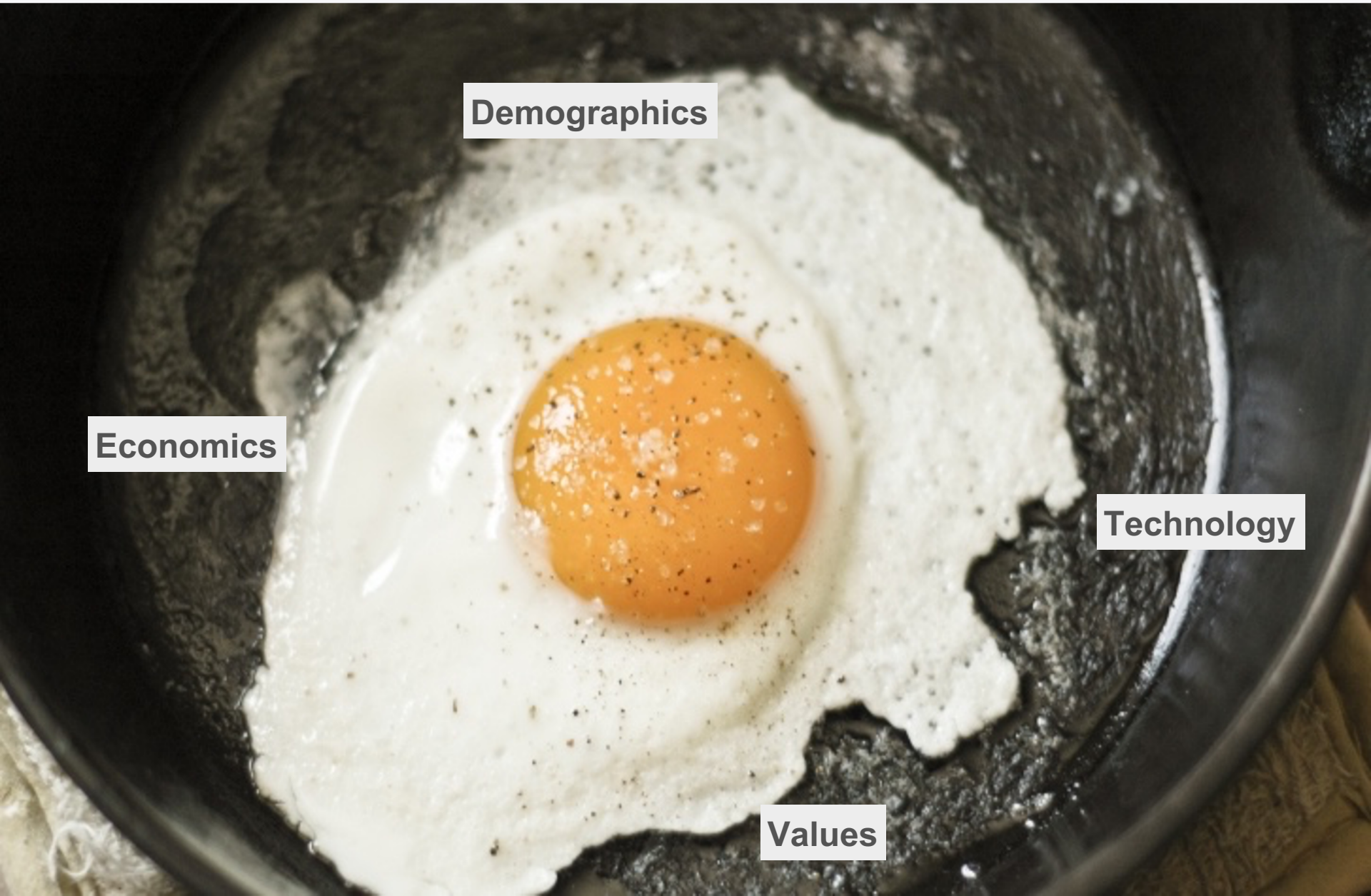


## 2. Open systems





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Demographics

Economics

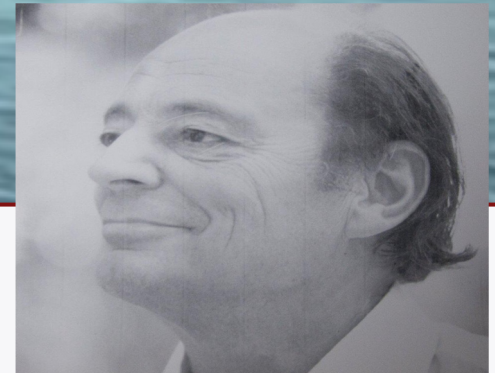
Technology

Values

### 3. Patterns of change



“Predetermined”: a richer category than the literature suggests





