



# THE FUTURE OF WORK IN THE AGE OF THE PANDEMIC

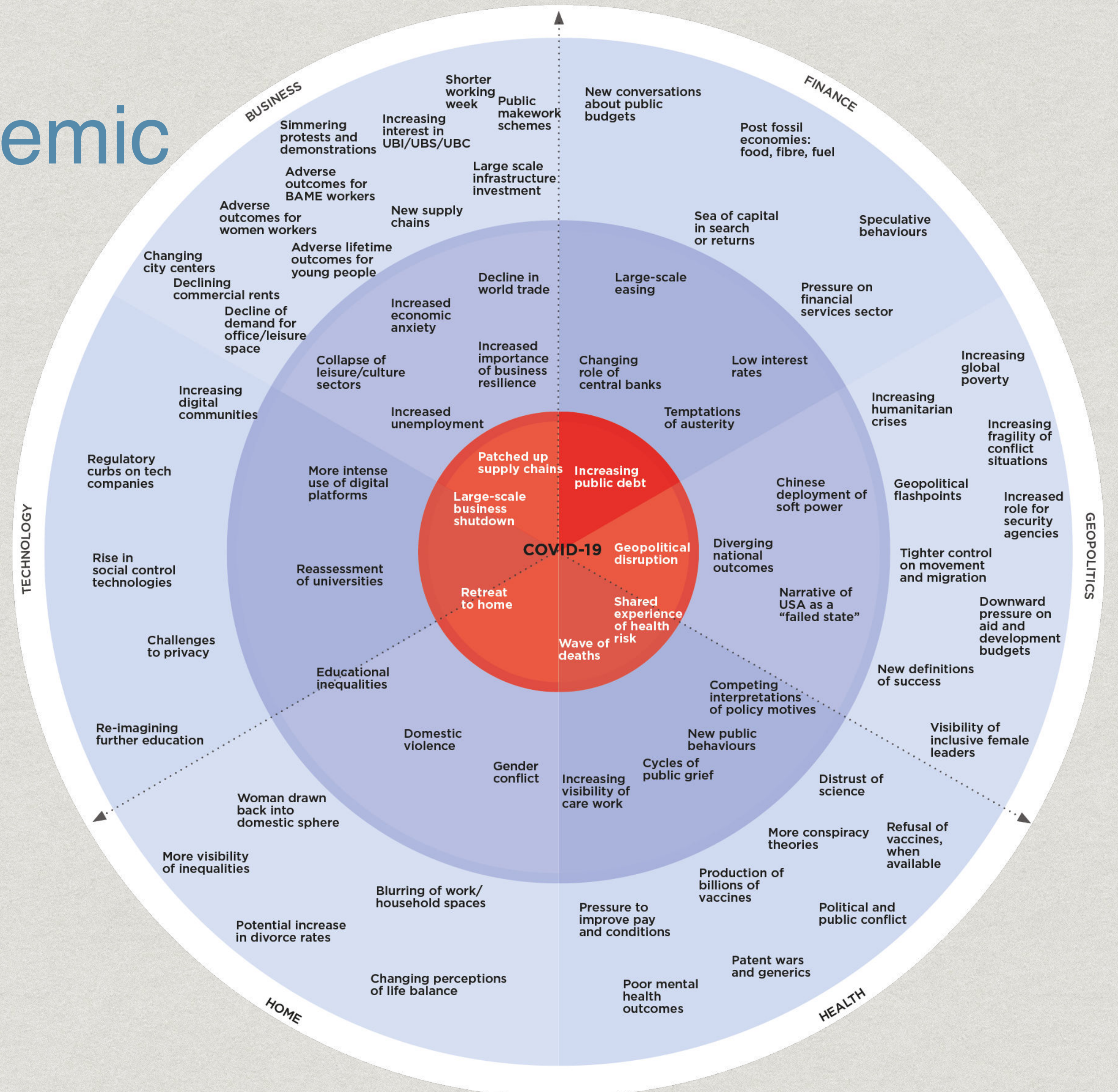
ANDREW CURRY, DIRECTOR OF FUTURES, SOIF

# What I'm going to say

- \* The impacts of the pandemic on work and the economy
- \* The bigger picture—the peak of the 'global city' story
- \* The sustainable city of the future—and what that means for the future of work

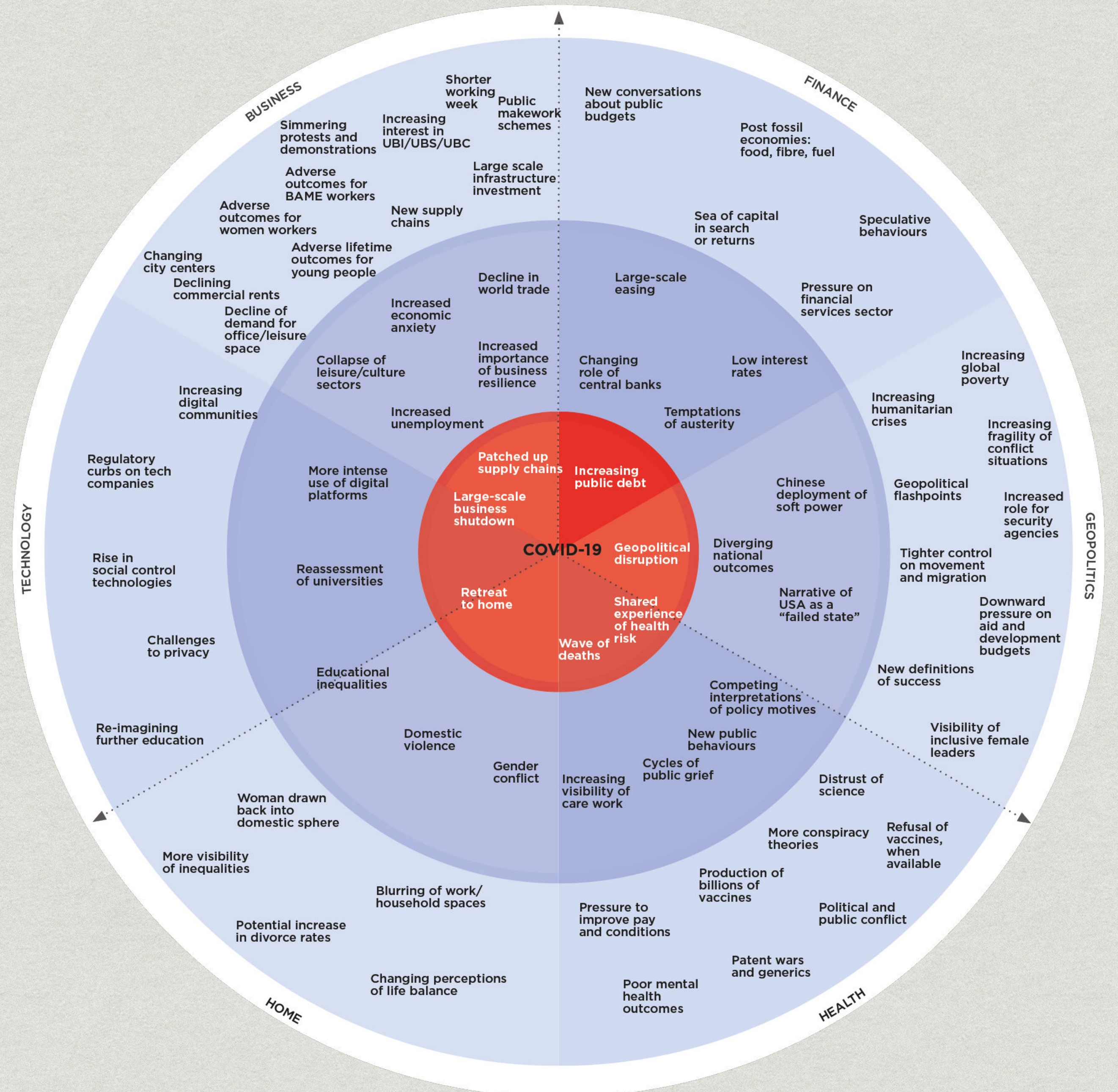
# Understanding the pandemic

- \* The pandemic was an accelerator and a brake
- \* About six months in, I used a futures wheel to explore its impacts
- \* Across: Technology; Business; The Home; Health; Geopolitics; and Finance
- \* Trying to get to the longer-term effects

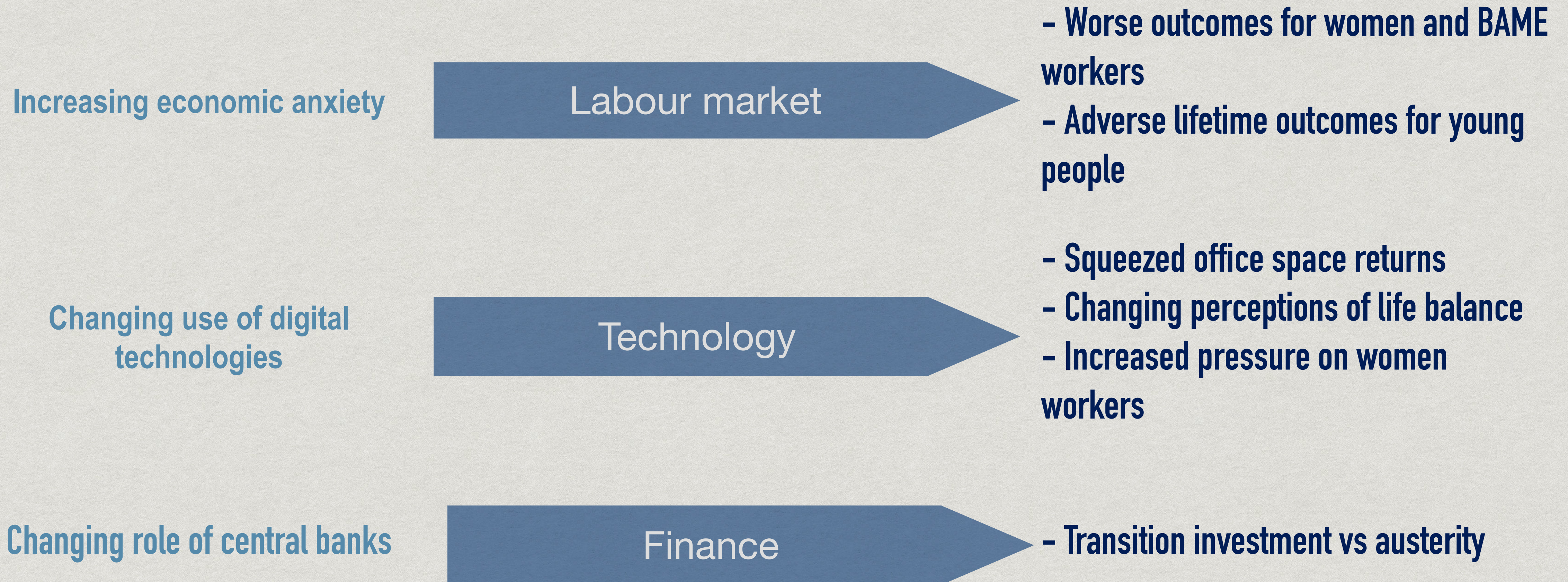


# About futures wheels

- \* Futures wheels are a simple device to explore the effects of a change
- \* They help you see how things interact
- \* We also used it in a pilot community futures project with WCVA—Better Futures Wales.
- \* Do try this at home!

