

Futures Told, Tamed and Traded

Barbara Adam

Abstract

This paper explores explicit approaches to the future and locates contemporary perspectives in their wider historical context. In five sections it considers how the future has been told, tamed, traded and transformed and how it is traversed today in a way that is superimposed on those earlier relations. It distinguishes the embedded, embodied, contextual future from contemporary perspectives of a decontextualised future emptied of content, which is open to exploration and exploitation, calculation and control. It shows how the abstraction of the future is implicated in both the progress of industrial-capitalist societies and the major problems that face these societies today. In the concluding section it suggests that there is much to learn from the conceptual tools honed by predecessors in their efforts to render the future more knowable.

Introduction

Industrial capitalist societies are inescapably wedded to innovation and progress. Change rather than stability is the order of the day. In this dynamic world of mobility of everything, standing still means falling behind. This committed pursuit of novelty distinguishes the contemporary mode of being, so aspired across the world, from other socio-economic systems in which the creation of permanence and stability was and is the desired goal, where products were and are crafted to last, where political structures are designed to endure and people conduct their social relations with a fair measure of predictability. The degree to which societies actively seek change, or permanence, has significant implications for their relation to the future. As Bertrand de Jouvenel explains,

The fewer changes we anticipate, the more we can continue to rely on our knowledge for the future. If society tends on the whole to conserve the present state of affairs, our present knowledge has a high chance of being valid in the future. On the other hand, the future validity of our knowledge becomes increasingly doubtful as the mood of society inclines toward change and the changes promise to be rapid. (Jouvenel, 1967: 10)

It is the relation to the future I want to address in this essay. In order to appreciate the complexity of the contemporary condition I contextualise present efforts to anticipate and traverse the future in the wider history of telling, taming, trading and transforming the realm beyond the present, which extends some 5000 years into antiquity.

Societies dedicated to progress, innovation and change, I want to argue in this paper, need to hone their tools for anticipating, taming and transforming their futures. Since the pursuit of change radically reduces stability and with it structural security, the substantial effort required to achieve competence in futurity is the price to be paid for the prize of advancement on all fronts of knowledge and socio-economic growth that awaits those most committed to the system of accelerating change. In his 'Communist Manifesto', Marx describes the relation in the following way,

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainties and agitation, distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier times. All fixed, fast-frozen relationships, with their train of venerable ideas and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become obsolete before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face with sober senses the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men. (Marx 1977/1848: 224)

Given that social uncertainties and insecurities rise proportional to the efforts in economic and technological innovation, the increased social transience needs to be counterbalanced by a parallel increase in concern with the future. In the second half of this paper I therefore look more closely at some of the contemporary ways of handling the future, consider their adequacy and identify some openings for departure from the established traditions.

The Future Told

The quest to unlock the secrets of fate and make contact with the realm beyond the present is shared by archaic and modern cultures alike. Throughout the ages, the quest to unlock the future has taken numerous forms and many different kinds of gifted specialists have been entrusted with this important task. In his history of divination, John Cohen (1964) gives accounts of over one hundred ways of telling the future. From the history of prophesy and divination we learn that foreknowledge of the future was the prerogative of gods, the gift of prophets, oracles and seers, of witches and wizards and, more recently, the specialised task of astrologers and scientists. Each of these specialists drew on different sources for his/her privileged knowledge and used different methods to access the temporal realm beyond the senses. A few examples will serve to illustrate the diverse ways of unveiling a future, which was first conceived as pre-existing destiny and in more recent times, as evolutionary continuity with the past.

The art of prophesy is believed to have originated some 5000 years ago in Mesopotamia, the land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, where some of the earliest records point to a range of prophetic and divinatory methods. The oldest prophesies appear to have been dream interpretations. According to Richard Lewinsohn (1961: 51-7) the peoples of Mesopotamia considered the legendary Sumerian king Emmendurana (or Enmeduranki), whose reign predated the great flood, as the founder of dream divination. Later methods of foreknowledge were based on Hepatoscopy, the inspection of the liver. The liver was considered the seat of life and interpretation of its symbolic characteristics was the prerogative of respected specialists who were answerable to their kings and nobles. Clay models of the liver, discovered by archaeologists, no doubt were used to instruct future prophets in their important art. In ancient Sumeria and Mesopotamia, as in cultures that absorbed and adapted some of these very early ways of engaging with the unknown, gods and god kings were the source of that prophetic knowledge. Ancient Egyptian societies too greatly depended on prophesy for guidance on significant prospective action and relied on it to be forewarned of impending disaster. From archaeological records we know that Egyptian oracles were primarily connected to festivals and associated with temples. It was in this way and at these specific times and places, Jan Assmann

(2001/1984: 35) suggests, that ‘the city deities exercised their de facto rulership’, which ‘reached beyond the temple enclosures and included the entire citizenry.’