# Predictable surprises



**"THE FUTURE THAT ALREADY HAPPENED"**  
(Drucker)

**There are no future facts, but...**

**... every  
“black  
elephant” has  
a theory of  
change living  
inside it**

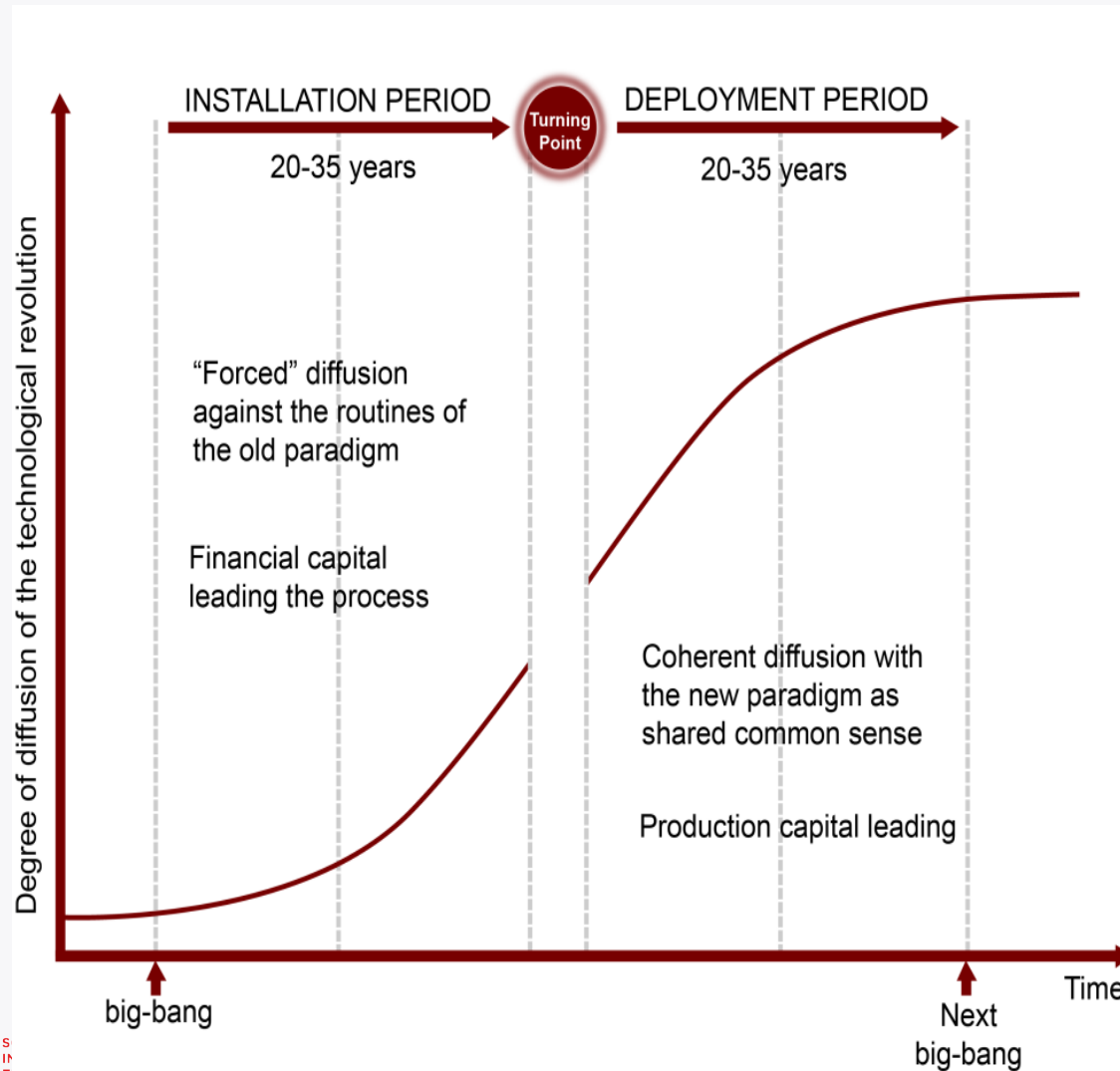
**Every theory of change makes a proposition about how the future will turn out.**