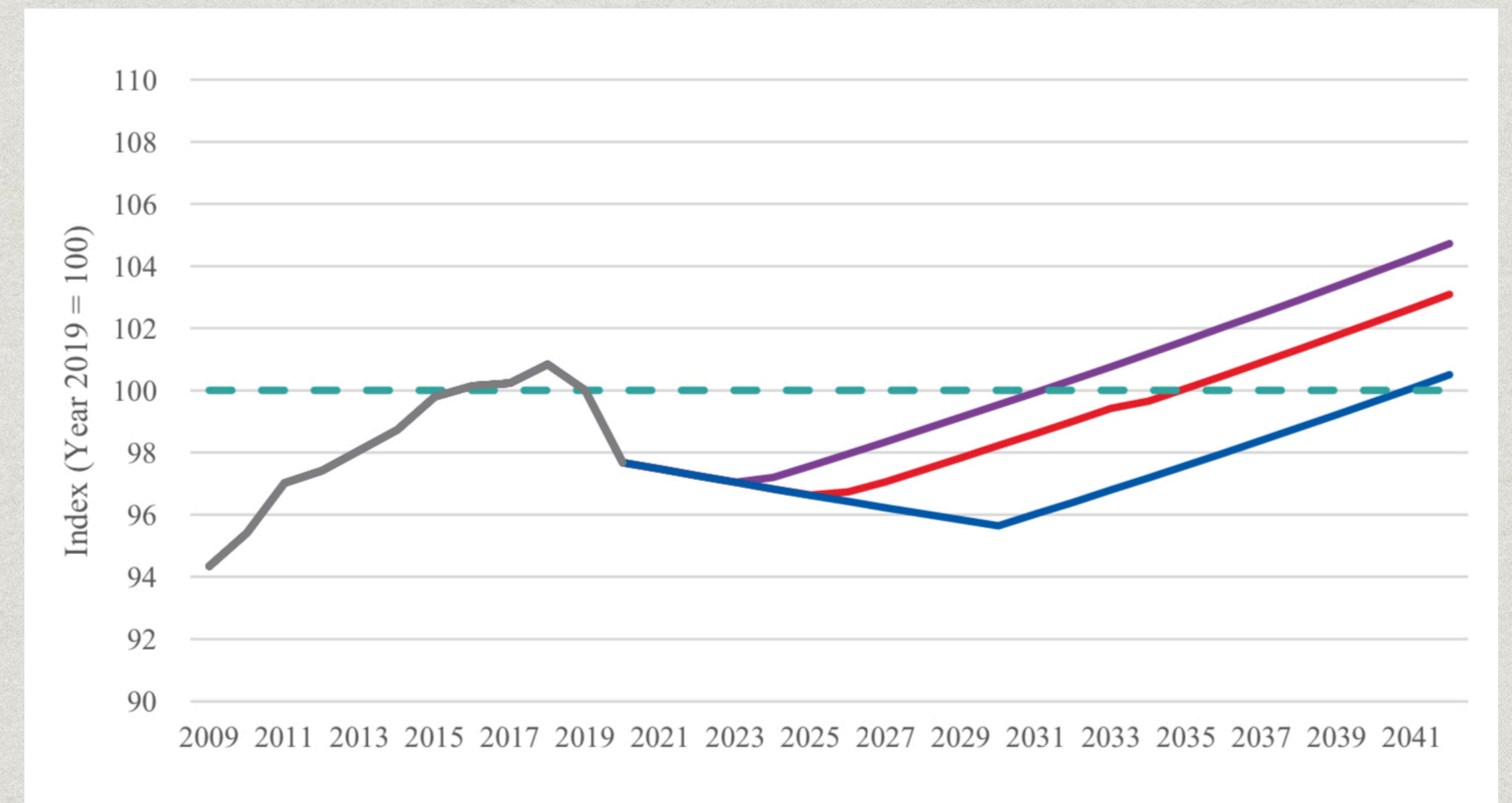


# Pulling out the main stories from the futures wheel



# London and its problems

- \* People hate commuting
- \* The 'three day' office week is becoming normalised
- \* A report for the central London boroughs optimistically believes that office space demand will come back to pre-pandemic levels eventually.



- Back to the Office
- Mid-Week Metro
- Uniform Utilisation
- 2019 levels
- Historic levels

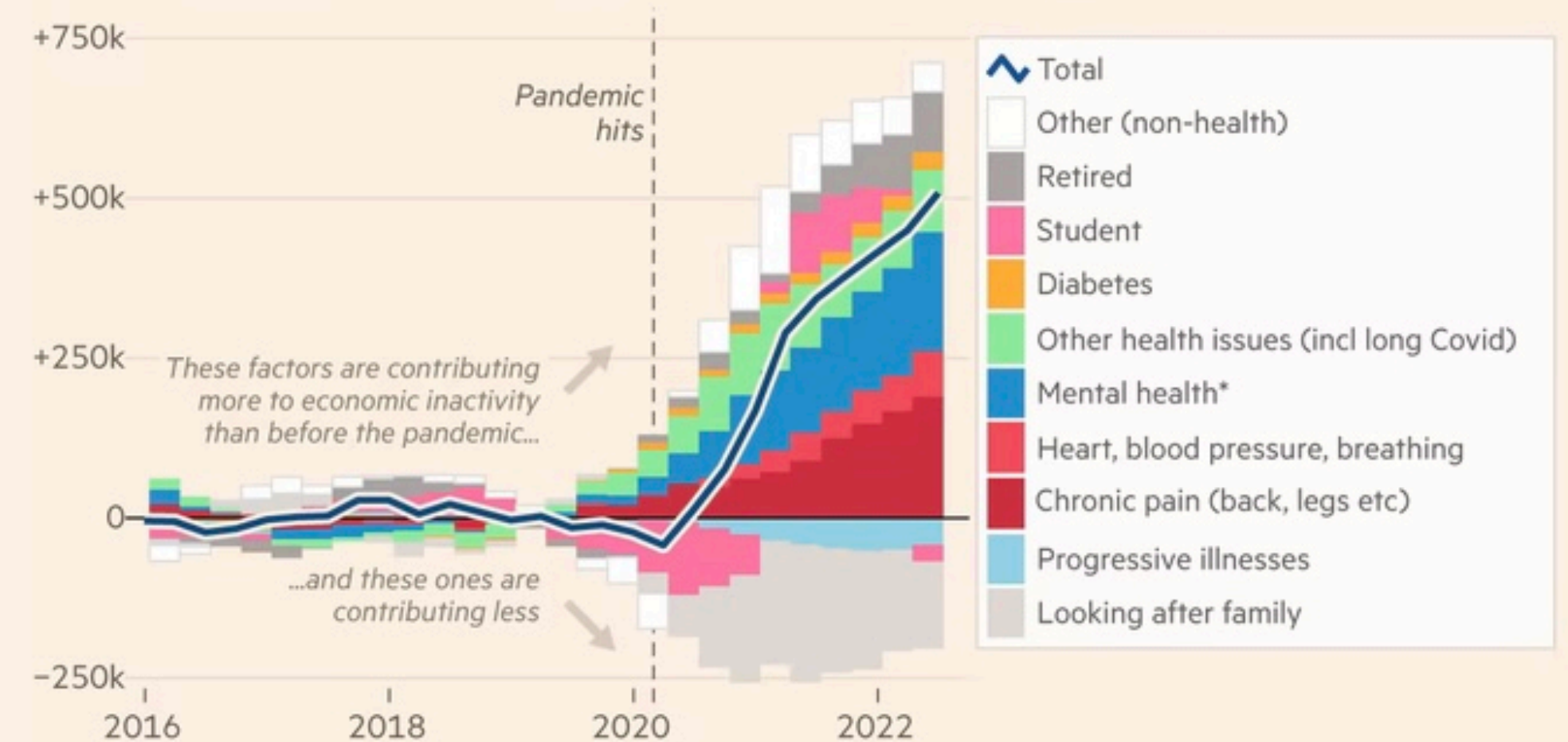
# Britain's missing workers

- \* 600,000 workers have left the UK workplace since the pandemic
- \* Even though there is strong demand for labour
- \* Long-term sickness has increased — both from COVID and from mental health issues among younger workers
- \* More from lower-paid and face-to-face service sector
- \* Increased early retirement

## Chronic pain, mental health problems and possible long Covid account for half a million more Britons missing from the workforce

Cumulative change in number of people aged 16-64 outside the labour force vs pre-pandemic trend

By main long-term health condition or other reason for inactivity:



