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Reflections

The future's history: Let's re-frame it

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All is not well. Investment, trade and production have collapsed. Global banking is in intensive care. Down the line, people hurt. Jobs are dissolving, home-loans are being recalled, retirement savings wilt. In emerging nations, the poor are even more deprived. All this because high-rollers have had a big party, feasting off bloated investments, often gambled with other people's money. But those not invited to the party must pay to clean up. The betting ring is dictating the economy of the daily bazaar.

In an issue headlined "The folly of growth", *New Scientist* [1] argued that our economy is killing the planet. "Economists see no limits to growth – ever." The magazine asked people, such as Herman Daly, founder of ecological economics, what could be done. It was concluded that we must reshape the economy to let us live within our means, no longer assuming infinite growth. *New Scientist* suggests readers imagine Daly's idea of a sustainable economy where society refuses to use the world's resources faster than they can be replaced and where environmental costs are part of the equation. Expect tough decisions on wealth, tax, jobs and birth rates.

New Scientist is not alone in linking the crisis in economy with the crisis in ecology. Visionary thinkers, a half-century ago, warned of threats to nature's order from a market system furiously swallowing finite resources such as water and oil. One-third of a century ago, the Club of Rome saw fit to publish the *Limits to Growth* which has proved prescient in the main, despite some clunky analysis. Climate change and, perhaps more recently, economic meltdown, have long been issues for futurists, while government and business have remained in denial, or apathy. Now, these earlier visions of the future are becoming history.

Why did business and government take so little heed, until recently? Did futurists lack the influence? Was there a failure in human imagination and vision, with governments reacting and businesses mired in self-interest? Did the media, including the Internet, largely driven by commercial advertising, not ask the questions? All the while, surely, public ethics remained elastic.

So, what is left for today's futurists to do? Do we re-imagine the future; and if so, how do we put new ideas into practice?

1. Opportunity

It fast became a cliché to see the financial crisis as an opportunity to take a new pathway to the future, especially when the crisis coincided with the advent of Barack Obama in the US. Here were new opportunities, for example, to reshape foreign relations, and to move away from an economics of growth where big capital eats the planet while their customers pay. And Obama has set the example to redress inequities domestically and to resurrect respect for the sciences as generators of knowledge. Not long after inauguration, Obama promised that, beyond the grim present, lies a brighter future: plug-in hybrid-energy cars, wind- and solar-powered cities, digital health records, vanquished disease, and the world's highest college-graduation rates. He thinks it is time to take charge of our future.

In my own country, Australian prime minister, Kevin Rudd, called on Obama, and those who support him, himself included presumably, to properly balance private incentive with public responsibility. As Rudd sees it, this is not the first time that social democrats have been challenged to save capitalism from itself: to recognise the great strengths of open, competitive markets while rejecting the extreme capitalism and unrestrained greed that have perverted so much of the global system in recent times. It is not sufficient to repudiate the neo-liberal extremism that has landed us in this mess, he said, but to advance the case that the social-democratic state offers the best guarantee of preserving productive capacity of

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properly regulated competitive markets. Government must be the regulator, and must fund or provide public goods while offsetting inevitable market inequalities with a commitment to fairness for all [2].

2. The way forward

But, Kevin Rudd, is it enough to fix the same old rusty machinery that has caused the crises? Or should we design an alternative form of economic exchange? It is beyond irony to see governments urging higher consumption, shovelling out tax-payers' funds and printing money, to cure a sickness caused by wanton consumption. As explained by Walden Bello, a Filipino economist, capitalism has a short-term view. Paradoxically, it relies on over-production to create bubbles in consumption in order to profit. Yet this outruns people's capacity to consume, owing to social inequalities that limit their purchasing power, thus eroding profitability [3].

And can Obama set the US on a vital, new course, or will he be constrained eventually by the individualistic features of American culture that could explain the greed and hype that helped blow out the mortgage and financial markets, helped along by a long-held hubris? Before the US election, Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies posed the question: *Will America change?* [4]. They concluded there could be no change while the US, in an increasingly interdependent world, undermined global institutions to suit its interests and ideology. Americans had to question whether the world needed more of their theory that, what was good for them, was good for the rest of the world. Sardar and Davies asked: "Are Americans ready to consider the idea that to restore the promise of America they may need to reconcile the very idea of America."

Certainly, early in office, Obama showed he was willing to change America's style of diplomacy from bullying to engagement, and to redress certain domestic inequalities. But are the problems too deeply embedded in the American psyche for any political leader, no matter how thoughtful, to solve? Is the capitalist fortress, though battered, impenetrable?

3. Underlying problem

While climate change is perhaps humanity's most lethal challenge, and has been put in a lower drawer while politicians wrestle with the money crisis, both are still only symptoms of a much deeper problem: how – even whether – we aptly use our intelligence to learn from the knowledge of ecology and economics. Both crises show failures in meaning – and in governance too. More critically, it is the failure in thinking, a social technology, that has ultimately led to our predicament. Both the political imagination and the ethical resolve may be lacking in the dominant thought system [5].

To re-imagine alternative futures, we should explore innovative ideas and futures ethics from a different epistemological framework – or frameworks. A shift from one side to the other of the same old sand box makes no real change to the system, and only avoids the solution. Is it not time to find a new frame for the sand box – a new mental frame of reference?