**These propositions are testable over time. Because they are testable, they are also falsifiable.**

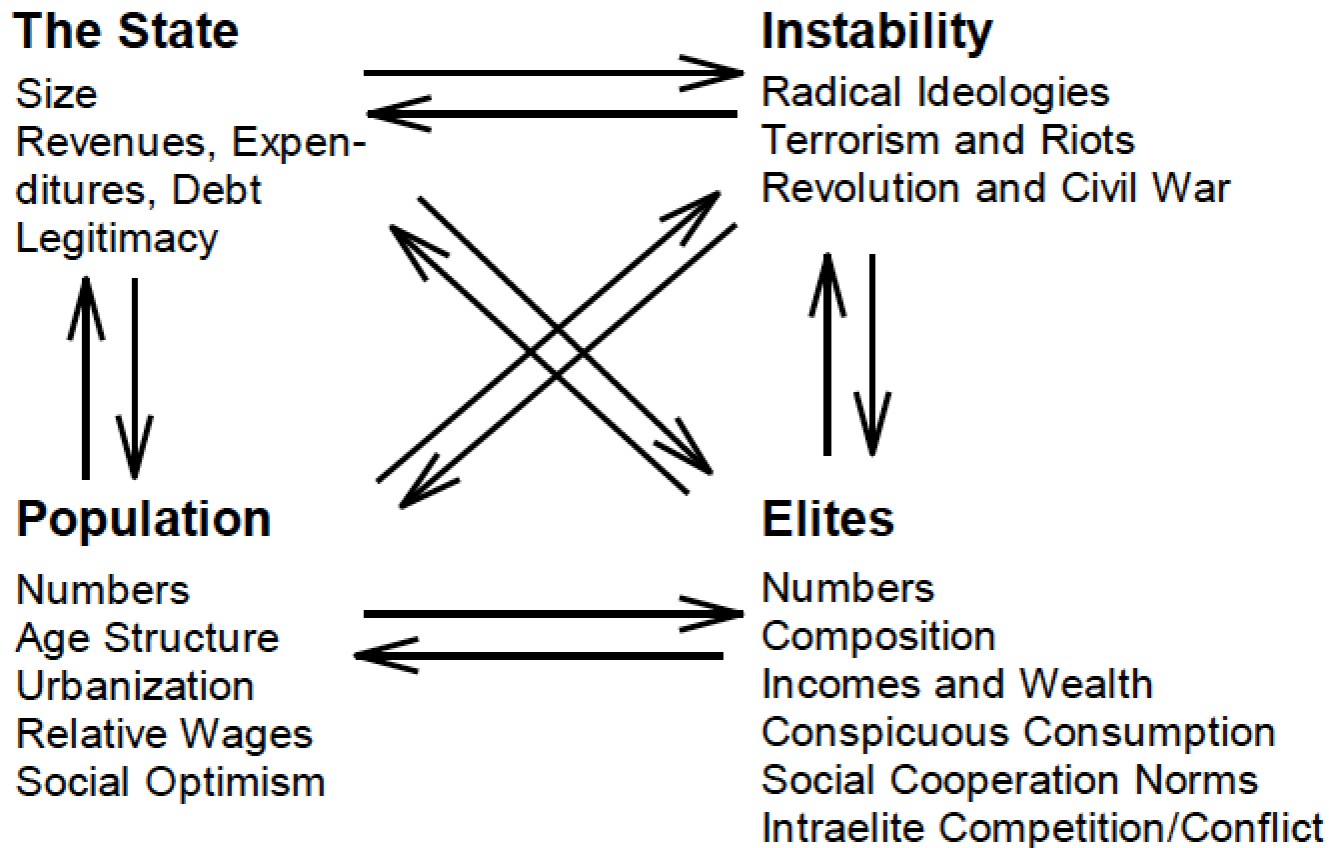
**So: every theory of change helps to spot a possible black elephant.**