Still in this part of the ancient world, the Israelites’ relation to the future is recorded in their sacred texts. Thus, the Old Testament is replete with stories about prophecies, visions, revelations and dreams through which Jehovah revealed his will to prophets. Thus, for example, eighteen of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament carry the subtitle ‘The Book of the Prophet’, telling of things that came to pass, of prophets employed to guide the Israelites on their way to freedom, of prophets as conduits to God’s messages. In Genesis (6.13 onwards) God speaks directly to Noah, warns him of the impending flood that will destroy all of creation and instructs him to build an ark in which he is to save his family and the animals, two of every kind. By following God’s instructions, Noah was able to escape the flood. Similarly, Moses was able to lead his people to the chosen land. In the New Testament too, all significant elements of Christ’s life are prophesied, as is the end of the world and Judgement Day. Thus, the prophets of the Bible, with their privileged access to a time that is inaccessible to the senses, were depended upon extensively to provide guidance and forewarning, signal and council. Their foreknowledge was based not on their own clairvoyance or wisdom but was imparted by their God.

What distinguishes Greek oracles from the prophets of ancient Sumeria, Egypt, and the Israelites is the nature of the oracle’s prophetic gift. While Greek gods too had a role to play in the oracle’s prophecies, their input was considered less reliable, their gods’ characters as well as their actions being much closer to humans than the gods of the cultures discussed above. Moreover, the Greek oracle’s prophetic prowess was associated with special hallucinogenic powers. From ancient Greek mythology we know that few decisions of significance were taken without first seeking advice from the oracle, the most famous of which was located in Delphi, the place that Zeus had declared the centre of the universe. The stories of Perseus and the Gorgon, of Hercules and of Oedipus, for example, all tell of attempts to avert the destiny prophesied by the oracle. In each instance, however, the prophecy came to pass: fate proved stronger than diverting actions taken in the light of foreknowledge provided by the oracle. So too for Cassandra, a tragic figure in Greek mythology, for whom the gift of clairvoyance had been delivered as a curse: no one would listen to her warnings or believe her prophecies. Thus, in vain she forewarned of the fall of Troy and the trick with the wooden horse. She even foresaw the details of her own and Agamemnon’s murder. Yet she was unable to avoid her destiny, helpless in the face of her own foreseen demise. In all these stories the message is clear: knowing the future does not necessarily help you to alter your destiny: fate is pre-set and resists our best efforts to influence its course. In Nordic myths too, we find a strong tendency for prophecies to come true no matter how hard gods and mortals try to avert the destiny thus prophesied. In the myth of ‘The Death of Balder the Beautiful’ (Ferguson 2000: 38-43) even Odin, the all-powerful god of light, and his wife Frigg are unable to prevent the killing of their son, as foretold in the prophecy.

The Druids of ancient Celtic cultures, who were equally renowned for their powers of divination, drew on different sources and powers. As Danah Zohar (1983: 16) notes, Celtic Druids were able to read the future from ‘the flights of birds, from the shape of clouds or tree roots, with the aid of bone-divining (using the boiled-clean right shoulder blade of an animal) or from rowan sticks’. Merlin, hailed as the greatest

wizard of all, foresaw many of the significant turning points in the life of King Arthur and far beyond that. His prophesies and predictions cover the crusades as well as the reign of James I, Henry VIII and Richard the Lionheart who lived some 700 years later. Merlin prophesised accurately that

The Lionheart will against the Saracens rise,
And purchase from him many a glorious prize...
But whilst abroad these great acts shall be done,
All things at home shall to disorder run.
Coop'ed up and cage'd the Lion then shall be,
But after suffrance ransom'd and set free.

...Last by a poisonous shaft, the Lion die. (quoted in Zohar 1983: 18)

In their foreknowledge of the future, Merlin's fellow druids were said to have been as accomplished as this most famous of Celtic sages, performing their task without recourse to hallucinogenic or hypnotic aids.

