FUTURES

We no longer have faith in the future. We’re no longer even able to imagine a single future. Hans Magnus Enzensberger ponders a political method for an epoch without faith in historical destiny.

Pluralism spares nothing. The future too is not proof against it. As if it were self-evident, it is a singular noun in all natural languages, just like the past and the present, which most of us continue to believe only occur once. If, however, we think about what is in store for us, our heads grow dizzy. We have lost the capacity to subsume what is not yet there in the singular. In this sense we don’t have too little future before us or even none at all, as the dusty slogan, No Future, would have us believe, but too much, which is to say: too many. The future has become unthinkable as an homogeneous idea. Every consideration which is devoted to it, splits in the manner of an endlessly proliferating flow diagram and brings forth a diversity which we can neither evade nor master.

All these possible futures compete with one another and rub each other’s elbows raw in the crush. Presumably the much-lamented disappearance of utopia has its basis in this relativisation of the possible. It’s not because nothing occurs to us any more than the available projects, irrespective of whether utopia or dystopia appear banal to us and no longer binding, but because the supply of phantasms of the future exhausts our power of comprehension.

Futurology is the science of tea leaves. It ascribes the patterns and structures which it wants to interpret to its material, in order to read them from it: Mars got its canals like this and the moon its face. This psychedelic procedure can rely on a tacit correspondence with our everyday projections. It is amusing to observe that the mathematical term intersects with the psychoanalytic one without anything dawning on either discipline.

This future pluralism has by now become part of the interior furnishing of normality. Anyone who ‘thinks more than one day ahead’—and which of us is spared that?—un-
avoidably develops whole series of scenarios which are not only incompatible with one another, but are mutually exclusive. The very same person, who is convinced that a worldwide catastrophe is imminent, signs a 30-year life insurance policy without batting an eyelid. The oscillation between Age of Aquarius and Apocalypse, New Age and profit calculation, nirvana and investment consultancy became a mass phenomenon long ago. It's easy to poke fun at the crude scenarios in which superstition is at home; but the future has its trends whose rise and fall, even among people who consider themselves to be models of reason, would be difficult to explain rationally. Nuclear war in Europe, an obsessive nightmare only a few years ago, has as good as disappeared from the collective imagination. Countless versions of ecological catastrophe are evoked in its place. Thus the unimaginable appears as a mere variation, the extinction of the species as interchangeable play material.

Even the 'visions' of catastrophe obey the realisation cycle of the media. Their totality is spurious, the finitude which they claim makes way for others, which emerge with just as much exclusivity: everything will be completely different, because the world economy is about to break down, because artificial intelligence is replacing the subject, because incurable diseases will make all other catastrophes superfluous, because genetic engineering will put an end to mankind, and so on.

But pessimism cannot be trusted either. It's not only the monthly mortgage interest payment which presents a silent but tenacious reservation. The same articulate citizen who is convinced of the unstoppable poisoning of the planet, of the melting of the polar ice caps, of the exhaustion of all natural resources, simultaneously holds on to the ideology of the technological fix and awaits the redeeming invention, the rescuing serum, the gentle trick which will solve all the energy problems once and for all.

The incompatible also exists among the experts. The economists can be considered the pioneers of modern fortune telling. For as long as anyone can remember, they've been solemnly providing the economy with their horoscopes, completely unaffected by every refutation by reality. The orthodox marxist calculates the day on which capitalism will finally collapse; in glossy brochures theClub of Rome is in agreement with the nuclear power lobbyists, just as much as the climate researchers are with the demographers: each has put a claim on the future, his future.

The addressee of these efforts is on a see-saw. The media subject him to a constant alternation of apocalyptic and tranquillising slogans, and there remains little else for him to do, except get used to the unstable balance of panic and apathy. The common sense, which believes in muddling through, in the long run immunes itself against the instructions which are concealed in both positive and negative prophecies. Anyone who looks back at the future scenarios of the 50s, 60s and 70s will have to admit that common sense with all its limitations has not come off any worse than all the think tanks of the world.

The experiences which have pulled the rug out from under the philosophy of history are, therefore, very tangible ones. The naivity of all theories—which are ultimately only secularised versions of the history of salvation—has become blatant even for someone who has little interest in speculative thought. Irrespective of whether they appear in 'progressive' or 'conservative' guise, their self-confidence has suffered greatly, and it's easy to see that they are now only concerned with administering their own assets. It is surprising and remarkable, that in fact a certain fraction of the 'hard' sciences have new suggestions to offer in this situation and, precisely because it is leaving behind its own tradition, the dogmatism of exact calculation. There have been developments in thermodynamics, evolutionary theory, systems theory, but also in mathematics and in theorectical physics that could perhaps lead out of the old dead ends.

They are concerned with new paradigms of self organisation, with dissipative structures and non-linear logics. One thing at least has become clear beyond any doubt: the evolution of complex systems cannot, in principle, be precisely predicted. Their course is decisively influenced by singular events, often of a very high degree of improbability. Minute inputs can cause very large ensembles to collapse while, on the other hand, enormous determining variables can be dynamically absorbed without uncontrollable turbulences resulting. Of course, that can also be expressed more simply. One could say that science is well on the way to reinstating chance to its old metaphysical rights. However, nothing would be gained by regression to a world of pre-scientific concepts.

More interesting is the question whether such new modes of thinking can also be applied to social processes. Their inventors have nothing to say in this respect—presumably not only because they don't feel themselves to be competent, but also because they recoil from the ideological implications of such a transposition. They have no interest in falling victim to politics. Equally, ever since their victorious polemic against Social Darwinism a hundred years ago, sociologists and social critics take it for granted that there is nothing to be learned from the natural sciences. This prejudice long ago hardened into a leftwing ban on thinking.