\*Includes depression, anxiety, learning disabilities, other mental illnesses

Source: FT analysis of quarterly Labour Force Survey

FT graphic: John Burn-Murdoch / @jburnmurdoch

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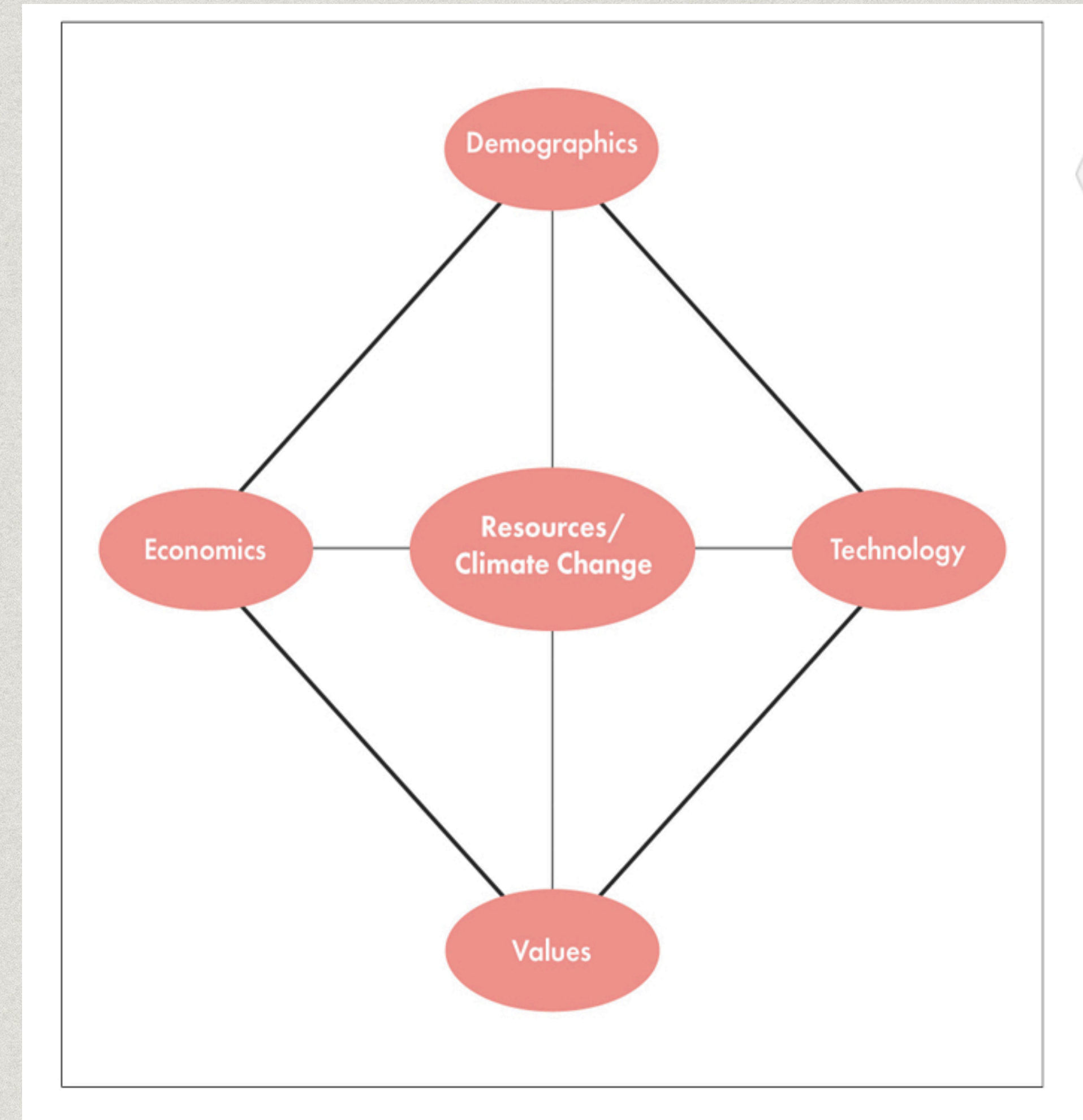
<https://on.ft.com/3CzPZCb>

**PUTTING THIS IN CONTEXT:  
UNDERSTANDING THE LINK BETWEEN THE CITY AND  
WORK**

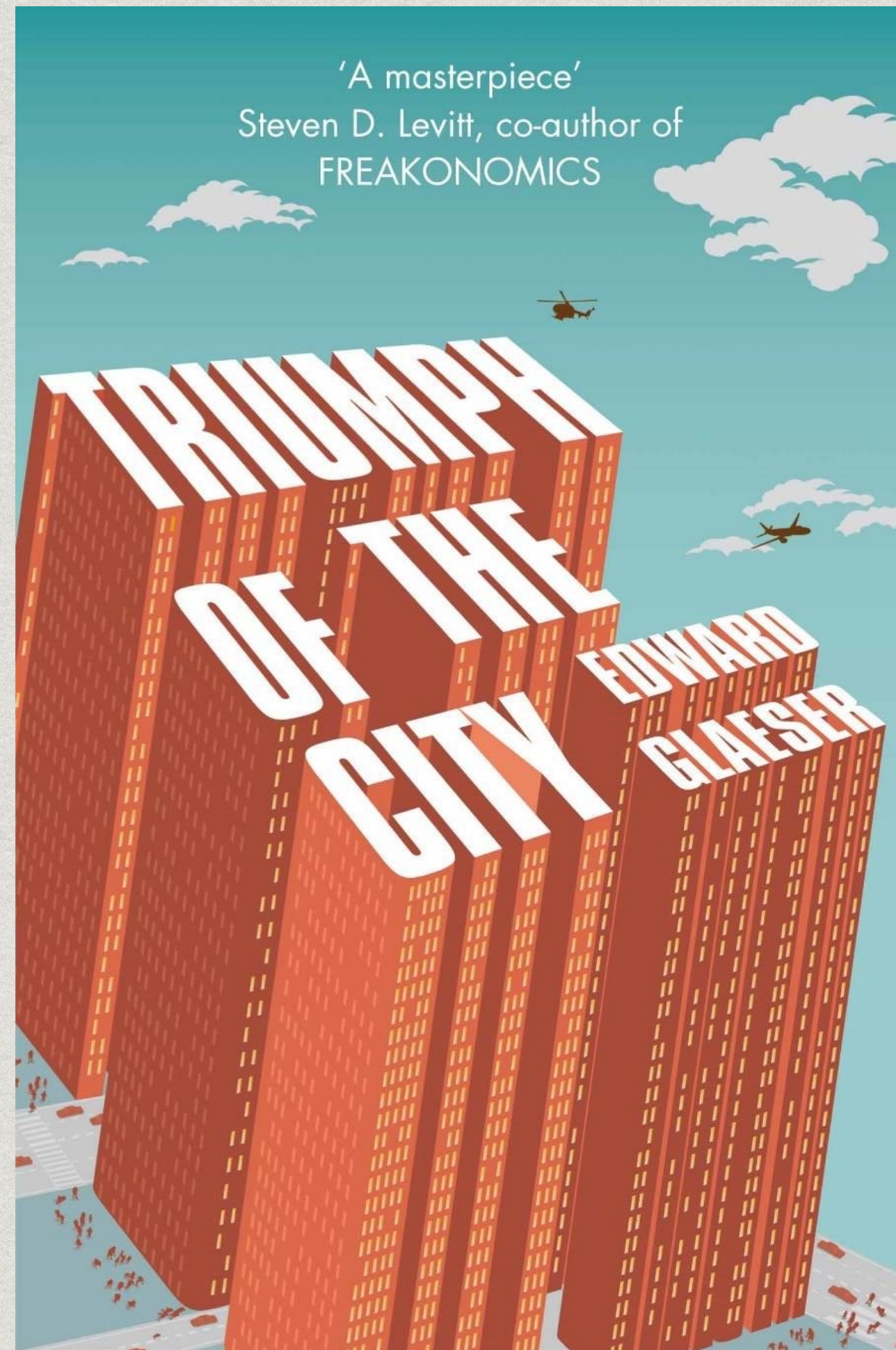


# The current big trends we are facing

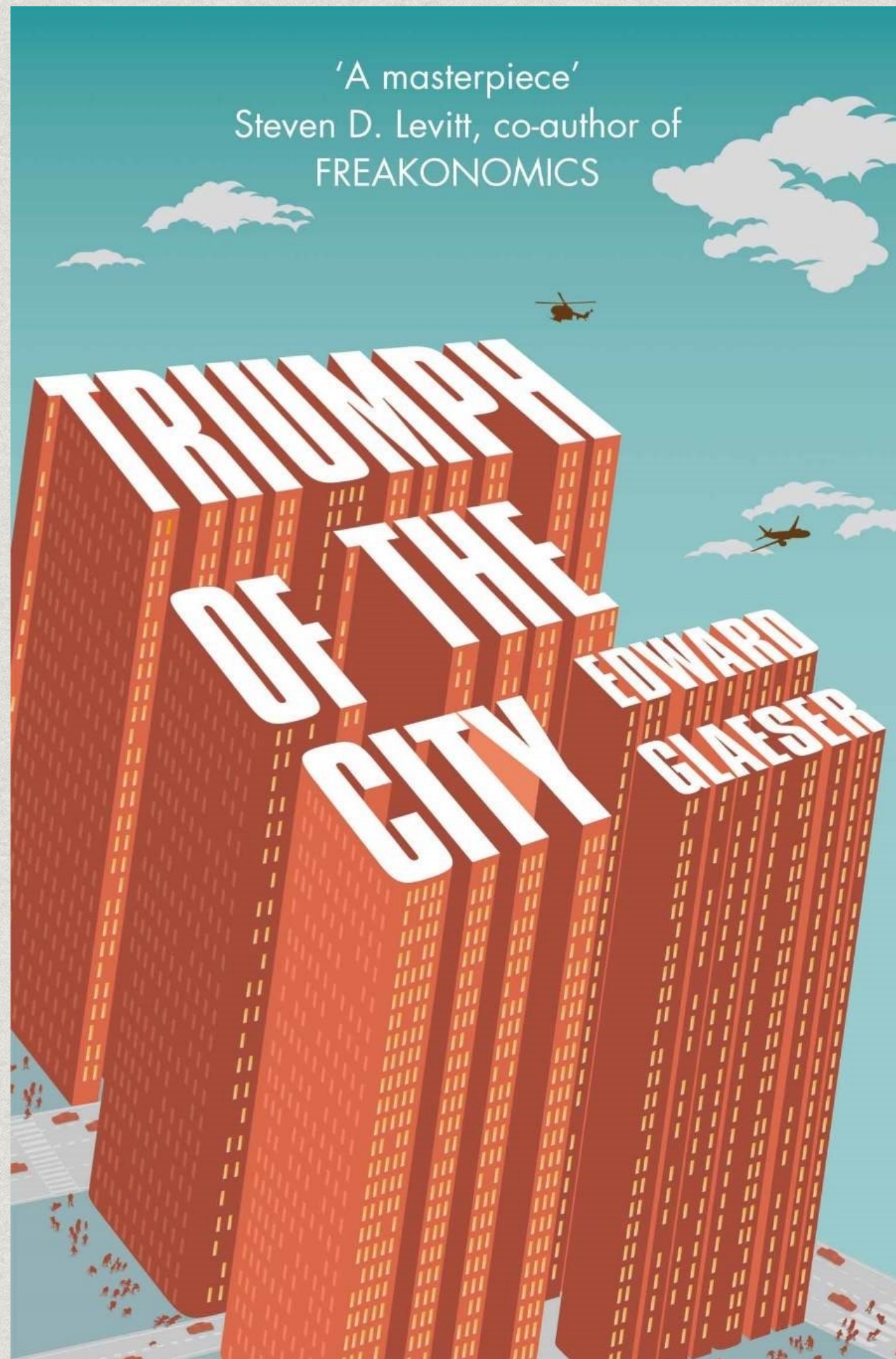
- \* Ageing population, almost everywhere, as a result of falling fertility and better health
- \* Slowing productivity and innovation — and more concentrated wealth
- \* Shift from ‘modern’ to ‘post-materialist’ values, about autonomy, diversity, and self-expression
- \* Digital technologies everywhere
- \* Combined pressure of the climate emergency and the biodiversity crisis



