

“Futures-Creation”

By Hasan Özbekhan ♦

On the question of *focus* we must once again be satisfied with our own inventions. There is no literature known to me, which deals with the subject. Except in the special field of corporate planning, professional preference remains so diffuse as to be impossible to formulate. Opinions I noted in the past used to lean either toward diagnostic approaches, or toward highly analytical model-building of behavior typologies. A newer line of thinking has come up with a strong rationale supporting the reduction of large masses of empirical data into “social indicators” with, hopefully, some predictive attributes. This approach, obviously inspired by the success of economic indicators developed during and after the 1930’s is of great interest. However, the difficulties that inhere to it are awesome and very little progress has been reported to date. A still more recent tendency favors the analysis of the value implications of planning. It must by now, be evident that I am in strong sympathy with this last trend. Yet, I also feel, and deeply, that such a focus must not be adopted to the exclusion of the aforementioned views. Both the diagnostic and the social accounting approach have their place in any seriously conceived general theory of planning that is focused on the subject’s value implications. Somehow the problem must be treated in such a way that all significant approaches can be fitted together and elaborated in conjunction with each other.

There is one point regarding focus, however, on which I find myself in disagreement with a number of professional planners. This concerns a current

□ Pertinent excerpts on “Futures Creation” from Part 3, H. Ozbekhan, “Toward A General Theory of Planning,” in PERSPECTIVES OF PLANNING 47-155 (OEDC Report, Jantsch ed. 1968); explained in A.N. Christakis, A New Policy Science Paradigm, FUTURES, Dec 1973; applied in Ozbekhan, The Future of Paris, in ROYAL SOCIETY OF LONDON, PHILOSOPHICAL TRANSACTIONS SERIES A, at 287, 523 (1977)

and widespread trend to look upon planning in which I should call the “predictive mode.” The attitude underlying this manner of thinking comes from the old tradition, which argues that planning is focused upon the future and, therefore, must be an exercise in prediction. Adherence to this extraordinary notion also assumes – must assume – that social reality is ultimately composed of predictable events. Hence a plan’s success or failure is generally measured by the question, “Did it come true?” (Obviously another way of asking: “Did you guess right?”)

This view of planning is, in my opinion, based on so deep a misconception of the nature of the future and of social dynamics that we must dwell on the problem long enough to make my own objections clear.

The “future” as an idea or operational concept has not received in recent times all the attention it deserves, nor is it always understood by everyone to mean the same thing. Cognition, experience, thought, judgment, and decision necessarily occur in the present regardless of whether their object is the present, the past, or the future. This gives the present an overwhelming influence over both what *has been* and what *might be*. Such influence, however, is somewhat mitigated in the case of the past since what has been is, by its very nature, a highly and uniquely structured configuration of events that have actually happened. In its effort to understand, recreate or judge that past the mind is always constrained by whatever is known of that configuration, though the present provides its peculiar flavor, quality, emphases and techniques to the perception.

The future is profoundly different. Here the mind does not encounter given happenings to limit and guide it. It must, so to speak, fill the whole vast and empty canvas with imaginings, with wishes and goals and novel alternative configurations that somehow possess reality and represent shared, or at least shareable values, as in the case of the past, this intrusion should be made in full

recognition that the outlooks, general views, strivings and techniques that it represents are its own.

Such an effort of conception, of imaginative *futures-creation*, is admittedly very difficult. It requires intellectual and emotional qualities of pure creativity and original synthesis. It calls for the ability to determine goals and norms, to embody different sets of envisioned situations into evolving constructs, to abstract different alternatives from them, and to choose among such alternatives. It depends on one's capacity to distinguish between what is constant and what variable, and to deal with large numbers of relevant interconnected but causally unrelated variables. Finally, if it is to satisfy the above requirements, the resulting construct will necessarily be different from the present state of the system and this difference must symbolize some good, or virtue, that the present lacks.

This is what I should call a *normative* approach to the future, it is an approach that has been neglected until now both because of its difficulty and because it requires habits of kind that greatly differ from those favored in our culture. The most telling of these differences probably resides in the particular notion of the "real" which our mainly technological worldview imposes on us. This notion forces us to limit our conception of the real to things and events whose present operational dimensions can be measured by means of existing rules and whose future modalities can be projected with reference to those same rules. All other approaches are refuted as operationally unproved or technically infeasible—that is, as subjective speculations, dreams and unrealities. Our minds are trained to view the future in terms of present certainties and to ignore, or disvalue as irrelevant, anything that goes beyond these certainties.

This way of limiting meaningfulness has grave consequences. For one thing, it encourages us to narrow our field of vision to the confused but concrete structure of outlooks, institutions and relationships that are now in place. Further, it limits us to that particular conception of the future which is primarily informed by

what we believe is feasible according to the current state of our technology. And within these limits there lies what we call *prediction*. Hence, the resultant image of such a future – of the future we say we predict – is no more than an extension of the present. The continuous extension of the present, that is, its perpetuation, is at the root of two important pathologies of our vision, one that amounts to a distortion, the other to preclusion.