Yet the condition of the wealthiest contemporary societies suggests precisely such investigations. They have abandoned the idea of planning. The powerful and the weak, individuals and groups continue to pursue their own particular goals, but the movement of the whole evades their designs, and even their imaginative capacity. It would not occur to anyone to think up a 'Five-Year Plan' and to put it into action, to say nothing at all of more ambitious goals. The idea of proposing or prescribing development plans à la Rostow to others, third parties (the Third World, for example) has also been abandoned. With that the once-so-favoured conspiracy theories which saw the historical process as guided by secretive omniscient centres have also...
been disposed of and the search for a subject of history, whether revolutionary or evolutionary, has proved to be futile.

An instance which would be capable of such central direction can no longer be discerned in these ‘advanced’ countries at all; it could even be argued that these are societies without leaders—that would be the ironic resurrection of a condition which the anthropologists believe they discovered among pre-historic peoples. Of course that is very far from meaning that power, wealth, opportunities would be more equally or even justly distributed in such an ensemble. It means only that after the dissolution of firm hierarchical status and class relationships an unstable, dynamic, fluid balance is forming, which constantly reproduces and changes itself without plan. Governments and parties in such a system have long ago ceased ‘to determine the guidelines of politics’, or even, as in the old physiological metaphors, to function as head, brain, central nervous system of the whole; they attempt, at most, to extend the metaphor, a kind of hormonal management, in order to prevent the turbulences building up into a catastrophe. Even this task seems too much for them. Where they attempt to tackle the results of the unplanned social process frontally, they regularly fail: ‘It is’, as the party officials then like to say, ‘politically unacceptable’.

But it’s not only the state whose effectiveness has declined; economic power too, despite, perhaps even because of its high degree of concentration, no longer appears, as it once did, monolithic and permanent. The multinational companies of today are threatened to the point of bankruptcy by unpredictable disturbances, crises, break-downs, take-overs, unstable patterns of ownership, sudden predatory raids. Just as international capital is daily moved around the globe in uncontrolled billion-dollar transactions, so the value of currencies is stochastically determined in a permanent electronic experiment, so economic power, too, embodied in a vast but fragile jellyfish, is subject to an unrestrained floating, a rapid sequence of rise and fall, growth and decay.

But in a dynamic regime that is constantly transforming itself there are also zones of inertia and resistance which are systematically underestimated by politicians and technocrats. We have seen how within the shortest space of time societies transform themselves right down to their seeming incorrigible features, right down to their collective unconscious (should such a thing exist); we have, on the other hand, experienced how all attempts to level out their divergence have failed. Limits which evade calculability are also placed on change. So projects to abolish bread or writing, for example, encounter a resistance which is difficult to explain but evidently tenacious; sub-systems like the so-called nuclear family have proved, against all expectations, to be extremely resistant.

This movement between acceleration and inertia, liquefaction and persistence only makes the whole thing more opaque. It is conceivable that such ambivalences make the process even more vulnerable to determining variables which are tiny in size, but appear at a significant moment and in the right place. The sudden passing of critical thresholds plays an even more important role not only in ecology but also in politics. Consequently an old, embarrassing subject, which the marxists thought had been finished off a long time ago, appears in a new light: the ‘role of the individual in history’. The emergence of a Khomeini or a Pol Pot can cost millions of people their head; if an enlightened Tsar appears, the consequences are unforeseeable; if a madman should move into the White House, then we wouldn’t need to go on worrying our heads about the future of pension systems; and we don’t dare to think what would happen if a brilliant founder of a religious sect got control of the media. Even someone who still enjoys putting forward theses about the future must realise that every single one of them can at any time be upset by a minimal factor x, which triggers the flash point.

Most of us will probably find it quite easy to put up with the end of the philosophy of history. But that does not mean that we could get by without perspectives for our lives, strategies, ‘plans’. The result is that the scissors between theoretical understanding and the practice of life must open ever wider. If there is some truth to what I have tried (fairly casually) to suggest here, then there follows from that a behaviour which can no longer claim any general obligatoriness: each person is left to pursue his own conjectures, and even they are subject to an unspoken reservation: I act as if, among all the continuously oscillating futures, I could find my own.

At the risk of it being confused with a confession I would like to state such a conjecture. I believe the flexibility which is demanded and praised on all sides and which is gradually being elevated to the status of a cardinal social virtue, to be a bad strategy. The mere social automaton, who always only responds to current situations, not only loses the last remnant of control over his own fate, he will always also arrive too late. The hedgehog’s contempt for the hare, who is always panting behind him, is certain, but the opposite solution is also worth less every day. Anyone who believes what matters is to assault ‘the system’ frontally, as a conservative or a revolutionary warrior, succumbs—if my description is not mistaken—to an illusion; because such an attitude is only then meaningful if one disposes of an objectively stringent perspective for the future (knows ‘the meaning of history’).

The question whether it’s best to swim with the current or against it seems to me out of date because it presupposes an untenable simplification. The method of the yachtsman who tacks with the wind as well as against it seems more fruitful. Such a procedure applied to society demands stoic disbelief and the greatest attentiveness. Anyone who wants to reach even the nearest goal must expect, step by step, a thousand unpredictable variables and cannot put his trust in any of them. But with presence of mind alone is not enough. No one who wants to escape the idiocy of synchronicity can afford to be afraid of anachronism. A certain degree of obstinacy which renounces last proofs can do no harm.

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