This strains the current story of the city and what prosperous work looks like



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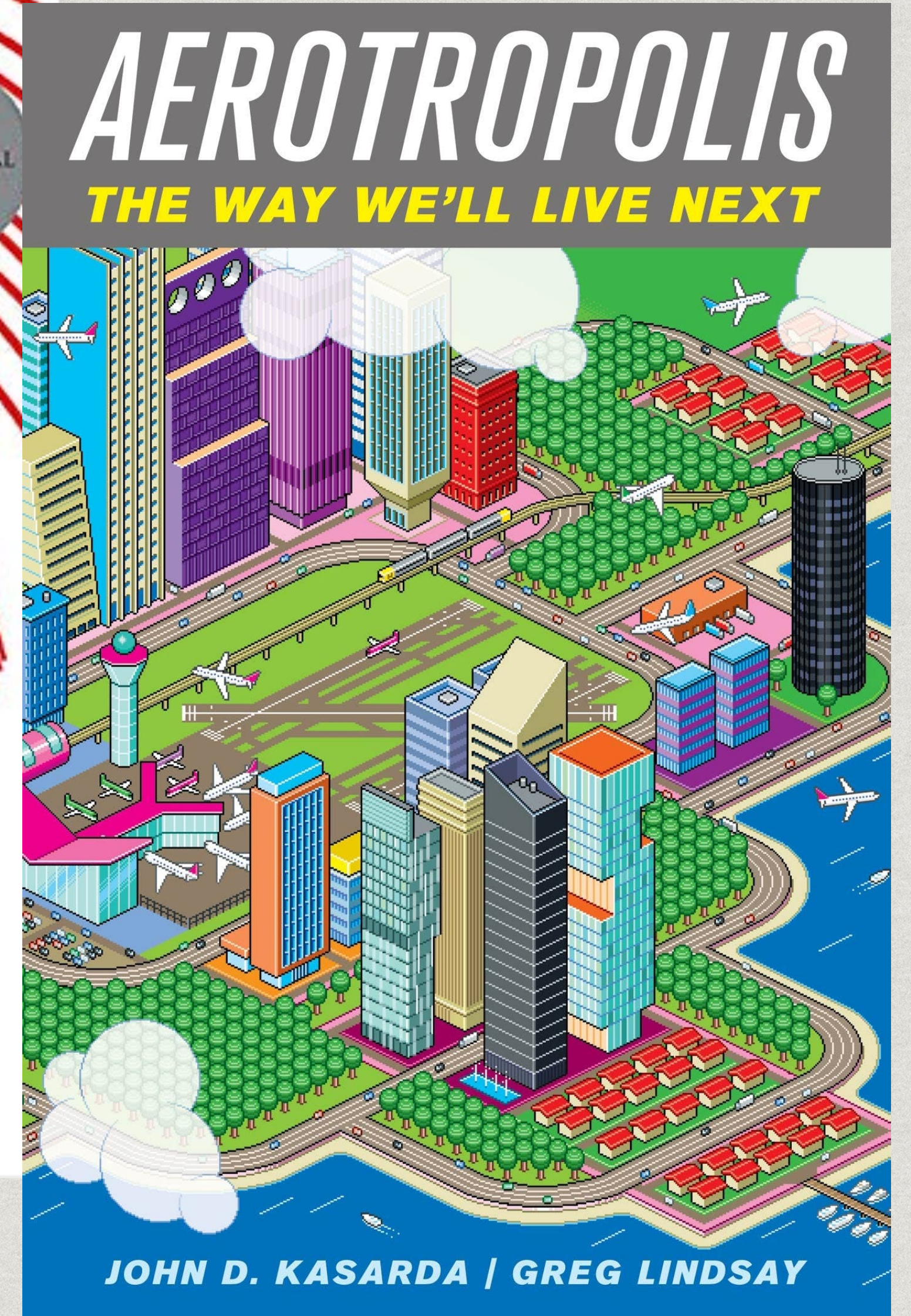
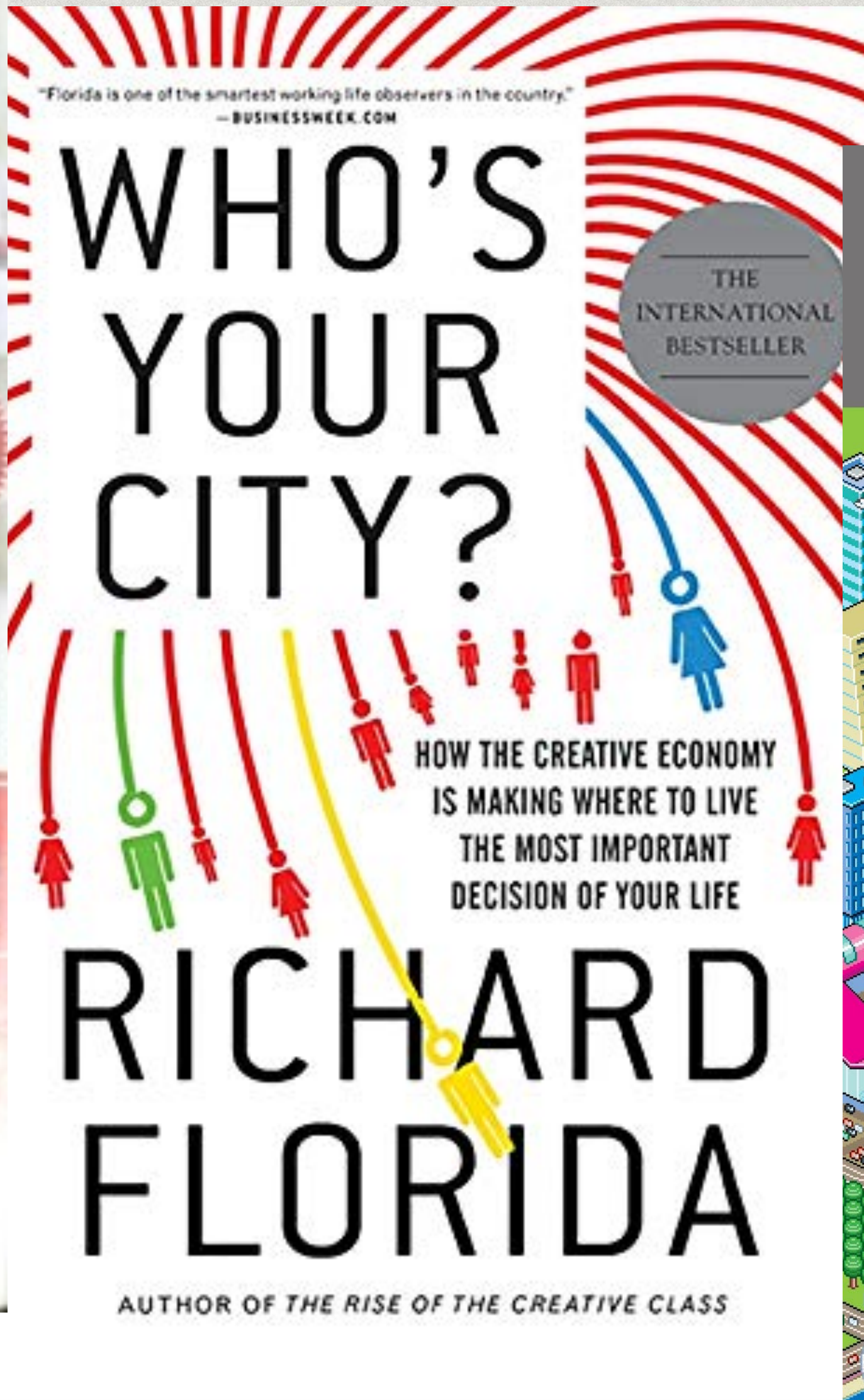
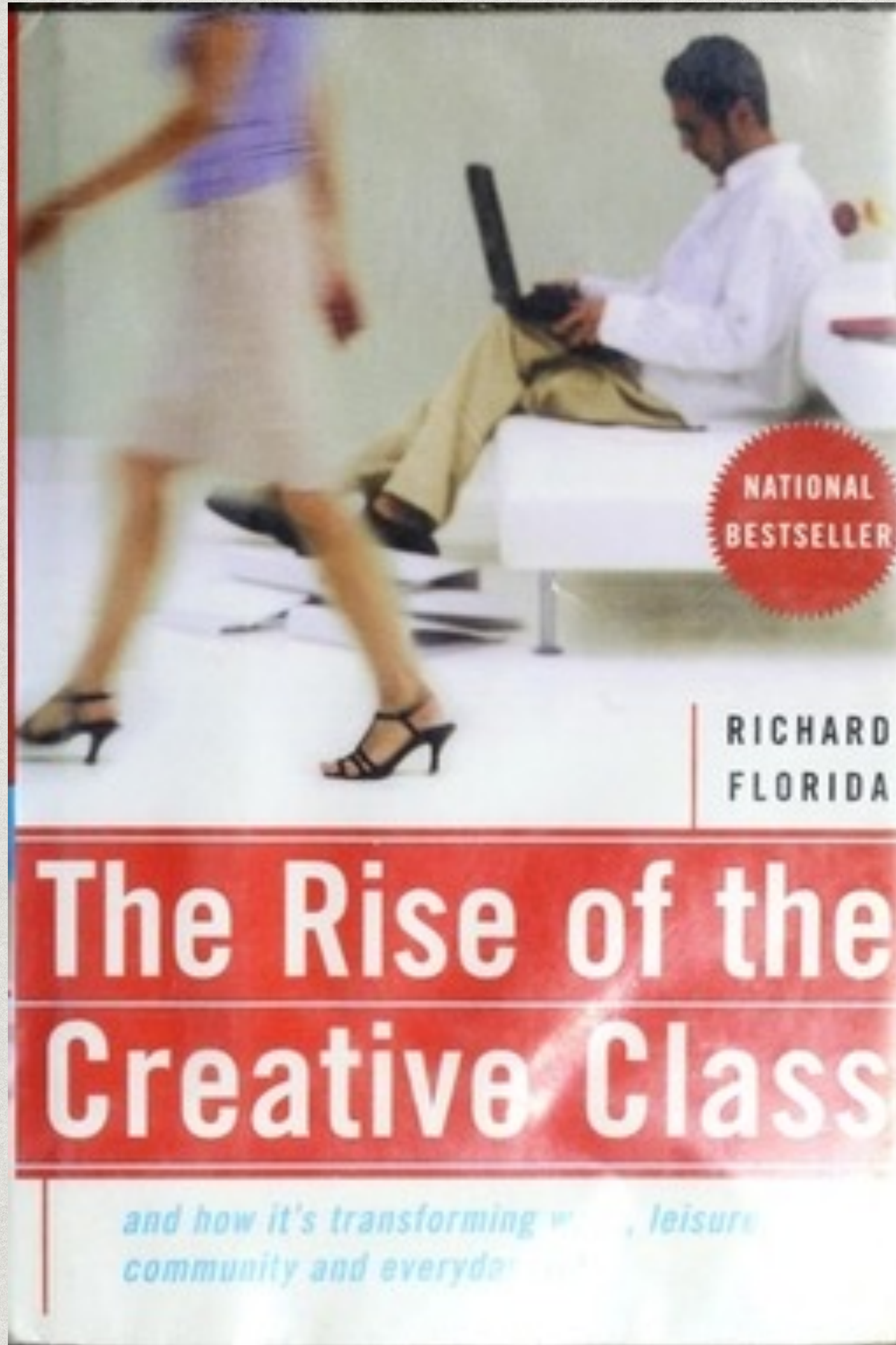
This is how the story has been told—more success to the successful

“Cities are the absence of physical space between people and companies.

