

SOME NEW TRENDS IN FUTUROLOGY

Mariana Todorova

Abstract: In this article I present a more unusual look at some new trends in futurology, for which confirmation served (me) my participation and attendance at the annual conference of the “World Future Society” held in Orlando, USA. These are not revolutionary new phenomena, but ones observed over the last several years, however they are sustainable and that turns them into trends. That is why the text is more of a peculiar reflection, an anthropological field work on the role and impact of futurology in different areas and public spheres. **My goal is to present a kind of image on a smaller scale of what happens in the field of futures studies.**

The first and most distinct trend, that I report is that there is no **noticeable development in methodological aspect concerning the forecasting methods. On the contrary, by the assumption that it is an interdisciplinary field, where numerous sciences cooperate, we can observe an eclecticism of methods. Each article or a book on futurology, is full of somewhat personally built scientific toolbox and prescriptions.** Rarely the genealogy of methods is tracked or a critical analysis is applied to them. The area and the discipline of the future’s studies are still over-flexible and conceptually vague concepts. A disciplinary procedure and arrangement are missing, probably they still need to be defined, and perhaps they are not necessary for futurology – it is a convenient flexible position. In support of my thesis is the Michael Marien’s article (7:263) “Futures Studies in the 21st Century: a Reality-Based View”. The author puts among the “unfit myths” the claim that futures studies are a field or a discipline: “ I have never seen any assertion about a ‘field’ backed up with a definition of what constitutes a ‘field’ and whether FS comes close to these criteria in terms of critical mass, quality, and cohesiveness. Nor have I ever seen any agenda for how FS could become more of a ‘field’, or a stronger field. Rather, I suspect that statements about a ‘field’ are made unconsciously in the hope that calling it a ‘field’ will make it so. *This is institution-building on the cheap, and it doesn’t work.* It is counterproductive, because if we think we have arrived or are arriving, we won’t have to struggle to get there.”

Similarly, even the term “foresight” is often presented as synonymous for prediction and futures studies. That is to say it is used in a much wider scale than what actually is, namely a process of preparing forecasts and recommendations for the future, taking into account the expertise of all interested parties – a state, business, a professional community, and amateurish view, etc.

In the Rafael Popper’s article (9): „How Foresight Methods are Selected“ it is illustrated how foresight brings together a wide range of methods, which are used as a whole in futures studies. This, however, is not a sufficient ground for them to be treated and considered as interchangeable. Foresight is a powerful separate trend serving as a bridge between the main concerned parties in it, but it has not got the capacity to prepare global geopolitical predictions or to identify megatrends, for example.

Despite this scientific eclecticism: “Futures studies are very influential, and perhaps more influential than ever. Why? Because futurology or futures studies go beyond themselves and their original aims to study and analyse the sources, patterns and causes of stability and change, and the improvement of the means of forecasting and mapping of the alternativeness of the future. An illustration of this belief of mine could be seen in the following examples.

The second trend on which I would like to emphasize is that futurology/futures studies become a tool for influence, propaganda, making decisions, modelling trends or even manipulation of mass consciousness, that leads to commercialization of futurology and even of turning it into business. This is carried out through forecasts which aim at suggesting certain ideas serving commercial or propaganda-driven projects and concepts.

Unlike other scientific fields and disciplines, futurology and its methods are studied and practiced not only in the academic world, but also in different organizations – corporative and governmental. “Futures studies” is a profile of a number of consultants who are not researchers.

To a large extent the American presidents in many sectoral policies base their decisions on the National Intelligence Council’s reports, which draws up the most influential global trends reports. www.dni.gov/index.php/about/organization/national-intelligence-council-global-trends. They aim not to forecast the future, but to establish a framework for the possible variations of the future, their impact and consequences. The Chinese people’s political consultative conference <http://www.cppcc.gov.cn/zxww/zxyw/historical/index.shtml> is similar to the National Intelligence Council (NIC) organization, which prepares the next five year plans. In fact, many decisions are taken after a kind of “foresight process”. The views of different groups are taken into consideration, mostly scientists and researchers, they make consultation, then they agree and finally they fulfil an experiment in some province, to see whether this system will work in China. Thus, futurology becomes an instrument to influence the political processes and a mechanism by which decisions in that sphere are formed and taken. The political entities prepare their platforms as normative forecasts with certain values laid down in them that they project into the future.

