

The Explainers: Non-Fiction Books on the State of Society in the 1970s and 1980s

Dr. Torsten Kathke



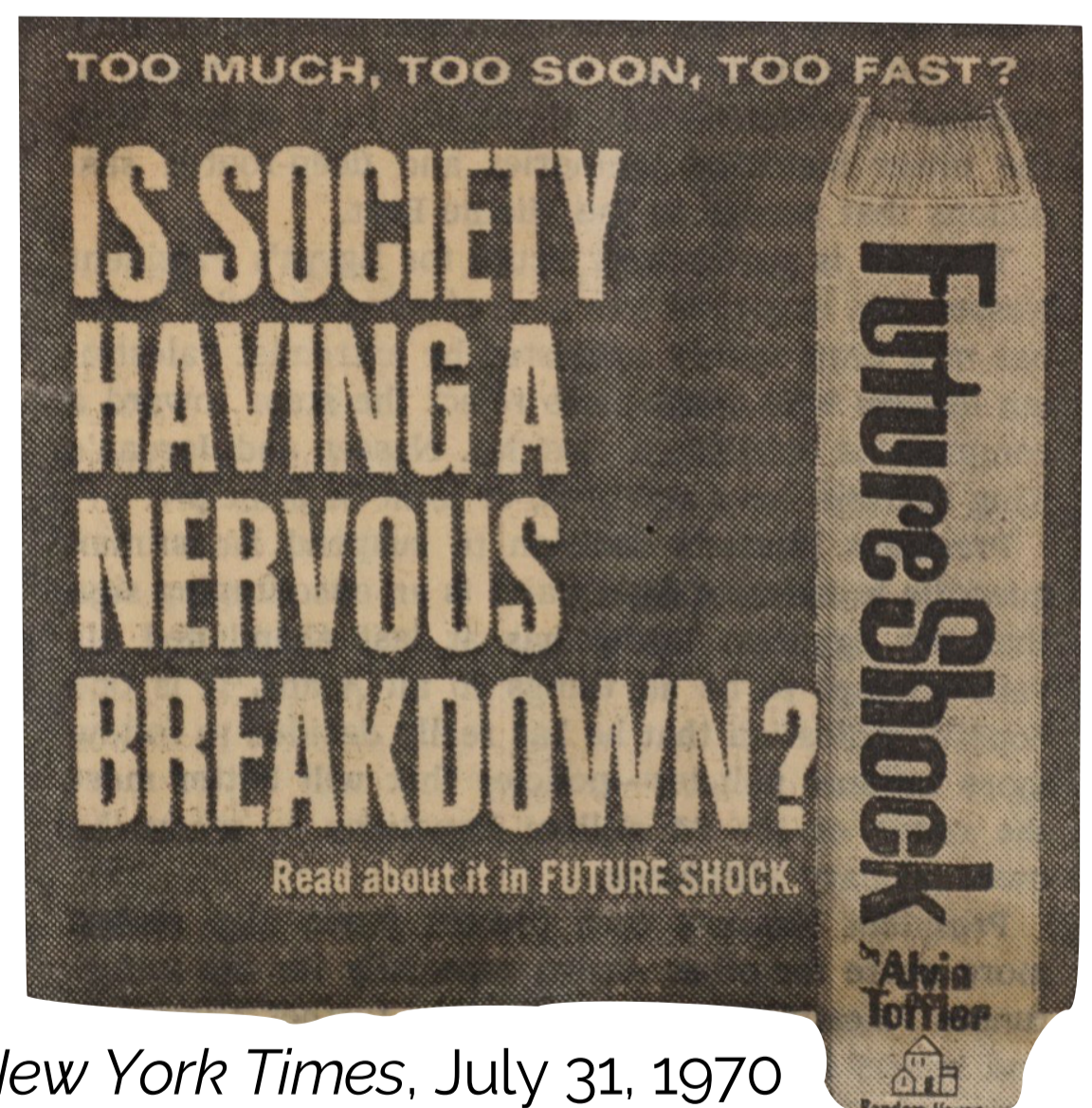
In the 1970s and 1980s, a genre of books came into its own: the **popular diagnosis of society**. This project looks at such books from the perspective of cultural, intellectual, and economic history.

Popular diagnoses were **non-fiction bestsellers**, encompassing futurist thinking and cultural criticism. They were read and **discussed widely**. These books responded to the **end of an era of prosperity**, and to the sense that **complexity** and uncertainty had become hallmarks of society. Marketed **to mass audiences**, such books directly **influenced business and politics**. Leaders from Jimmy Carter to Newt Gingrich flocked to them. **Popular culture** took them up.

Popular diagnostic books provided **guidance**, but also created **uncertainty** by focusing people's minds on the problems diagnosed.

These works could become important drivers of debates on both sides of the Atlantic only in a **specific historical moment** in which media had become held by conglomerates and not yet split into today's on-demand media.

Popular diagnoses shaped discourses in an age in which **major issues relevant to our present** first emerged.



New York Times, July 31, 1970
(Alvin and Heidi Toffler Papers, Columbia University Archives, Box 141)