# Example 1: Perez - Technology cycles broaden then deepen

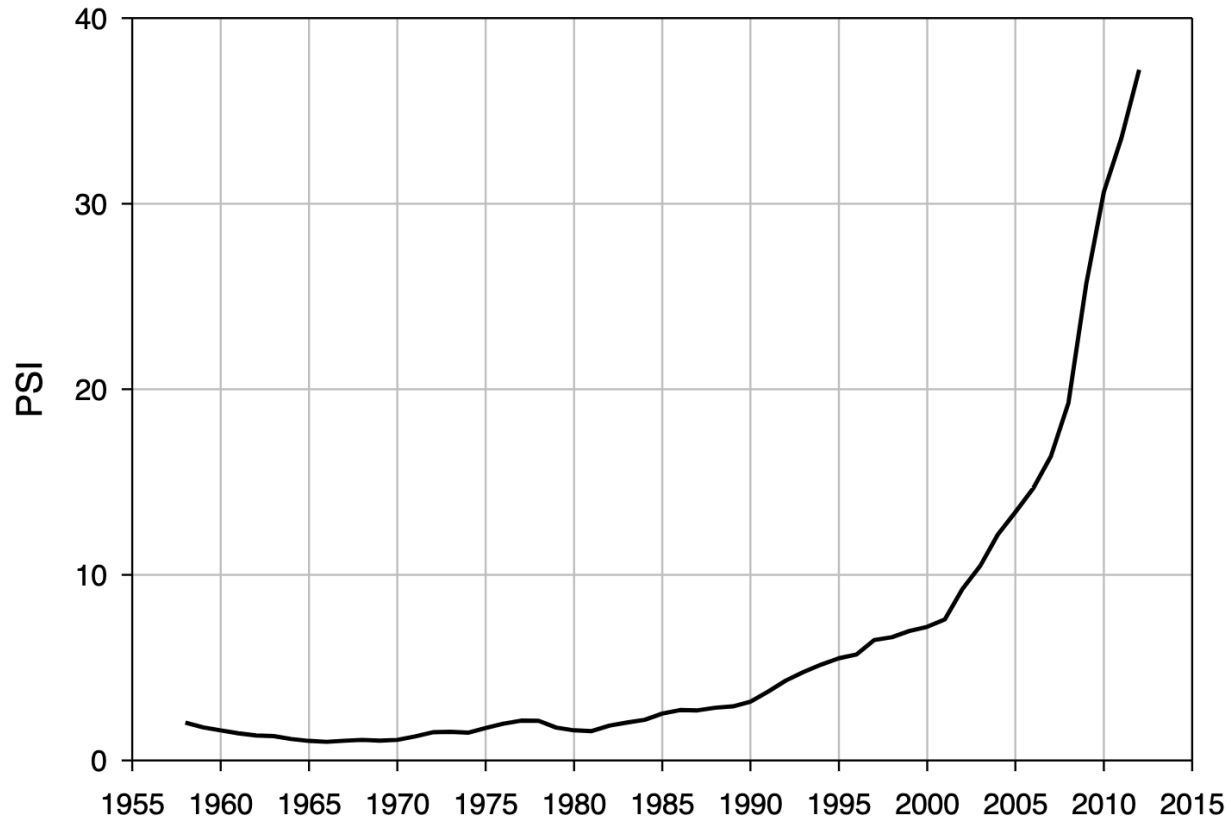


## Example 2: Turchin – Demographic-structural theory



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Turchin: US Political Stress Indicator, 1958-2012

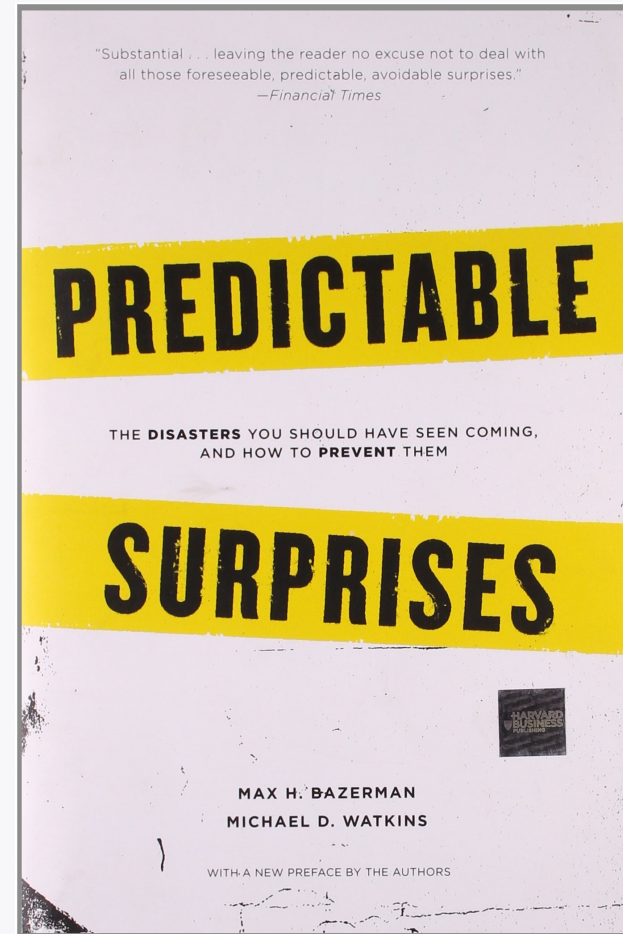


Turchin, Peter,, Modeling Social Pressures Toward Political Instability,, Cliodynamics, 4(2), 2013. .  
<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/6qp8x28p>



# So why don't we act when we see it coming?

1. We have **positive illusions** that lead us to conclude that the problem isn't severe enough to warrant action.
2. We tend to assess problems on the basis of **self-interest**.
3. We **discount the future** too heavily, reducing our incentive to act now.
4. We tend to **maintain the status quo**, rather than addressing unpalatable choices.
5. We need to experience a problem through **vivid data**, before we invest in fixing it.



# Thank you.

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