The large corporations also make competitive strategies for the future, in order to maintain their competitiveness. **Very often the forecasts, particular-**

ly those concerning their technological development, are located in a some time horizon. Let us take for example the forecast that 9.2% of cars sold in 2024 will be autonomous vehicles - www.driverless-future.com/?page_id=384.

Technologically, unmanned cars are already invented. The point is that they have no value in themselves. A perfect synchronization of the navigation systems will be needed to enable their functioning. This is rather a promotional marketing gimmick of a famous automotive corporation, which aims to raise its sales now, based on these estimates. For that reason are chosen such dates as 2024 – ten years from today. 2025 is a rounded version and 2020 is the next most discussed horizon. But 2024 and 2025 are convenient dates, because, on the one hand, they are far enough, but on the other hand, they are too close for more fundamental events that further adds drama.

Another example of the entry of futures studies in the field of consulting services is research of the habits of the Millennial Generation. Pew Research Center in its social and demographic trends' section recently published a report "Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change") (<http://www.pewsocial-trends.org/2010/02/24/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change/>). Erica Orange and Jared Weiner are the consultants futurists who commented on Twitter characteristics of this generation (@webfuturetrends). Through the social network they both proclaim their consulting abilities as they build a theory of "millenials", which gives reason for the introduction of many neologisms. The so-called "millenials" are regarded as a social class. Their habitus, their way of life is called "milleniat", derived by the English words *millennium* and *procariot*, which in its turn is a form of *precarious* and *proletariat*. The forecasts of the two authors, that "millenials" will live in dominant uncertainty, difficult adaptation, and the time of disappearing of some key professions. They communicate globally, the world is small for them, but they are not so flexible and mobile, mainly because they travel mostly through the network. They have altered cognition and basicly visual perception – they do not percive the world as linear but as multilinearly, multiple. They are apolitical, but with a strong sense of belonging to a group and so on. Based on these characteristics and forecasts consultants are trying to draw what their way of life will be. In accordance with that a lot of marketing strategies are developed by which they are to be "attacked". Along the lines of this principle many other social phenomena are explored which with the help of consultants futurists and other specialists are "packaged" in patterns relevant to the market consumption.

Gregory Vit describes a similar trend in **Forecasting the Problems of Conformism in Teaching Strategies, Research And Practice Strategies** (Handbook of Research on Strategy and Foresight: 518). Vit indicates which the dominant strategic management model is by trying to offer alternative visions and models of thinking.

The third trend seeks answers to the question what the future will be like - if it will be global or fragmented, and finds confrontation between these two trends - globalization versus fragmented/local vision of the world.

Prediction and forecasting in the futures studies are also contextual, dependent on the place where the forecast is made. A survey of the Pew Research Center (<http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/10/16/greatest-dangers-in-the>

world/), conducted in 44 countries around the world, from different continents, shows that people have different attitudes towards the world global threats. **This respectively affects the focus in the forecasts that have to be made.** For example: **the threat of ethnic and religious hatred** is defined as the strongest: in the Middle East - for 34% of the surveyed, in Africa and America it is for 24%, in Europe it is for 15%, in Asia 13% and in Latin America – only 9%. **Inequality** is the strongest threat to Europeans – 32%, for the USA – 27%, while for the other continents we have similar values that are below 20%. **Environmental pollution** is the greatest threat to Latin America - 25% and Asia – 22%, while in the USA and Europe they are only 15 and 14%. The nuclear weapons are considered a threat in Latin America and the USA. **Accordingly, in Africa, the greatest threat is AIDS and other communicable diseases, because of Ebola pandemic.**

The results depend both on the continent and the problems of the particular country. That is why there is a direct correlation between these problems and the visions and the strategies for the future of these countries. In Britain, the religious and ethnic hatred is considered the biggest threat – 39%, and then comes inequality – 25%. In Japan it is about 49% of nuclear weapons and 20% environmental pollution because of the Fukushima case.

Sohail Inayatullah in his article “The Causal Layered Analysis Reader: Theory, historical context, and case studies” demonstrates very convincingly by his method how different types of analyses for one and the same problem give different and sometimes mutually incompatible solutions. In the example about the bad infrastructure of Bangkok the local analysis and forecast lead to one solution, whereas the global one – to another, totally different solution. It puts an obligation upon us, when we observe a certain forecast, always to take into consideration the context of the country where it comes from.

