

Research Framework: the future as open process “in the making”

8.05.19 | Isabelle Vuong | www.isabellevuong.ch

The future? A modern concept

In our Western (post-)modern time, the future has become the focus of all attention. Whereas the pre-modern era paid reverence divine order, which drew its legitimacy from the past, the modern age is characterized by a consciousness of the future which emerges together with the Enlightenment, its technical breakthroughs and capitalist societies. Preservation of a divine order is therefore gradually replaced by the quest for novelty and innovation specific to modern times, which in turn hold the promise of better futures. “Utopia” as first described and imagined by Thomas More (1516) was an elusive island somewhere South of the Americas, and became Mercier’s distant future of the “Year 2500” (1771). The future is indeed a modern concept.

The second half of the 20th century sees this paradigmatic shift culminate into a rationalisation and commodification of the future. Techno-economical interests take control over tomorrow and dictate their ideological, goal-oriented future – be it about satisfying the need for endless growth or about some techno-utopia where artificial intelligence and algorithms will replace politics. This in turn leads to the emergence of Future Studies as a scientific discipline, which at the same time also often serves as a “tool discipline” to those in power. Hence, a techno-capitalistic abstract time compresses the present while emptying the future of any substance, whereas the lengthy time and uncertainty inherent to both political and social processes seem more and more outdated. This led to the concept of “acceleration” by German sociologist Hartmut Rosa. This also makes visible the profound absurdity of the Western world generating risks at home, and elsewhere, before desperately trying to assess and mitigate their subsequent and immediate (local) negative effects.

Where are our utopias gone?

It comes as no surprise that the social and political utopias dear to the modern times have been turned upside down into a dystopian future which, it seems, will bring only harsher “power and economic inequalities”¹ not mentioning some ecological cataclysm, whereas the only left “utopias” are of technological or regressive nature claiming the past as “better times”.

It also comes as no surprise that we conceive of any of our individual or collective actions as oriented towards a vision or goal in the future – just as imposed on us by the techno-economical complex. Although existing in our heads only, the future thereby enacts itself *in the present*.

The revolution starts in our heads

A change in perception of the future is therefore critical for the social transformation we need as we are facing earthly challenges. But it is not only about changing the type of future we envision (e.g. different from techno-utopias), it is rather about changing how we think about the future. “The revolution starts in our heads,” wrote the French sociologist Bourdieu.

¹ Fabio Boschetti has demonstrated that the future as seen from a Western perspective can be summed up to six archetypical myths of the future, among which the “power and economic inequalities myth,” which entail the belief that “big business and governments are likely to become more powerful and cause social inequality and economic crisis”. Fabio Boschetti et al.: “Myths of the future and scenarios archetypes”, *Technological Forecasting & Social Change* 111: 76–85, 2016.

Indeed, if we are true to our social potential for change, then we must acknowledge that the future is full of uncertainties and no one can tell what it will be. The future is wide open; it holds the fullest of the unknown. And this is so because the possibilities actually lie in the present.

This is precisely what the metaphor of the “butterfly setting off a tornado” (Edward Lorenz, 1972) tells us: even within a deterministic, not within random complex system, any minor change *of the initial conditions* can lead to major differences in the future. The possibilities, therefore, lie in the present. And how to qualify our contemporary world, if not as a complex system? Ever evolving and process oriented, it bears no overall hierarchy, thus no possibility to control it from any single legitimate point. There, certainly, lies hope for collective social and political transformation.

Like a billion butterflies, the present holds the promise of many different futures

Changing how we think about the future is thus about giving up the goal-oriented approach and work instead with the future as an open-ended process “in the making”.

Whereas the target-oriented future pertaining to conventional Future Studies represents an enclosure of what is yet to come – quite simply a colonized future; the process-oriented future “in the making” remains wide open. Opening the future shifts the focus away from the future to the present, which, just as a billion butterflies, encloses countless futures. Far from being detached from the present, the future indeed rather comes into being from it. The same applies to the past: “the past is never dead, it is not even past”, wrote William Faulkner. The thickness of the present indeed holds the traces and memories of the past just as it contains the seeds of many futures *in potentia*. Future Studies speaks of these realities that have not yet solidified into significant, notable facts as “latents” or “dispositions”. Latents are maturing realities which haven’t yet crystallized into meaning-bearing facts, such as the effects of radioactivity or climate change. Dispositions are properties which can be triggered like the capacity of sugar to melt in water, but more than that, the dispositions relevant to future studies are that of societies and individuals to change.

From a goal-oriented approach to a concept of the future as a process “in the making”

The future as a process “in the making” is thus about embracing the multi-layered complexity of the present instead of reducing it. To that aim, this approach uses imagination and speculation (“what if?”) about the future, and their unexpected and counter-factual scenarios or narratives. Then by reflecting these back into the present, alternative ways of seeing and embracing future potentialities become uncovered. Such a practice shall lead to an embodied ability in acting and making decisions in the present informed by the many unpredictable possibilities connected to it – using creativity, spontaneity, and experimentation together with a commitment to change. “Dancing on the unknown” says Riel Miller. “Staying with the trouble,” would Donna Haraway say.

Committing to an open future best honours our human disposition for change. It opens up many paths for our becoming as individuals, groups, and societies on this planet. It also reminds us of a moral responsibility to preserve an open future for generations to come. A fortiori, when we colonize the future, we play the game of the techno-capitalist complex and undermine at the same time our collective potential for transformation.

Hanna Arendt wrote that by asking the ontological question of what is happiness, we get closer to happiness. By asking ourselves what is the future, and not what the future will be like, we are getting closer to the future.