They are proximity, density, closeness. They enable us to work and play together, and success depends on the demand for physical connection...

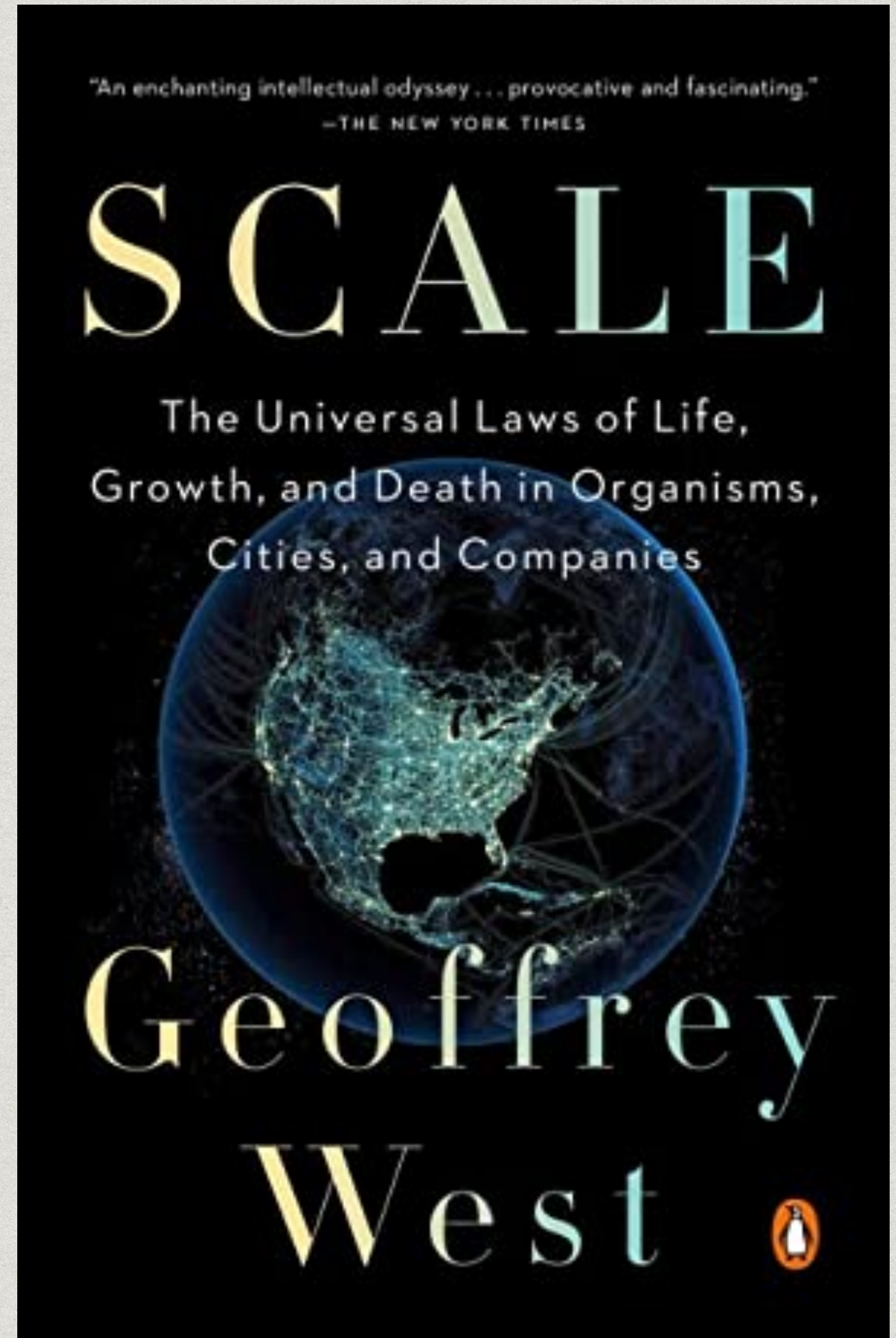
And during the last thirty years... technological change has increased the returns to the knowledge that is best produced by people in close proximity to other people.”

*Edward Glaeser*

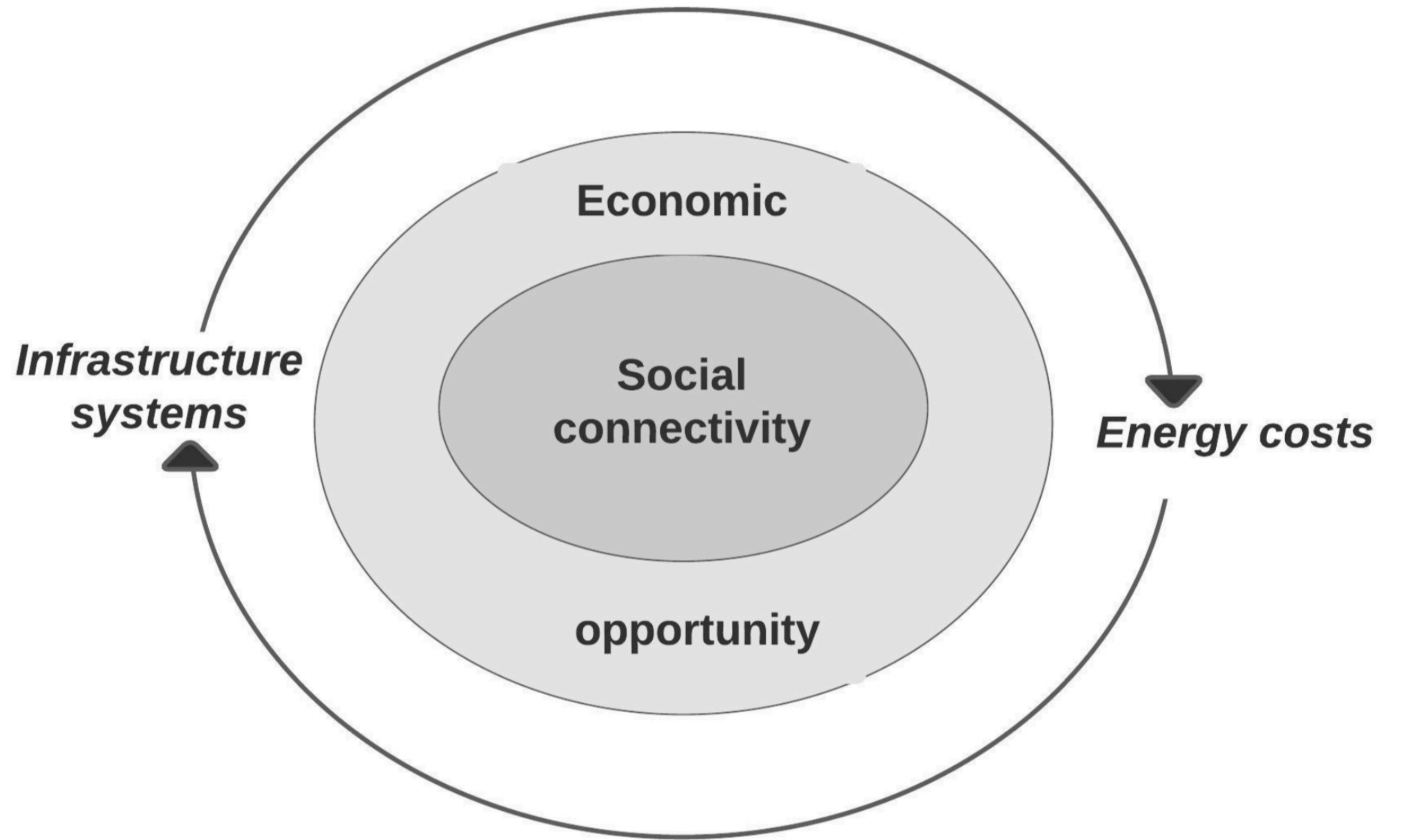


# Cities are amplifiers

If you compare a city in a given country to one that is half its size, it will be 15% better off per person. But it will also have 15% more crime, illness and so on.

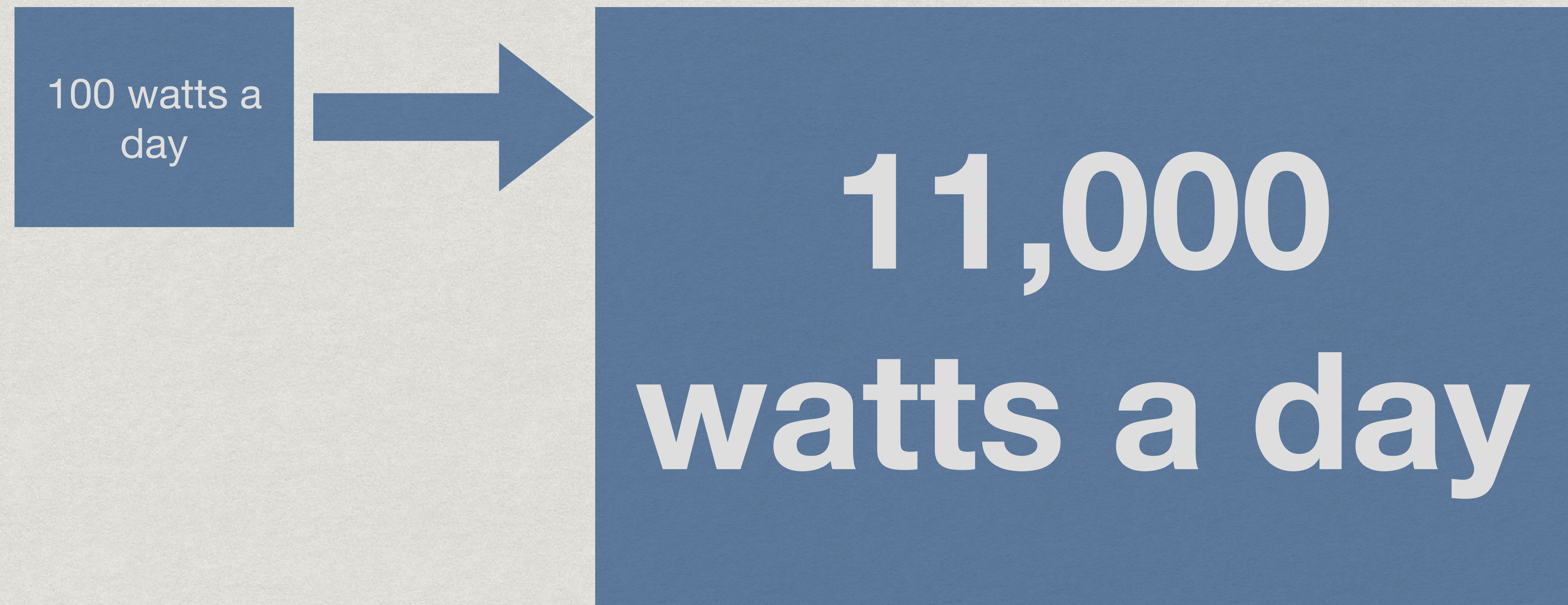


Cities are systems that use infrastructure to convert energy into economic opportunity and social connectivity.