While the prophetic practices detailed so far are drawn from archaeological and historical records, The Book of Changes, the *I Ching*, is still consulted today. It is one of the few divinatory traditions that has survived for some 4000 years without losing any of its pertinence for daily practice. Throughout its extensive history, the *I Ching* has been consulted by individuals who sought guidance about decisions at crucial moments in their lives. The *I Ching* is rooted in Taoism, Tao meaning *the way that is in harmony with the moment in time*. It locates the questioner in a wider context that transcends the particular time and place of the consultation. It places chance and the quality of the moment at the centre of its system of meanings. As Carl Gustav Jung explains in his introduction to the *I Ching*,

The matter of interest seems to be the configuration formed by chance events in the moment of observation...

Synchronicity takes the coincidence of events in space and time as meaning something more than mere chance, namely, a peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves as well as with the subjective (psychic) state of the observer. (Jung 1961 iii-iv, quoted in v. Franz 1978: 26-27)

In the *I Ching*, the quality of the moment, the projective situation, the inner state and the consciousness of the person asking the question are placed into the wider scheme of cosmic connectedness in which every unique event is interdependent with every other unique event. Thus, coincidence, interdependence, connectivity and uniqueness are the key components that work the 'magic' of this particular system of divination.

The reading of patterns, recognising significant coincidences, understanding synchronicity and establishing a-causal connections to unlock the future are in fact the means that are shared across history by people with special access to the future: by prophets and oracles, Druids and Nordic sages, as well as individuals consulting the *I Ching*. The principles upon which these divinations are based, we need to appreciate further, are diametrically opposed to those underpinning classical (Newtonian) scientific prediction, the primary, dominant and socially most legitimated means of modern industrialised cultures to access the realm beyond the senses. In contrast to these ancient practices, scientific prediction is wedded to the principle of linear causality and projects into the future past patterns of repetition. Historically the rise of scientific prophesy is interesting. Despite the fact that scientists were trespassing on a terrain that was the exclusive preserve of God, scientific prediction had gained acceptance from the Christian church on the basis that it merely brought together

knowledge about processes that had occurred in the past and were therefore expected to continue into the future. That is to say, given that the past rather than the future was the source of science's prophetic prowess, the church did not consider predictive science to be either blasphemous or the work of Satan.

Before we can focus on knowledge practices that make social life more predictable and thus more secure, we need first to appreciate that the futures outlined above are tied to the assumption that 'the future' is pre-existing, that there is a future to be discovered and told. Only on the basis of such a pre-existence and pre-determination can the future be unveiled and can we make sense of efforts to intervene in fate and destiny.

The Future Tamed

Efforts to know what lies ahead have to be distinguished from knowledge practices that make daily life less precarious. These latter practices are concerned not so much with knowing and intercepting destiny but more with providing structural security for the daily and seasonal rounds of social life. Such structural security can be established by better anticipation of natural rhythms, social interactions and/or both. It entails a quest for special skills and know-how associated with futurity. Know-how implies in-order-to knowledge, knowledge for use, that is, knowledge to structure, order and tame the insecurities of the realm beyond experience. It encompasses useful knowledge in the effort to render the uncertain more certain, the insecure more secure, and the unknowable more knowable.

Towards that end, ancient Egyptian death rituals, for example, facilitated the detailed anticipation of life after death. Instructive texts, written on the walls of tombs, on clay tablets and much later on papyrus, provided authoritative information about what to expect as well as detailed instructions on how to behave to ensure a safe journey to the netherworld (Assmann, 2001/1984, Geddes & Grosset, 1997 and Hornung, 1999/1997). In ancient Egyptian society death was seen as a key marker in the stream of existence, a difficult staging post beset by perils and unforeseen hazards. However, by following the examples of gods and especially Osiris, the rituals systematically transformed the abyss of the great unknown into something familiar and unthreatening. Thus, the 'Book of the Dead' is a book of spells whose sole purpose it is to ease the journey of the dead person to the afterlife. The 'Book of what is in the Underworld', in contrast, describes the underworld, thus taking away some of the fear of the future unknown. It exists in many versions and has been found in the tombs of both kings and ordinary citizens. (While in the old kingdom the transfer to eternity was the preserve of pharaohs, in later times it was open to anyone who could afford the rituals necessary for safe passage.) The 'Pyramid Texts', finally, are intended to ensure entry of the dead to the netherworld. They mostly recount the Osirian legend and give detailed guidance on how to emulate Osiris' transition from the world of the living to the realm of dead souls. Underpinning all these instructions was a belief that the preserved physical body was essential to securing existence in the afterlife. From these death rituals of ancient Egypt we can see how detailed 'knowledge of the unknown', in this case the stages of death and the journey to the realm of the dead, provided existential security. Clear instructions for rituals relating to the deceased, therefore, transformed the ministering to the dead from an anxiety-bearing last service into an essential life-giving activity. Non-existence, the ultimate unknown, had been

rendered knowable. From the secure basis of practical knowledge, therefore, the future in the netherworld of dead souls became a mere technical challenge and a matter of correct ritual conduct.

