

1. IMAGES OF THE FUTURE

➤ LECTURE NOTES

Thinking about the future

- The concept of the future as essential to the human condition
- Ways in which we think about the future in everyday life

Four common scenarios

- Business as usual; Technological fix
- Edge of disaster; Sustainable society

Probable/preferable futures

- Utopian/dystopian futures: the most optimistic/pessimistic
- Probable/preferable futures: the most likely/visionary

➤ KEY READING

- Hicks, D. (2009) Images of the future ([Downloads](#))
- Turney, J. (2010) *The Rough Guide to the Future*, Rough Guides

➤ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why are the images of the future held in society so important?
- What do your probable and preferable futures for society look like?

➤ LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Understanding the significance of images of the future
- Able to think more critically about alternative futures

LECTURE NOTES

1. THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

The idea of the future

I would like you to try just for a moment to imagine that the future does not exist. Can you close your eyes and spend a moment imagining that only the past and the present exist ... How easy is it to do that? The answer is 'not very' or 'impossible', because we cannot be human without thinking in some way about time that has not yet occurred, time that has yet to come, whether that's tomorrow or next year. John McHale, writing on the notion of the future in the *Handbook of Futures Research* (Fowles, 1978:5), pointed out that:

The idea of the future is one of the central symbols through which human beings have ordered their present and have given meanings to the past. Whilst futures research in the academic sense is a recent pursuit, conjecture, speculation, and exploration of future events have always been prime features of the human condition.

It is important to note, however, that our contemporary way of looking at the future is relatively new in human experience. It dates from the Scientific Revolution (17/18th century) and the Enlightenment (18th century), both of which placed great value on reason and rationality, as typified by the rise of science. Rather than the future being preordained by God or the gods (as had been believed for much of human history) and being something over which we had limited control, the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions reshaped our notion of history as something which could lead to progress, with the future being seen as essentially controllable. For the Victorians in the mid/late 19th century the idea of a materially better future for all seemed a real possibility. However, at the same time, industrialisation and urbanisation were beginning to break down traditional communities.

Research on people's images

Representing the future through use of the creative imagination is a natural and necessary human activity. Future events and situations are thus anticipated through the imagination. Bell and Mau in *The Sociology of the Future* (1971) propose the following definition of such images. 'An image of the future is an expectation about the state of things to come at some future time. We may think most usefully of such expectations as a range of differentially probable possibilities rather than as a single point on a continuum.' One should add here, of course, that such images also include 'preferable possibilities'.

I wonder what the images of the future were that you jotted down in the first session and where you feel they came from? One of the most comprehensive studies of how people view the future was a ten-nation study carried out in the early 1970s called *Images of the World in the Year 2000* (Ornauer et al. 1976). This was a cross-cultural investigation into how people thought the world might be at the start of the 21st century, and thus an in-depth study into how people then conceptualised the future.

In general it was found that the tendency to think, or express thoughts about the future, was not very well developed amongst respondents. Images of the future often focused on likely developments in science and technology or concern about the problems of war and peace, rather than wider societal issues.

Pessimistic visions of the future were found to be better developed than optimistic ones. Particularly in industrialised countries there was an association between pessimism, scientific scepticism and thinking about the future primarily in terms of technological change. In the conclusion of this major study Galtung (Ornauer et al. 1976: 56-57) noted:

For the nations in our sample the future seems somehow to be synonymous with a technological future. The future is seen in technical terms, not in terms of culture, human enrichment, social equality, social justice, or in terms of international affairs...*People may also think in terms of social future but regard it as unchangeable. But it seems more probable that they have only been trained to think technologically and have no other type of thoughts as a response to the stimulus 'future'; or at least have not been trained to express any other thoughts.* And this will then become self-reinforcing since no one will be stimulated by others to think about social futures (my italics).

One of the crucial questions for this unit is whether this finding is still true today or whether, in the early 21st century, we have more diverse and creative images of the future? Nearly thirty years later a special issue of the journal *Futures* (Galtung and Wiberg, 2003) looked back to see whether and how the original study had stood the test of time.

Futurists thus have a long-standing interest in images of the future (Bell, 2004, 2006; Rubin, 2002) and sessions 6 and 7 will look in particular at young people's views of the future and how these may influence their views of life.

Everyday thinking

The future is an integral part of everyday life and we spend a large part of our time thinking about it. Identifying goals for the future, for example, enhances our ability to work well in the present, adds to our motivation and helps give us direction. Whilst on

the one hand the future is intangible, it is also of crucial importance, human existence cannot be conceived without it (Rubin, 2002).

Yet because there are no facts about the future we often neglect it or leave it to others, e.g. management, economists, politicians, transnational corporations (TNCs), and it's their future that we finish up with. We often know what we don't want in the future, but may be less clear about what we do want.