The distortion is intellectual and it governs many of our attitudes. Conceptions of the future on linear derivations from the present tend to create the impression that there is something logically and factually inevitable in both the sequence and the final configuration of predicted events. In other words, such conceptions unavoidably suggest that the model represents some preordained reality, that has now been *discovered*, and consequently, nothing different can occur – much less, be made to occur. Belief in a preexistent natural order which can and must be discovered has great authority, for it has long been one of the supporting foundations of our philosophy of science. But when it is inspired by a model of the future instead of by the nature (the object for which our science was built) there results from it an attitude which Bertrand de Jouvenel has termed “modern fatalism”¹. Confronted with what appears inevitable, people tend to abdicate their role as creators of new and different events and abide by the dimensions and measurements which current technology has imposed upon their vision. Further, once imprisoned within such a restrictive outlook, they tend automatically to act so as to make the prediction come true. The present is thus perpetuated by techniques which become strengthened and more elaborate at each step of the way – as does the feeling of impotence and irrelevance experienced by those who manipulate them. Technique-derived imperatives multiply, and increasingly restrict the areas of free choice.

Connected with this fatalism, fed by it and supporting it, there is the other consequence which I called a preclusion. What I have in mind is the preclusion

¹ Futuribles Symposium at Yale University, 1965.

from consideration of any possibility, which does not fall within whatever happens to be accepted as *feasible* – that is, technologically feasible.

“Feasibility”, as a criterion for direction and action in an advanced technological society, opens the door to some astonishing perspectives both by what it reveals as possible and by what it precludes from sustained discussion and serious consideration. If our technological civilization has a point, it is that almost everything is, or can become, feasible if technical ingenuity is applied in sufficient measure. Hence, most of our problems can be viewed not only as having technical origins, but also technical solutions. The range of these solutions, namely, the range of feasibility itself, is already vast. And there does not seem to be any reason why we should not make it grow further, at will.

For instance, from the vantage point of the present, feasibility promises climate control to suit regional needs, it seems possible not only to expand agricultural productivity in land areas but to use the ocean to produce both supplementary and new food resources, human presence on the moon and in space is already a foregone outcome, control of human behavior through psychedelic drugs and other means of intervention into the brain is more than an experimental promise; so is the elimination of cancer, viral and vasomuscular disease. The automation of production is a familiar fact and its extension to distribution and exchange opens extremely interesting vistas; generalized use of computers in which I should like to call “household cybernation” is no more than a further application of automation to fields that come increasingly close to our private lives.

All this is but a sampler. These and numerous other omitted possibilities are striking not so much because they display radically new features, but because they represent, in the form of massive congeries, the constituents of today’s situation. It is their inflation by future magnitudes that amazes us. Almost all we seem able to envision or imagine is more of the same, only larger. It is as if we were suddenly seized by the impulse to carry to its ultimate flowering and

conclusion every circumstance, every event, and every notion which present day technology has infused with some degree of feasibility.

Such are the outcomes that populate the logical future,² the future that results from prediction, the future, which is the extended present. Are such outcomes good or bad? Do they represent any kind of world we would like to see happen? Is such a world what are (sic) consciously striving for?

We have no language yet, no legitimate planning conception or theory, with which to answer questions of this kind. Nor did we think, until the great disquiet of our immediate times engulf us, that it was any business of planning or of planners to raise such questions, let alone to search for answers. Thus we have reached our current state of vast confusion and difficulty innocent of everything but the image of the logical future engraved in our minds; having given up, among many other freedoms, the freedom to use values as an instrument of will; our eyes firmly fixed on the narrow road traced by what we know – technical feasibility – and having erased from our vision all other possible ends. In our advance along this road we have learned one thing: to respond to any challenge posed by technology with the cry “Yes, I can,” and to forge ahead. This bravado, it seems to me, merely serves to confuse the issue and cover up our abdication. For by now, surely the question to ask is no longer “Can I? It is “Ought I?” And this takes us back to what I have called the normative approach, which yields, not the ideal future or any utopia, but the willed future.

By willed future I mean that conception of the future which transcends mere feasibility and which results from judgments and choices formed with reference, first, to the idea of “desirable,” then to that of “betterment,” both of which were mentioned earlier.³ Desirability, like feasibility, can be taken as an attribute that qualifies both ends and means. However, if desirable outcomes are viewed as capable of going beyond individual preference and, thus, of becoming

² I am indebted for expression “logical future” – and “willed future” which appear later – to Dr. Rene Dubos, who mentioned them to me in the course of private correspondence. The use I make of these terms, however, might differ from what Dr. Dubos had in mind.

³ See Part I, Section 4, above (not included in this excerpt).

conceptualizations leading to social betterment, then they should arise from larger, more varied sets of ends than the set that is determined by feasibility alone. The range of choice must be bigger, more heterogeneous, less bound by the present, or by the authority of any particular orthodoxy. The choice of ends must be given primacy over the logical evolution of means. It follows, then, that such futures might (and perhaps, must) be imagined as differing radically from present reality, that they must represent situations which are not mere temporal extensions of the here and now; they must be free of the weight of what we are able to simply predict. To will a particular future state of any system is an act of choice involving valuations, judgments and decisions that pertain to the attainment of man-determined ends and to the selection of the right means (not forgetting the development of new means, if necessary) to gain such ends. In the act of willing, thus conceived, the emphasis is, however, on the identification of the ends involved rather than on the techniques that help us to reach them; hence, it should be possible to define these ends in reference to many considerations that differ from, or transcend, the boundaries of our technological world view.

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