

Reinventing the Wheel: Common Sense and Responsibility in Futures Studies

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Very few times have I liked so much an article I have disagreed with so deeply. Molitor's paper poses a puzzling combination of much needed common sense with, what I believe to be, misleading inaccuracies.

The part that I have really enjoyed is that in which we can benefit from Molitor extensive experience regarding what works and what doesn't. I would even say that all those lines in which he stresses the fact that there is very little novelty under the sun should be a required reading for futurists (or wannabe ones), because our discipline is plagued with the cyclical reinvention of the wheel. I also appreciated the criticism about what has been the real impact of the discipline, a reality check that we should keep in mind. Yet I'm not so sure about the implicit bitterness in it (although I'm eager to accept that this may not be Molitor's intention and it is just my reading of it).

Assumptions around Futures Studies

But, and just for the sake of argument, let us assume that there may be some disappointment. If that is the case, I would argue that such a feeling is a side effect of an implicit assumption vastly extended within the field: that futures studies (and –by extension- futurists) have a greater responsibility towards the future than any other discipline, activity or profession. I have argued elsewhere (Serra, 2006) that this assumption, i.e. that futures has some sort of superior authority over future matters than other disciplines, or more to the point, that it is the authoritative discipline on future questions, it is a sort of discipline-centrism or, if you want, an epistemology-centrism. If that were true, it would be sensible to trust future studies to manage the future; even more, futurists should have the first option when facing future questions. If all this were true, it would be logical that futures studies and futurists would have a greater responsibility towards the future. But I do not believe that this is so. Mostly, because I do not think that futures studies really deals with the future, the way I see it, futures helps to manage the uncertainty contained in present decisions; this is particularly clear in the European tradition, and yes, that implies it studies the future quite as much as many other disciplines. I would contest that futures studies cannot claim expertise on the future above other disciplines, just a particular approach to it, but one that can be especially useful when taking decisions in the present.

Anyway, even if we concede that futures should have had a greater impact, I would agree with Molitor that its concerning tendency to reinvent the wheel cyclically is one of the main causes of lacking greater recognition. It is hard to be taken seriously by the academic community, by decision makers or by society at large, when we are unable to reach a minimum agreement among ourselves or, even worse, when very few practitioners acknowledge (or are aware) of the richness and history within the field. That is why I am also so upset with the article; Molitor seems to fall in this same mistake.

For instance, Molitor uses scenario in a quite restricted sense. To begin with, the most common denotation of scenario is as one of the possible outputs of a futures studies project. But in Molitor's paper the main sense, if not only sense, is as a method, which is also correct, but it takes me to a second divergence: Molitor's depiction of scenario as a method is, again, quite constricted as he seems to limit the category to methods that include participatory processes; In this regard Molitor claims to follow the work of Dennis List (2005) "Network Mapping: The Development of a Methodology for Social Inquiry" which, according to Molitor covers *scenarios in all their varied forms and permutations*. Then, it is even more shocking that there is no mention of the French approach to scenarios: *La demarche prospective*. In the French school scenarios are indeed a method, and a very rigorous and prolix one, but with no particular emphasis on open participation. Arrived at this point the question to find out is if this is just a mistake or an intentional omission. If it is an oversight, it poses some shadows on the thoroughness of List's work and on Molitor's experience as well; if the slip was on purpose, then we should wonder why.

My guess is that Molitor wanted to be sure that his main point got through and hence he decided to focus only on those facts that supported it while side-lining the others. That would explain, for instance, his attempt to consider any breakthrough as a simple incremental increase; he is right that change may be quantitative in its evolution but we cannot deny that its consequences can be qualitative, if nothing else ecology has widely prove it. A second example, I have found quite unfair to compare futurists with astrologers (in the Kublai Khan court) if nothing else because futures does not do predictions, even less prophecies; but even if we could accept that the astrologer engaged in strategic conversation, then we have to conclude that such an activity would hardly be astrology. Finally, his insistence in mixing futures studies and strategy could denote a lack of conceptual finesse that I would have never expected in someone that has been active in the field for more than 50 years. It is true that the hype of the time is "strategic foresight" but it would only hurt both disciplines not to keep their specificity: futures relates to alternatives and consequences of present decisions, while strategy works with opportunities and pitfalls, they are very complementary but they are not the same and should not be mixed.

All and all, these inaccuracies harm the main point of the paper. After all, how can futures gain credibility if its own practitioners are the first ones not to be rigorous in the use of its concepts? I would say that the message is powerful enough and there was no need to force some of the arguments in such a way.

Scenarios Are Worth The Effort

And just for the record, scenarios are worth the effort. If we think about it, there have been some achievements. Nowadays, most government would not engage in a relevant public policy without some sort of plan; that is, action is based on an explicit prevision of what is expected. I cannot speak for other countries but this is a quantum leap in mine (Spain) where action was usually based on intentions and resulted, quite often, in some sort of disaster. A second point worth noting is that scenarios have become a frequent term in common language, it is true that most of the time it is used incorrectly, but they introduce some sense of alternative development nevertheless. The truth is that the challenges for futures studies and futurists are enormous, we are confronting formidable obstacles: our own brain, ill suited to deal with change and novelty; our social and cultural systems, for which change is tantamount to calamity and last but not least, our political systems (particularly democratic ones) that are structurally entangled with short term horizons. It is no wonder that futures have barely made a scratch on them, but scenarios have.

However, the hope is that once people start thinking (and planning) in terms of alternative scenarios there is no turning back because it makes human agency relevant, and we all like to have something to say about the (or our) future.

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