We are also often more used to thinking about our personal/professional futures than societal or global futures. But the times require that we think much more explicitly about the future and about how local and global futures are interrelated. In particular we need to ask: Where are we going and where do we want to get to, locally, nationally and globally? Actually there is no such thing as *the* future (singular), for at any given moment in time any number of futures (plural) are possible. The term 'alternative futures' or 'futures' is thus used as a shorthand reminder of this.

For an exploration of alternative futures to be of use it needs to be remembered that different people and groups have quite different views of the future, e.g. a middle class child in Perth, a homeless woman in London, an unemployed worker in Dresden or a logger in Brazil. And clearly some groups in society have much more power than others to define the future, generally those who are rich in the global system or who wield power through, say, TNCs, international banking, governments, the military, the media. In some sense such groups also colonise the future, particularly big business and free-market capitalism with its constant creation of new 'needs' for tomorrow.

2. FOUR COMMON SCENARIOS

Popular views of the future in the western world tend to fall into four broad categories. Each has many variations appearing in different forms and versions of these four often appear in the work of futurists (Dator, 2002).

- ***Business as usual*** – This view is held by those who argue that the future will be very much like today. There will be the usual difficulties, but nothing that can't effectively be dealt with. The main problems we have to face will be similar to today and solvable in similar ways, i.e. the world will go on much as before. This view is often held by those who have a vested interest in the status quo or who fear change.
- ***Technological fix*** - This view is held by those who believe the answer to most problems lies in accelerated growth of science and technology. Thus genetic engineering, the internet and nuclear power will offer dramatic rewards for all, especially business. This is one of the most common and popular views of the future, especially amongst boys, often reflected in science fiction writing and popular movies.

- ***Edge of disaster*** – This view is held by those who believe that we are on the verge of one or more serious catastrophes, the signs of which are already evident, from global warming and international terrorism, to famine and poverty. For many people, of course, some form of this scenario has already arrived. This view is often held by thoughtful people but also by those who see the future as a place to be feared.
- ***Sustainable society*** – This view is held by those who believe the future must involve a fundamental change of direction, from a fragmented mechanistic view of the world to a more holistic and ecological one. It requires a major shift away from material consumption as an end in itself towards a more sustainable society based on environmental concern, economic welfare, and peace and justice for all.

3. PROBABLE/PREFERABLE FUTURES

There are various ways of classifying futures and several of these are outlined below. Thus *possible futures* are all those that could conceivably exist. In part this is the territory of science fiction writers, such as Iain Banks and William Gibson for example. Most possible futures lie somewhere between the most optimistic (utopian) and the most pessimistic (dystopian).

Utopia/dystopia

Thomas More coined the term in 1516 as a pun in Greek: 'eutopia', the good place, was also 'utopia', no place. Utopias are thus blueprints for a better society, or even a perfect society. Many utopians have presented their ideas in literary form, e.g. William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1890) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1979). Such utopian novels are often double-edged, on the one hand a critique of existing conditions in society and a vision of what a better world might look like. It was Oscar Wilde who commented that 'A map of the world without utopia on it is not worth even glancing at' and the utopian tradition has been a constant and influential current in western society since the time of Thomas More.

Other utopians are not satisfied with just a literary exploration of their dreams but in setting up lived communities. UK examples would include the Diggers in the 17th century, the Shakers in the 18th century, Robert Owen's New Harmony in the 19th century, the communes of the 1970s, and more sustainable communities in the 90s.

Dystopias, on the other hand, are 'bad places', nightmare societies as portrayed in George Orwell's *1984* (1949), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and films such as Mad Max, Judge Dredd and Blade Runner. Dystopias too can be both literary and lived. They draw on pessimistic, as against optimistic, notions and experiences of human nature. There is plenty of historical evidence for this and lived dystopias would include the death camps of the Third Reich and the gulags of Stalin's Soviet Union.

Most of human life obviously lies somewhere between these two extremes but it is nevertheless important to hold in mind the questions: 'What is the most pessimistic future/optimistic future that one can imagine?'

Probable/preferable futures

Whilst utopia and dystopia mark the outer parameters of alternative futures it is the notion of probable and preferable futures which is most commonly used by futurists and educators.

- *Probable futures* are all those futures that seem most *likely* to come about, e.g. in our own lives or through forecasting. It seems that people are often pessimistic about the probable future, especially at a global level, although less so at a personal or local level.
- *Preferable futures* are all those futures that we *most want* to come about because of our most deeply held values and beliefs. They are about the visions that we need to identify of a better world in order to create action for positive change in the present. What would be the key elements of your preferable future locally and globally?

This session has explored the key role of images of the future and the various roles that these can play in helping conceptualising time yet to come.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Whether you are reading this for your own interest, sharing this material with others or using it as an aid to your teaching this session raises questions about the significance of futures images in society. After reading 'Discussion skills in groups' jot down:

1. Why are the images of the future held in society so important?
2. What do your probable and preferable futures for society look like?

After discussing each question (agree in advance how long to spend on each) list on a flipchart the main responses arising in the group. What similarities are there, what differences? What might be the possible origins of these? What further reading might be useful?