

What do we mean by foresight “vision”

Arc et Senans, 19-11-08

“Imagine” Seminar

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- **Foresight is about exploring *the long term futures* in order to act upon short and medium term decision-making mechanisms more effectively;** thus creating a relationship between the **long timeframe of processes** and the **shorter timeframe of action and strategic decision.**
- “What must I do here and now whilst looking into the possible futures?”
- There is a dialectic relationship between the **remote time horizons of a shared vision and the closer horizons of decision-making;** the longer term contributing to putting the shorter term into perspective and giving it meaning.

- Foresight is based on the assertion of the following principle: **The future is not written. It is to be shaped and built by means of collaborative work.**
- *Foresight is a method.*
- *It is also an attitude aimed at building a desirable future taking current constraints and trends at work into account in what could be called exploratory, trend-based and contrasting foresight*

- Two inputs, two stands
- Exploratory foresight and normative foresight
- Exploratory foresight: the observer is at year 0 and considers what the future of object x “could be” at $t+10$, $t+20$, $t+30$, $t+50$.. $t+100$
- “What would happen if a given historical process was applied to object x?”
- It involves the classical work concept of anticipation

- Normative foresight is about aims, purposes and “what we would like to happen” in order to move away from current or anticipated reality by shaping it into a desired, longed for or dreamt about future. This is where “visions” come in.

- Between our desires and dreams about a desirable future and the result of trend exploration, there is room for a reasoned, controlled, acceptable and sustainable desirable future.
- It is “what we want”, taking the sets of constraints imposed by reality as well as public policies into account in order to travel down the road of collective willingness.

Foresight is intended to:

- -1°) *analyse the reality we want to act upon in depth*
- -2°) *anticipate changes*
- -3°) *be “preactive” by reacting to changes before they impose their own logic upon us*
- -4°) *be “proactive” by foreseeing changes and anticipating the construction of conditions for keeping change under control*

- 5°) build collective *discourses on the future*,
- 6°) screen the *representations of the future by using the representation of one desirable future, amongst other possible futures, as a filter*
- 7°) transform the vision of a desirable future into a collective process capable of orienting reality towards a path other than the one existing initially; thus ensuring that the effective future is as close as possible to the desired or desirable future.

- **5°) *build collective discourses on the future:***
- The future is first and foremost a societal construction, a political act in the strongest sense of the word, that is in the sense of “polis”, the City, the Agora; it is about building a **public forum** where desires, dreams, fantasies, risks, uncertainties and constraints can be debated
- It is a collective work as is explicitly revealed in the notion of the *territory project*.

- A vision could be the representation of the gap that exists between the current situation and the desired or desirable future; the difference between the two leading to the realisation of what should be done to achieve our objectives.
- Example: When Martin Luther King uttered his famous phrase “I have a dream”, he expressed a vision. The gap between the vision and experienced reality gives an idea of how far down the road we still have to travel.
- Barack Obama has just taken a major step forward down this road: his election marks the passage, at least on paper, between the desirable and the possible, between dreams and reality.

Vision logics : attitudes towards the future

- 1) The future is the exact *reproduction of the past*. “There’s nothing new under the sun”. New generations keep repeating the experiences of their elders. **The future is seen as an *intangible cycle*. Time is assimilated to a **natural cycle** (seasons, generations, etc.), notion of immutability. **Everything changes, and yet nothing changes**. Invariance, an *a-historical vision of the world*: Nature in its cosmic sense dominates and overwhelms Mankind.**

- 2) ***The future is written by a superior force***, of a divine nature, but we do not have access to the knowledge and conditions of its revelation. “It is God’s will”. The future is seen as a mystery. *Intercessors* can help us accede to the divine portents.
- Ex. The Delphic oracle, in Ancient Greece; the role of the priests who, through their trances, announced the future as a preconceived phenomenon that is already there, although not yet elucidated. Images of possible ruptures, catastrophes, chaos, etc.

- **2) *The future as the accomplishment of spiritual progress.*** The City of God by Saint Augustine (5th century AD), troubled times, the decline of the Roman Empire. St Augustine proposes an ***optimistic vision*** of the end of time, a Christian version of successive ages, youth. At the end of time, men will be gathered together in the “City of God”, a messianism that announces a reconciled society.
- ***Time has a direction, it is the beginning of the world’s historicity principle.***
- Man as a “revealer” of God’s will. The so-called “revealed” religions carry a new vision of the world: history is “in motion” and Man is its instrument

- **3) *The future as an idealised vision of the present world.*** Today's world is bad but a different future is possible. There is no such thing as fate.
- The future is a human construction. ***Describing a different future helps make it come true.***
- **Thomas More**, 16th century: wars of religions, troubled times. **Utopia (U-Topos, “non-place”) (1516)**, Francis Bacon's Atlantis, 1627, etc. herald **Fourrier's** utopian socialism in the 19th century. **Optimistic foundation of the world.**
- History is in the hands of Man.

- ***4) The future is a rationality that is accessible through the knowledge of the laws of nature (laws of physics).***
- **Nature is like a “celestial mechanism” = (Newton, Laplace): its knowledge enables us to understand its logic and **to use it as a lever to control the forces of nature.** Vision of Man as a “**virtual master of the universe**” that **inspired positivism** (Auguste Comte)**

- 5) ***The future is inaccessible to human understanding***, a sort of “black box” with no direction nor meaning. Today’s time announces nothing and goes nowhere. “It is”, like a succession of t instants. Historians, at least as a profession, refuse to consider the future as an extrapolation of the present on the future. “I believe only in what I see”, Saint Thomas.