Source: Andrew Curry

The city needs energy, desperately





And it has a huge resource footprint

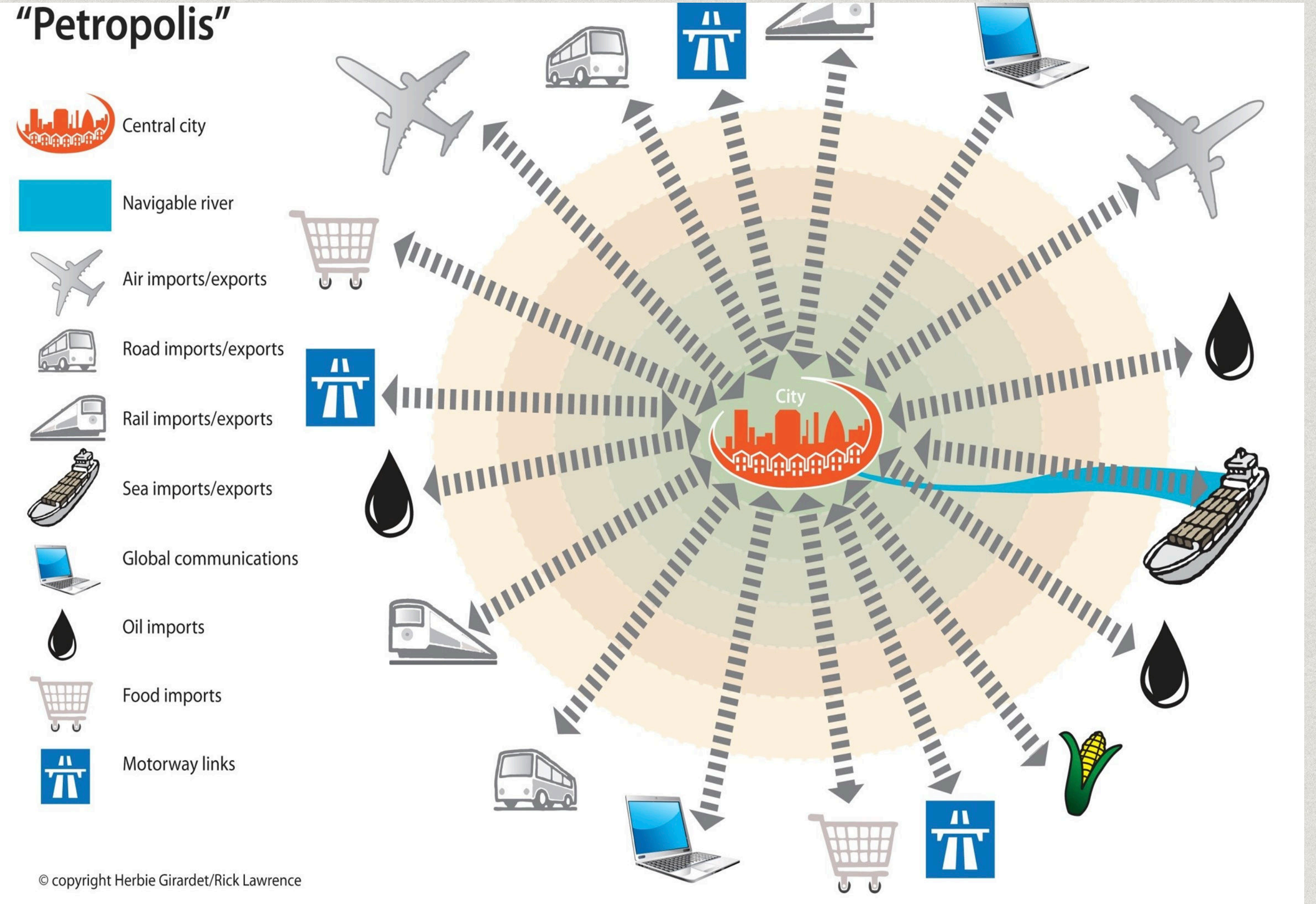
London's ecological footprint is 125 times its surface area. It is equivalent to almost all the productive land in Britain

*(Herbert Girardet)*



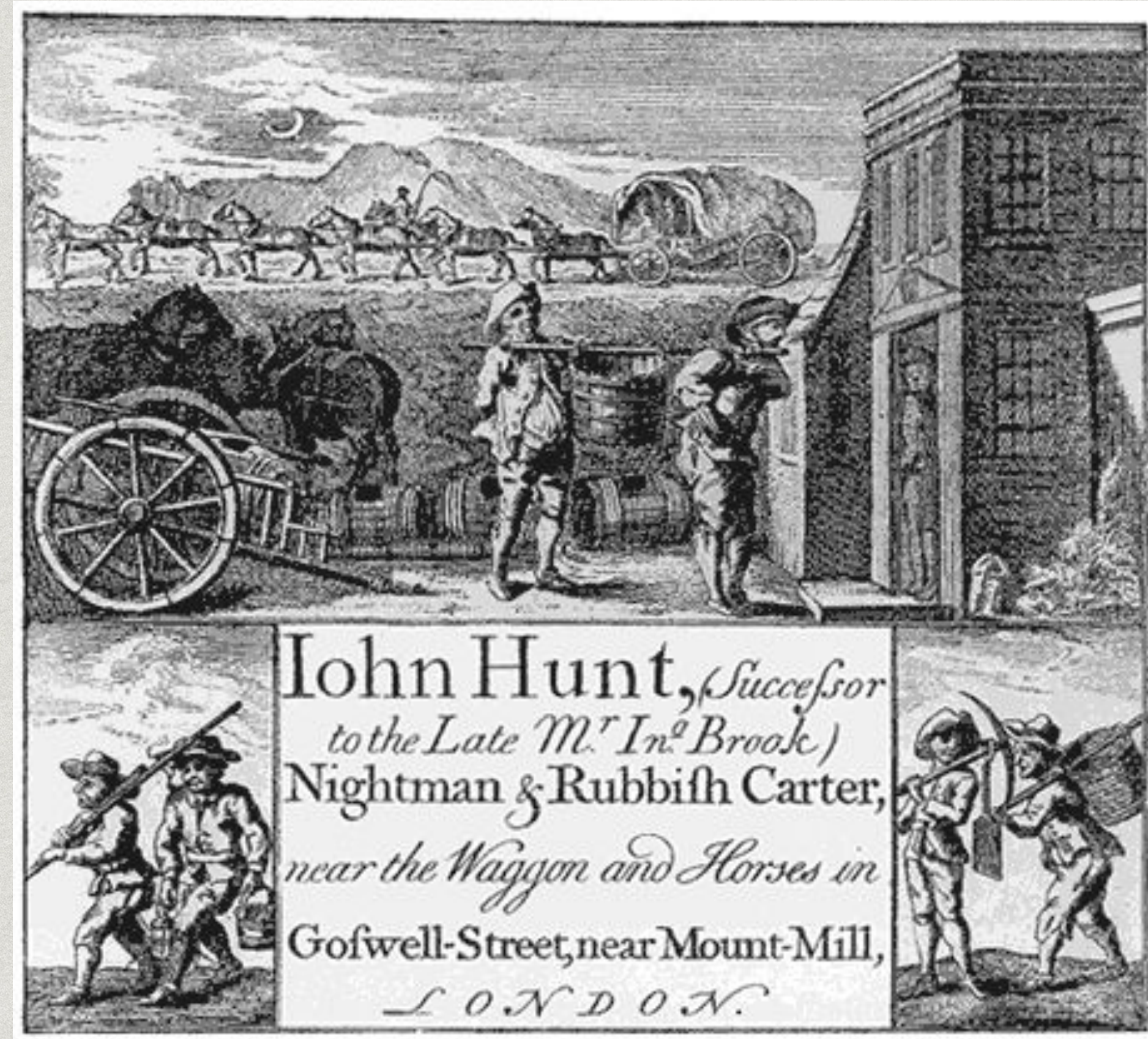
# The 19th and 20th century solution to this

Most cities are dependent on cheap energy and globalised trade to maintain themselves



# ...which isn't working any more

- \* To survive, cities need to be able to reproduce themselves
- \* This means that their their support systems need to work.
- \* But they can't rely on global energy and production systems any longer
- \* Service workers aren't paid enough to be able to get to their work from their houses
- \* Basic care is breaking down (health, education, elder care etc)



# We've reached peak complexity

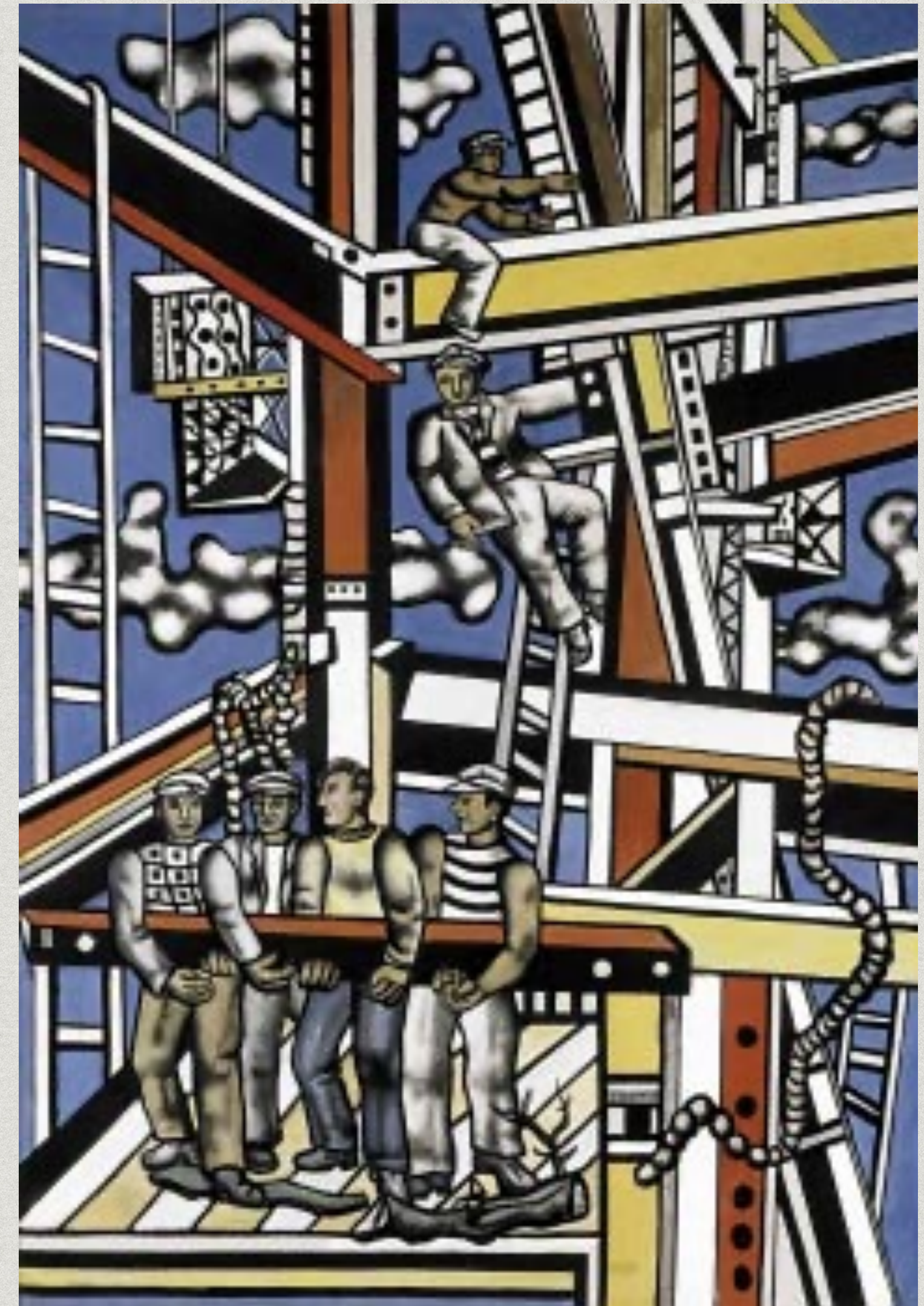
- \* To survive, cities need to be able to reproduce themselves
- \* This means that their their support systems need to work.
- \* But they can't rely on global energy and production systems any longer
- \* Essential service workers aren't paid enough to be able to work and live
- \* Basic care is breaking down (health, education, elder care etc)