An insight into the way mental framing is bound in culture was something I took home from a recent conference on indigenous culture and spirituality. For Aboriginal Australians it seems that the divine spirit was originally revealed through their land and their environment. An Asian scholar [6] of indigenous spirituality had found that a similar focus on land is widespread among indigenous peoples. Meanwhile, it seems that in non-indigenous cultures – ethnically mixed societies no longer comprising mostly first-nation peoples with a continuing habitation in their native land – spirituality seems to have been mediated by individuals, at least back to the prophet, Zoroaster. Does this explain the comparative self-centredness of non-indigenous cultures, especially from the West, including the individualistic ethos, the national ego, of the American culture and its spread with globalisation? The indigenous focus for culture may be the landscape, whereas for Westerners it seems to be the human *self*.

4. Strategies for change

So, how to challenge the cultural foundations of self-absorption, imposed with financial orthodoxy from Washington, and exploited by the former Wall Street? Will futurists be able to develop and have enacted the strategies for the social and epistemological change needed to save humanity, if not the planet? Have they the intellectual capital, the command of multi-disciplinary teams and the clout to re-frame and inspire the political will? Probably no single group, certainly not our political leadership, enjoys these assets.

Theories of social change and complex systems suggest that change is more likely to happen in times of turbulence, or crisis. And people in the wider community are caught in it. Is this the time for change to come from below?

Whatever, the crises do present an ideal time for rethinking, re-imagining and reforming the social constructs of economy and governance, and their subordinate relationships with the web of life that we call the ecology. We may not have the knowledge to govern evolution, but this will test the human will to survive.

5. New constructs

Rethinking economics and governance is possible. As social constructs they can be deconstructed, and reconstructed, and our social relationships re-imagined. Economics could be extended beyond both Hayek and Keynes to take account of non-monetary matters, externalities such as the assets of nature, the value of art and child care, the yearning to learn. Climate

change could be subjected to intelligent critique if taken out of the lower drawer of “pragmatic” politics which values short-term commercial exchange above community – even above future generations, it seems.

Any intelligent life in outer space, able to study citizens of Planet Earth, would surely be mystified that we see progress in the rubric of seemingly infinite growth when they can clearly see both the limits and the mess. In our new Earthly economics, quality, including measures of comfort and security, for example, could be valued at least alongside quantity – economic consumption. We could examine equity through the distribution of wealth by looking beyond the per-capita GDP, an average of accumulation, to the standard deviation. Ecological and community health could be included in models that indicate human progress. Green replaces greed as good.

6. Futures of governance

But, first, the systems of governance may need reconstruction. The past century saw exceptional advances in the human condition, including the recognition of women’s rights and change through innovative technology, but it saw unprecedented inhumanity and bloodshed, and a widening of the gaps in wealth and knowledge. Can we govern ourselves more humanely this century?

More recently, we may have to look into contemporary geopolitics to further explain both the crash of toxic debt and the market play of financial instruments, as well as the associated depletion of nature’s resources and the degradation of the ecology. How long can the imbalance between the single superpower, the US, and the ascendant China, persist: the industrial surge in China, feeding the consumer splurge in the US? While this may be the most crucial relationship right now, there are other imbalances falling out of the crises, including the fragmenting of Eastern and Western Europe and the decline in what has been the world’s second biggest economy, Japan.

At the local scale, too, governance is lacking. Even in established democracies there is a well-intentioned reliance on opposition, automatically adversarial, based in thinking that goes way back to ancient Greek logic of linear cause-and-effect and either-or choice. Political interests get locked into a futile switch – a zero-sum game – between individual liberty and social cohesion, rather than working from a reciprocal integration of both.

And parliaments, meant to represent the people’s will, too often bypass democracy between elections. Public engagement in politics is not vigorously enough demanded; and apathy in the electorate is too easily shrugged off. Governance is enacted by representatives rather than through direct, deliberative democracy which demands both discussion and decision from a fully informed and inclusive society. People with the rights to decide public issues need open access to specialist competence. Vocally passive people need to be consulted, as do minorities. Meanwhile in the West, most institutions, including parliaments, still operate as men’s clubs that now admit women. Paul Ginsborg asks: Would they perform differently if designed by women in the first place? [7].

7. Conclusion

These suggestions are merely examples of change. In what way the world emerges from turbulence is hard to determine. Theories of complex systems suggest a range of alternative possible futures: systems can be self-replicating, adaptive, revolutionary or evolutionary. Change can be self-organising, adopting new pathways as conditions change, or simply a random switch to a new regime. Given this, it is difficult to see how any group of experts, futurists included, have the needed intellectual equipment and the influence alone. In a democracy, the citizens have the right to decide change and, hopefully, they have the responsibility to do this wisely. They will need ready access to a range of reliable knowledge.

Perhaps change is required even deeper in our social hierarchy, in the schools. This would take time to filter through, but it would benefit future generations if they survive. I wonder what kind of politics would emerge with a keener emphasis on critical thinking – asking questions – and public ethics, including a responsibility for unborn generations.

Futures studies has its biggest challenge yet. Perhaps the key emerging issue is how to avoid extensive human conflict, even war. The pressures are building. Surely, we will need to invent new non-violent resolution as big capital fiercely resists any dismantling of its system, emerging nation-states feel victimised, and even the educated middle classes feel the pinch.

What will next century’s historians make of our futurists?

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