Many of the global forecasts concern only a small part of mankind. The technological advantage that is typical of some countries, mainly the Anglo-Saxon world and the USA, would create insurmountable inequalities, **but these social and ethical aspects are hardly commented in the technological forecasts.**

There is a tendency towards absolutization of the technological progress. Authors like Ray Kurzweil, Bill Joy and Martin Rees fall into the group of the so-called technological determinists.

Statements of the technological absolutism:

➤ Soon there will be an artificial intellect and it will be the last discovery of humanity as we know it today. In other words, “an enhanced human” (cyborgs) already exist which is “an improved and enhanced human being”. It will happen after 20-30 years, according to Moore’s Law (**the founder of Intel**) which **generally states that computers double their capacity every year.**

➤ There will be an artificial intelligence that will reach the human levels in the period 2029-2045.

➤ Progress in biotechnologies and deciphering of the genome. Diabetes, Alzheimer’s disease, Parkinson’s disease will all be diseases under control. This holds true for the other genes as well – the genes for the eye color, or what could

cause death etc. It will turn medicine into a preventive science and will lead to implementation of the so-called “**design babies**”.

➤ **First steps towards immortality and “death” of the death.**

According to the representatives of this direction in futurology everything is a technology: nanotechnology, biotechnology, infotechnologies and cognotechnologies the building units of which are atoms, cells, bits and neurons.

➤ **The new professions and the extinction of the old ones.** In the virtual milieu system “Dr. Watson” – the Internet doctor, has already existed. There are similar systems suitable for architects, lawyers, that will lead to the death of the old professions and the birth of the new ones.

➤ The brain is the most complex structure and after 10-15 years this complexity will be unravelled. The beginning of telepathy – few years later we will not talk in the usual way but the communication will be “brain to brain.”

➤ **The robots will have feelings. In South-Korean legislation the human rights for robots are fixed.**

What is typical of the technological determinism is that the futures studies are related to the paradigm of the neoliberalism. That is to say they are a new territory for the capital. It is emphasised that many of the scientific discoveries have happened thanks to the entrepreneurial spirit in the small and medium-size private companies, which are much more competitive than the big industrial groups funded by the state. An example is given with decoding of the human genome. Initially the US government has invested significant amounts of money and not yielded success, while a small company with a team of 15 people managed to do it and now it is commonly used. **In other words, the thesis is that thanks to the entrepreneurial spirit more and more scientific discoveries are made, and they become more and more accessible because they are popular and they aim production. This way much more is done for the benefit of humanity, and not for the increase of inequality.** Futures studies and the neoliberal theories mutually support each other.

A New era of utopia and dystopia

Utopias flourish again. Today it is very difficult to distinguish between utopias and dystopias. It is hard to determine if Dave Eggers’ novel **The Circle** is a utopia or a dystopia. The author presents the story of a new transparent world in which the technological company “The Circle” has totally changed the way in which humanity lives. “The Circle” gets control over everything, giving the impression that the new ideals dominate. In the new world everything is so open that it is scary, because there is nothing spontaneous, human or natural left. The secret is a lie, so there is no real friendship. The perspectives for the new world is people to live in total openness, without that sense of antagonism familiar to us. The question is if the humanity is ready to live without comparing by opposing of basic categories.

It is difficult to determine if Dan Abelow’s book “Expandiverse” (“Expanding the diversity”) is a utopia or dystopia (<http://expandiverse.com/>). It presents expanding of the diversity in which all people are free and equal, but they live only in a digital universe where they are allowed to have multiple identities, and there are no institutions and responsibilities. However, the author describes

only the positive scenarios. He defends the thesis that everyone can choose to be whatever s/he wants, but he refuses to play out the hypothetical scenarios – what would happen if someone chooses criminal and negative image. There is no answer to the question who bears the moral responsibility in that case.

Dystopians from the science fiction

Their value is that they are the opposite of the self-fulfilling predictions and they are self-protective. They sound so ominous that humanity or particular governments and social groups take measures against them in advance. Dystopias act in this mechanism. They very often become scenarios for Hollywood blockbusters. „The Day After Tomorrow“ is about a scary climate change. The emblematic *1984* by Orwell (1) is about the super control, watching and programming of the behavior.

Zoltan Istvan (www.transhumanistwager.com/) believes that utopias do not provoke such dramatic feelings as dystopias do. If the issues for the society collapse and for the values are not raised hypothetically – there is no antagonism to point us the problems.