The city needs energy, desperately

“The chief function of the city is to convert power into form, energy into culture, dead matter into the living symbols of art, biological reproduction into social creativity.”

*Lewis Mumford*



“The paradox that characterises our era... is that the more powerful our civilization grows, the more vulnerable it becomes... To preserve ourselves from serious disruptions to the climate and the ecosystems... we need to turn off the engine.”

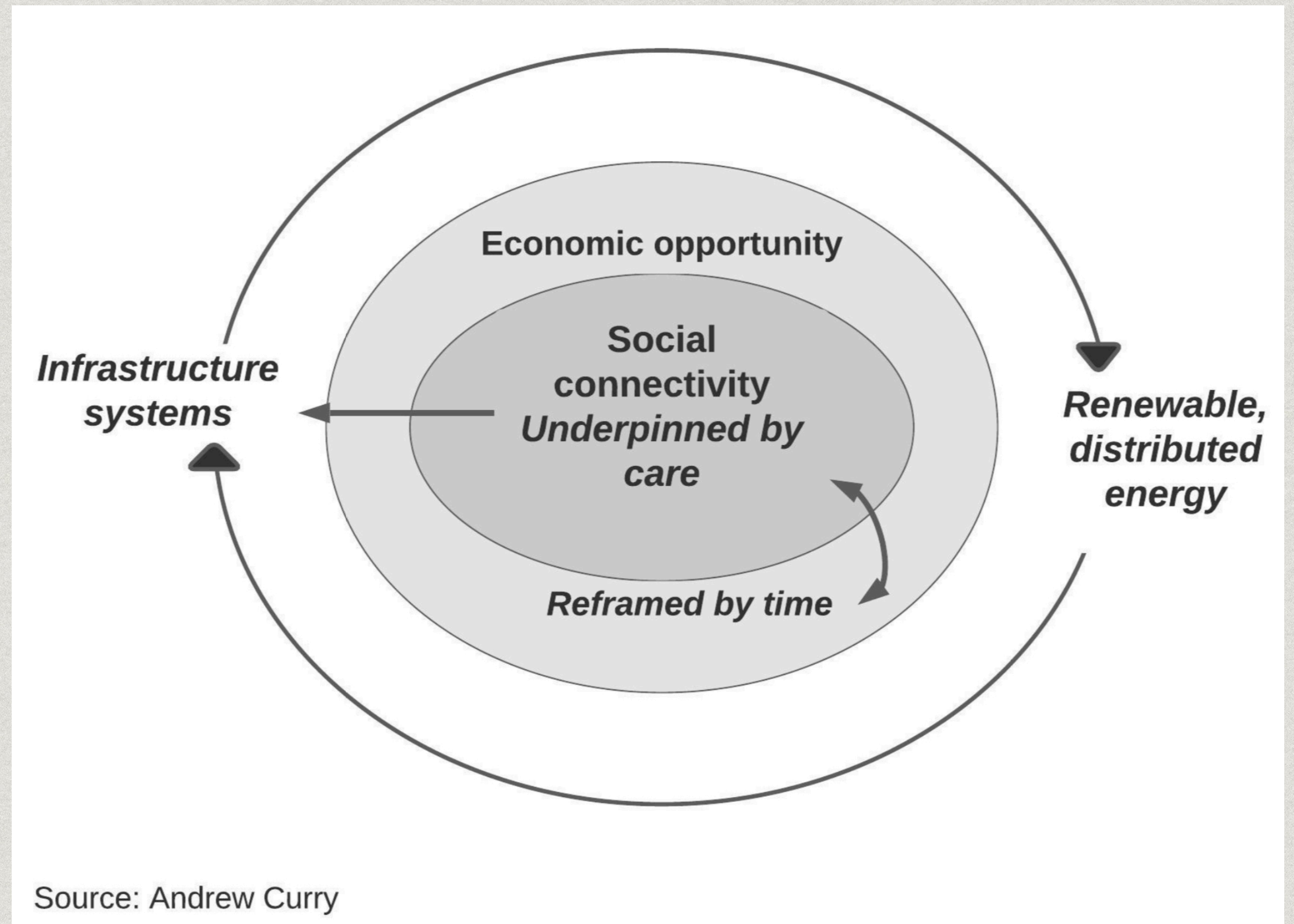
*Pablo Servigne and Raphael Stevens, 'How Everything Can Collapse'*

# RRREVISITING THE FUTURE OF WORK



# When systems become too complex, they either break or they simplify themselves

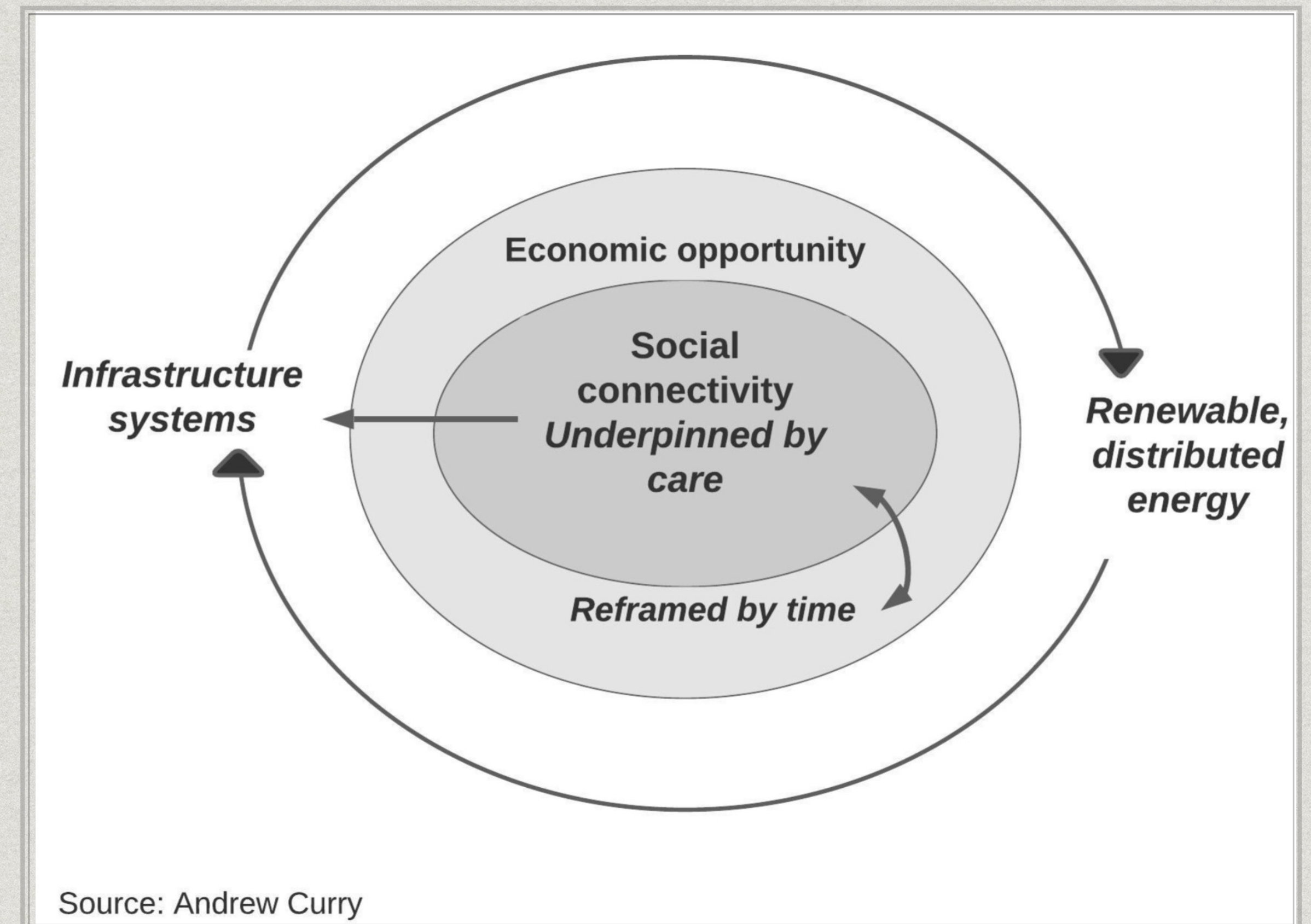
- \* Revisiting Geoffrey West's 'city system'
- \* Energy systems based on local renewables
- \* Time becomes more important in the way the economy works
- \* Care—in all its aspects—becomes more important to social connection



# WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK

# When systems become too complex, they either break or they simplify themselves

- Revisiting Geoffrey West's 'city system'
- Energy systems based on local renewables
- Time becomes more important in the way the economy works
- Care—in all its aspects—becomes more important to social connection



# Future work: energy and infrastructure

- \* Energy moves from being globally produced and distributed to being more locally managed
- \* Food also becomes more urban (and possibly manufactured)
- \* New types of infrastructure and investment to manage climate mitigation and adaptation
- \* And social changes—such as the ‘15 minute city’



Westmill Solar Park, Oxfordshire. Image: Mr Renewables/Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0

# Future work: time

- \* Time has been a battleground ever since the industrial revolution.
- \* In Europe gains in productivity are largely being translated into gains in leisure, not more income.
- \* The pandemic has accelerated ideas about work flexibility and working days. Four day week trials are everywhere.
- \* Time becomes an important element of care



Swiss railway clock, Zurich. Image: JuergenG/Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0

# Future work: care

- \* If cities want to be able to function, they need to make sure that care works
- \* This means schools and childcare, health, transport, eldercare, greenspace, and so on
- \* But to work, care—in all of its forms—needs to be disconnected from the market
- \* Lynne Pettinger: “What would happen if care work, not industrial production, was the start of understanding work?”