- 6) ***The future as an expression of the world's contradictions*** which “produces” **a logic, a direction, a “meaning”**. Knowledge of its “laws” enables us to transform it and “use” it as a lever to transform the world by applying the right levers.
- Marxist approach to history.

- 7) ***The future obeys laws that result from prior “behaviours” of a number of key variables. The laws of probability enable the trajectories of a possible future to be approached, without being able to determine its exact shape. This is forecasting with a probabilistic approach to the future. The future can be apprehended in a rational way, but its evolution cannot be apprehended with accuracy due to a lack of knowledge of all the possible interactions between the system’s components. Limited rationality theories (in economics) are based on this, hence a mixture of logic and indetermination.***

Conclusion concerning attitudes towards the future(s)

- The history of anticipation is largely the *history of fears and hopes* concerning the future based on the realities of the moment: the tougher the reality, the bigger the “dream machine” is: **there are many examples of this, from messianic approaches to utopias.**
- Having said that 1: *too many dreams kill the dreams* (cf. 19th century ideologies leading to dictatorships in the 20th century, etc.)
2: science creates a new context with the rise of *predictive sciences*, for example with global warming
- 3: *the current context is characterised by the dominance of economics over other spheres, thus encouraging us to address short-term horizons and pragmatic issues* with a poor ideological content

- 4: ***the technology/economics couple, which uses the biosphere for its own end with destabilising effects that have backlashes on the economy (growth limitation), urges us to change the system once again, but on new bases. Hence the use of *sustainable development* as a new “development frontier”.***

Brief history of contemporary visions

- Amongst the great foresight experts in the US, we can mention Herman Khan and the Rand Corporation after WWII, as regards the idea of **key rupture technologies, major corporate firms** like IBM, Microsoft, Ford, GM and Standard Oil, **and a State that projects its power all over the world** with foresight as its main instrument (futurology), based on methodologies like “what if,” matrices and SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats).

- ***France is not to be outdone with great figures*** like **Bertrand De Jouvenel**, founder of the *Futuribles* magazine (currently edited by his son, Hugues)
- ***Philosophers and researchers like Gaston Berger*** (creation in 1957 of the “centre international de prospective”), and previously, **Henri Bergson** (“the creative evolution”)
- A number of “***senior civil servants***” like **Jean Massé** (CGP), **François Bloch-Lainé**, **Jérôme Monod** (creation of DATAR in 1963), **Louis Armand**, and economists like **Jean Fourastier**

- The emergence of foresight in France in the 1950s and '60s is *closely linked to the major role played by the State* in the economic development of the country, supported by powerful devices and the Welfare State tradition: *foresight is the tool of a “vision” at the service of an “ambition”* that takes the form of a *strategy as part of national economic and social development plans*, considered the backbone of development. There are favourable “grounds” for developing a foresight approach that is more qualitative than quantitative.

- **The European Union is another major source of foresight activities, especially under the major research programmes (7th FP for example), preparing Central European Countries to join the EU**
- The “cohesion” concept has dominated EU culture for 20 years
- The concept of “knowledge economy” (Lisbon) is the prevalent form of the European vision
- The concept of sustainability is the emerging form of the new vision
- cohesion-innovation-durability= “the” EU vision

- ***France is not “top of the class” when it comes to questioning the growth model inherited from the thirty years of prosperity following WWII because the State apparatus is “formatted” to consider social development as a sub-product of economic growth, and does not question its prime model based on the technology / corporations / Welfare State couple.***

- ***This model is, however, wearing out. The State does not have the means to achieve its ambitions and Europe is gradually undermining the French State-nation model.*** Alternative models are, however, slow to emerge, we continue to follow a model based on strong growth, even though the growth is no longer there.

- The “Grenelle de l’Environnement” (meeting between the government and trade unions on environmental issues) testifies to the emergence of the new vision.
- But ambiguity still exists: we want sustainability, but at the same time we are ready to “fight for growth”
- Sustainability is, however, a discourse of compromise between the three sustainability pillars, thus leading to strong or weak sustainability (Jacques Theys)

- The situation in which we find ourselves is very simple: our society has no global vision; it navigates by dead reckoning and has its back to the wall.
- - the horizon of worldwide globalisation is living on a short term basis.
- - 11-9-01 and 15-9-08 (collapse of Lehmann Brothers) are two key dates that mark the end of an era, that of the political and cultural hegemony of an “all-economy” system
- Hence a global lack of vision: the horizon seems blocked on all sides.

Long live the crisis

- Since history “abhors a vacuum”, a window is opening in front of us. Edgar Morin evokes the possibility of a “new era”. But there will be no new era without a new “vision”. What could its broad outline be?

The new vision could be characterised by:

- 1) the rejection of totalizing, not to say totalitarian, “global” ideologies
- 2) the weight of the IPCC scientific forecasting activity
- 3) a “pragmatic” research that proposes possible answers to each “limit point”, adapted to the stakes at hand for a given period of time The “step by step” principle becomes standard.
- 4) a “bottom up” answer, social practices being as close as possible to everyday life concerns

- 5) an answer for which the territorial approach (the “meso”) becomes a major component by force of circumstances.
- 6) a line of thought feeding on the accumulation and mutualisation of experiences
- 7) a “percolation” process between the micro and macro levels, the local and global levels, and the top-down and bottom-up approaches that could lead to **global changes of direction at certain times** (little streams make big rivers)
- 8) a process based on the circulation of ideas, exchanges and contacts.

- Well before the Second World War, Paul Valéry said: “the time of the finite world has come”.
- Now that we are at risk of being crushed down by the world we created ourselves, our only option is to build a new world.
- The time of vision is back.