The movie “The Matrix” is a simulation theory, which aims to protect the human race from the machines – in order to keep the best of humanity and maintain balance. The movie **Gattaca** is based on the same principle concerning the genetic engineering. It raises our awareness and plays a preventive role, while **Elizeum** is dedicated to the social inequality.

The relationship between science fiction and futurology today is stronger and there is a transfer of knowledge between them. Unlike a few years ago, when futurology would strongly distinguish itself from science fiction in order to keep its claims to be scientific, today it is not so. The idea of robots, mobile phones, even tablets come from it. Science fiction is “the occurring truth” so the futurologists are becoming increasingly interested in it as a methodology for the future. Science fiction gives us a way to feel it, not to think about and to make strategies about the real hero, the plot, the most interesting scenarios for the future. The scientific texts acquire scientific inspection and actuality. They somehow mix the genres of the scientific approach of futurology and the science fiction. Eric Drexler in his book **Engines of creation** is among them.

Through the new trends in the futures studies/ futurology we can try to guess what the future of “the futures studies” would be. The dominant paradigm of late 20th c. and the beginning of the 21st century are the technological breakthroughs. That is why they have such a strong influence over futurology. We can argue that it is highly reflexive to the emerging trends. So, by tracking the main tendencies in it, we see the main directions of the scientific development as a whole. If futurology fails to construct a clear methodological and conceptual model, then it will seek other forms to prolong its existence, which will be beyond the scientific ones. This will place it in dependent position regarding outside trends and will jeopardize its scientific objectivity. Therefore it will be better if it turns to itself in order to define its criteria, which will transform it into science, subject, discipline or a field instead of following the commercial and marketing principles.

REFERENCES

- Оруел, Джордж. 2004.** *1984. Големият брат те наблюдава.* София: Панорама груп.
- Costanzo, Laura Anna, Robert Bradley Mackay. 2009.** *Handbook of research on strategy and foresight.* Massachusetts: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc.
- Drexler, K. Eric. 1987.** *Engines of creation. The coming era of nanotechnology.* New York: Anchor press.
- Eggers, David. 2013.** *The Circle.* New York: Vintage books – a division of Random House.
- Elkins, Charles. 1979.** Science Fiction versus Futurology: Dramatic versus Rational Models. – *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1: 20-31.
- Inayatullah, Sohail. 2004.** *The Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) Reader. Theory and Case Studies of an Integrative and Transformative Methodology.* Taipei: Tamkang University Press.
- Marien, Michael. 2002.** Futures studies in the 21st Century: a reality-based view. – *Futures*, 3: 261-281.
- Popper, Rafael. 2008.** How are foresight methods selected? – *Foresight.* Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Vol. 10, No 6: 62-89.
- Riedy, Chris. 2009.** The influence of futures work on public policy and sustainability. – *Foresight:* Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Vol. 11, No 5: 40-56.
- Vit, Gregory B. 2009.** Foreseeing the problem of conformity in strategy teaching, research and practice. – In: Costanzo, Laura Anna, Robert Bradley Mackay (Eds). *Handbook of research on strategy and foresight.* Massachusetts: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc.

Internet sources:

Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds. (Available from: <http://www.dni.gov/index.php/about/organization/national-intelligence-council-global-trends> [Accessed: 19th November 2014]).

Report on the work of the standing committee of the national committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). (Available from: <http://www.cppcc.gov.cn/zxww/zxyw/historical/index.shtml> [Accessed: 11th October 2014]).

Forecasts. (Available from http://www.driverless-future.com/?page_id=384. [Accessed: 1st November 2014]).

Pew research center. Greatest danger in the world. (Available from: <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/10/16/greatest-dangers-in-the-world/>. [Accessed: 4th November 2014]).

Pew research center. *Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change.* (Available from: <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/02/24/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change/> [Accessed: 29th October 2014]).

Dan Abelow. *Welcome to expandiverse technology.* (Available from: <http://expandiverse.com/> [Accessed 15th July 2014]).

Wenier Edrich Brown. Twitter. (Available from: @webfuturetrends [Accessed: 10th September 2014]).

Correspondence address:

Mariana Todorova – Assist. Prof., PhD

Phone: (+ 359) 886 698929

E-mail: mariana_g_todorova@yahoo.com