By Lily Horseman, Kindling Play and Training (c) Lily Horseman

# Future work: technology [1]

- \* Yes, I haven't talked much about AI.
- \* The scary 2013 projections about AI eating our jobs were badly constructed—and missed the new jobs that AI will create.
- \* (For example: accountants and climate management)
- \* According to credible labour market economists, technology has already done most of its restructuring work.
- \* Augmented work is the mostly likely future.

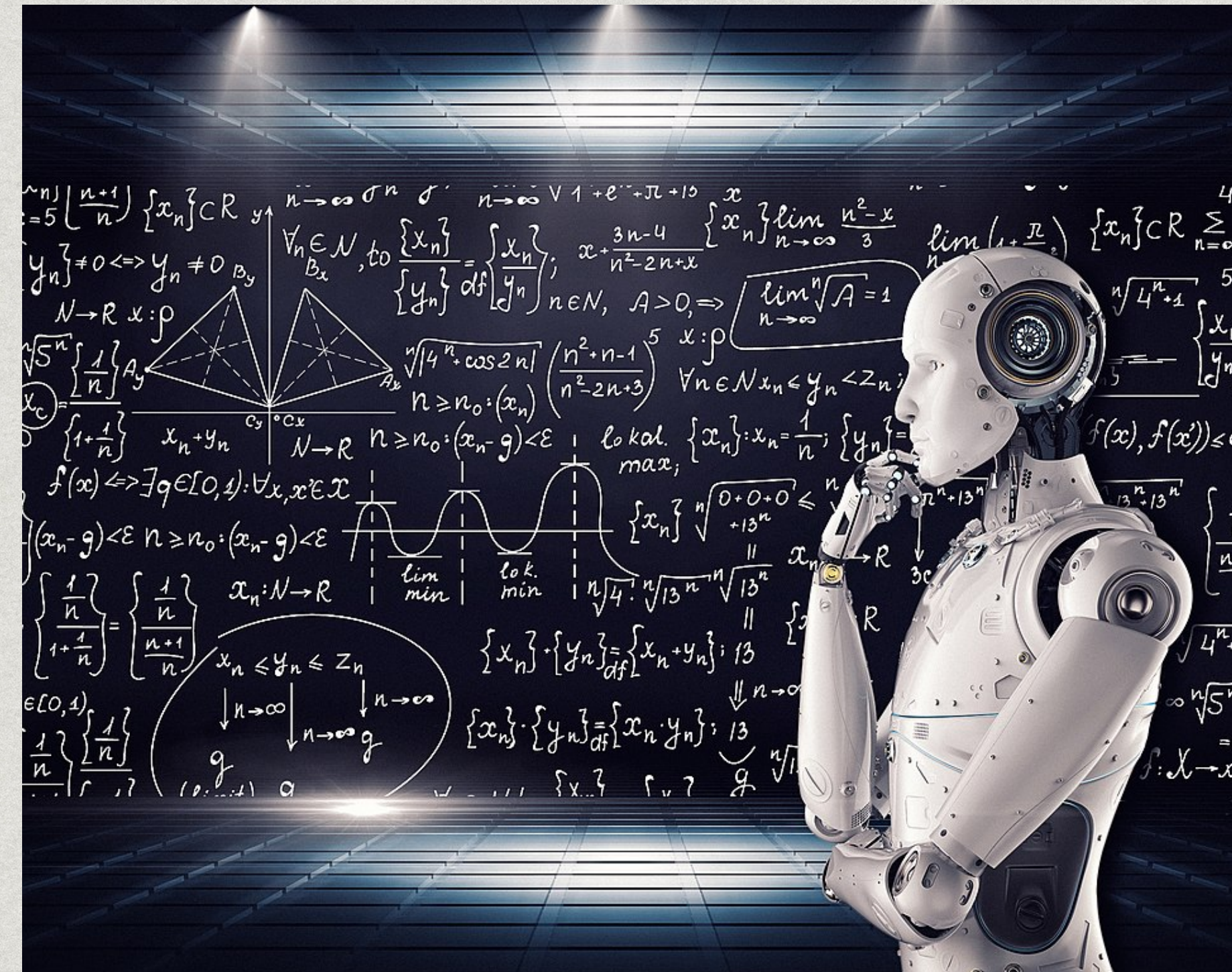







Image by mikemacmarketing. [www.vpnusrus.com](http://www.vpnusrus.com). CC BY 2.0

# Future work: technology [2]

- \* There's also a bigger picture story.
- \* Digital is the fifth wave of economic transformation since the Industrial Revolution. It's coming to an end.
- \* We're in the 'social innovation' phase of the digital wave—and AI is part of that.
- \* The sixth wave will use digital technology, but it won't be led by it. More likely to be about materials or biosynthesis.

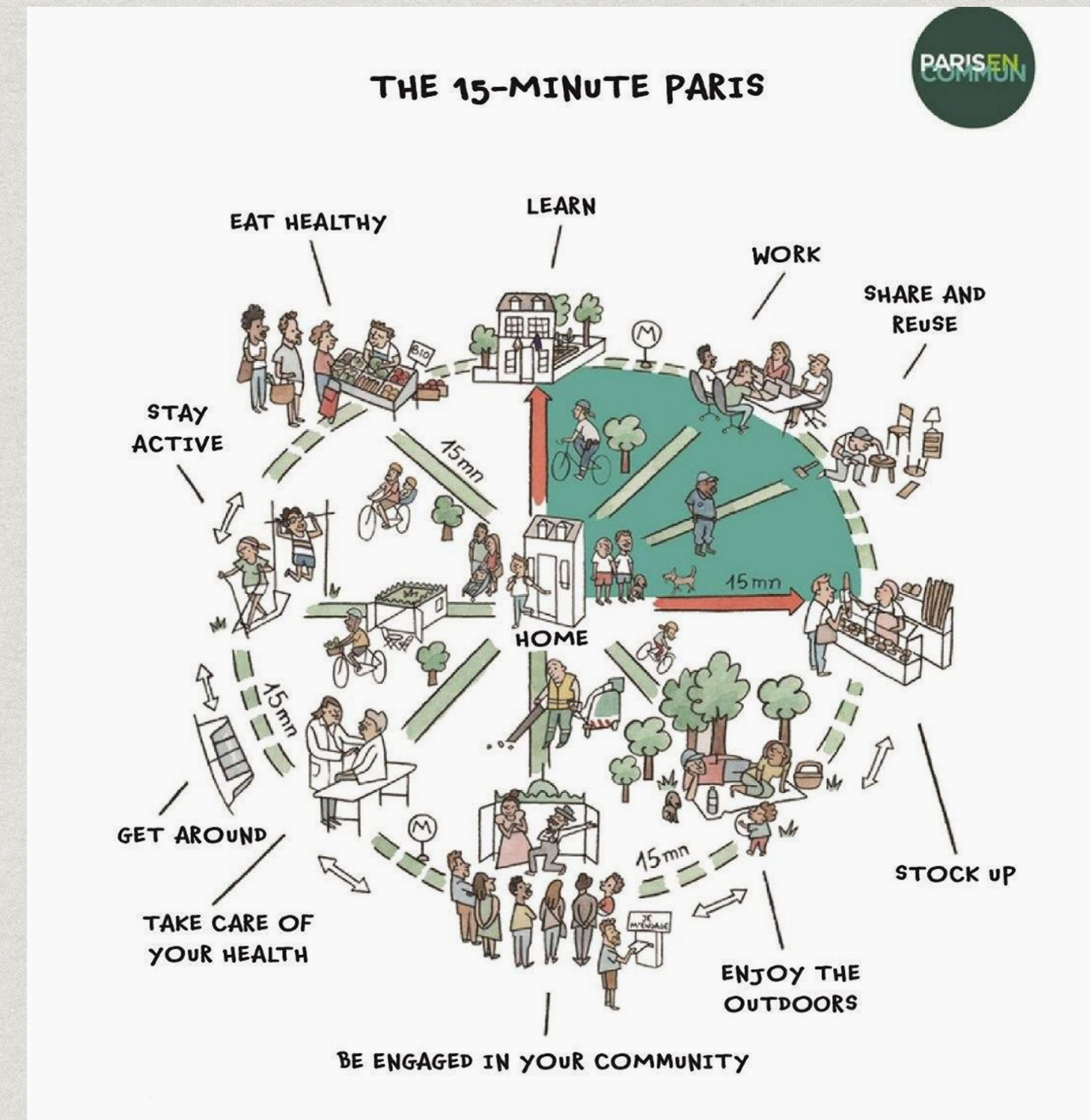
<i>Technologic al revolution</i>	<i>Popular name for the period</i>	<i>Core country or countries</i>	<i>Big-bang initiating the revolution</i>	Year
 <b>FIRST</b>	The 'Industrial Revolution'	Britain	Arkwright's mill opens in Cromford	1771
 <b>SECOND</b>	Age of Steam and Railways	Britain (spreading to Continent and USA)	Test of the 'Rocket' steam engine for the Liverpool-Manchester railway	1829
 <b>THIRD</b>	Age of Steel, Electricity and Heavy Engineering	USA and Germany forging ahead and overtaking Britain	The Carnegie Bessemer steel plant opens in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	1875
 <b>FOURTH</b>	Age of Oil, the Automobile and Mass Production	USA (with Germany at first vying for world leadership), later spreading to Europe	First Model-T comes out of the Ford plant in Detroit, Michigan	1908
 <b>FIFTH</b>	Age of Information, Computing, and Telecommunications	USA (spreading to Europe and Asia)	The Intel microprocessor is announced in Santa Clara, California	1971

Source: Carlota Perez 2002



# Living in this city

- \* It is more resilient to shocks
- \* It is more liveable for everyone
- \* It uses data and digital information to enhance services
- \* It has a richer social and cultural life
- \* It is likely more decentralised and more distinctive
- \* It marks the return of the regional centre



Concept by Carlos Moreno/ illustration by Micael



**ANDREW CURRY**  
**DIRECTOR OF FUTURES**

**ANDREW@SOIF.ORG.UK**

Further reading:

The long pandemic

<https://soif.org.uk/app/uploads/2021/02/SOIF-The-Long-Pandemic.pdf>

Better business: beyond the ESG agenda

<https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:f6794362-c1f7-350a-bc22-fc14e5c5d2e0>

The future of cities as the future of work

<https://thenextwavefutures.files.wordpress.com/2021/12/curry-cities-and-work-chapter-planetary-cities-preprint-1221.pdf>