In a less technical way, religion, in the most general sense, fulfils the need to know about the unknown, the life beyond death, the world beyond human existence. It places human beings in the wider scheme of things: nature, the cosmos and the spirit world. It explains continuity and locates every person's finite life in the greater cycle of life, death and renewal. The details may differ between the world's religions but each one provides a measure of predictability about the great unknown, life after death. Each one offers guidance about conduct and the consequences of actions. Each one tames the unknown future, renders it knowable and known.

Beyond ritual and religious creation of ontological security there are numerous other ways in which practical knowledge has been able to enhance the predictability of the realm beyond the present and thus increase the structural security of social existence. These may relate to knowledge about the movement of planets and its impact on seasonal and climatic patterns, they may entail the creation of institutional structures and they may involve the postulation of connections between planetary patterns and social destiny, as in the case of astrology. Repeating cycles allow for the recognition of patterns. Naming and numbering these repetitions makes them predictable, allows for anticipation and planning.

From the studies of archaeoastronomy in Britain (Ruggles, 1994), South America (Aveni, ed. 1975) and the Middle East (Heggie, ed. 1982) we know that buildings were aligned with the stars so as to bring into unity heaven and earth, social organisation and the divine. The rising and setting of heavenly bodies was tracked and fixed against features in the landscape while the extreme positions of sun, moon and planets were aligned with respect to the local horizon and key features of buildings. Thus, solstice and equinox, the moon cycle extremes, which repeat every 18.61 years, as well as the disappearance and reappearance of stars have all been identified with respect to ancient structures as distant in time and space as the pyramids and temples of ancient Egypt, the temple structures of Inca, Maya and Aztec cultures, and the stone circles, long burrows and cromlechs of Neolithic Britain. As I argue elsewhere (Adam 2004: 102-12), in each of these cases, the knowledge of repeating cycles enhanced anticipation and facilitated social activity in preparation of future events.

According to the sociologist Eviator Zerubavel (1985: 31) the calendar was the first institution through which cultures established and maintained temporal regularity. On the basis of the above, I would like to suggest that this assertion requires some qualification as well as more detailed understanding of what a calendar might be. However, in the context of this essay, the definition of what might constitute a calendar is of far less importance than the recognition that both the alignment of buildings with the movement of the planets and the establishment of calendars provide socially distributed structures of anticipation. When such natural rhythmic processes are integrated with social regularities of seasonal activity and religious festivities they help to anchor social life in patterns of anticipated events, thus taming what would otherwise have remained key insecurities of social existence. Moreover, such practices demonstrate that knowledge of the future is not just possible but is an essential ingredient of social life.

Jouvenel (1967) points to the importance of structural and contractual certainties as pre-conditions to any form of socio-cultural life. These certainties, he suggests, are created on the basis of expected social behaviour.

They may be interpreted as an offensive collectively waged on the future and designed to partly tame it. As a consequence the future is known not through the guesswork of the mind, but through social efforts, more or less conscious, to cast “jetties” out from an established order and into the uncertainty ahead. The network of reciprocal commitments traps the future and moderates its mobility.

All this tends to reduce the uncertainty. Jouvenel (1967: 45)

Habits, customs and traditions as well as social laws, rules and moral codes provide a degree of foreknowledge and anticipation. They make behaviour of others predictable and facilitate a certain measure of security. In a similar vein, contracts and promises, obligations and commitments allow for projective actions to be embedded in socially constituted frameworks of certainty, thus making possible calculations and estimations for what would otherwise be unpredictable transactions. Structural and contractual securities thus form the stable anchorage points in the shifting sands of the social future and they allow for a wide range of predictions with a high degree of probability. In this instance it is the use of social institutions and practices through which the future is tamed and uncertainty reigned in sufficiently to make social interaction possible.

Irrespective of whether it is tamed by ritual, religious, (astronomic) scientific or institutional means, the future delineated above is one of embodied and embedded continuity. It is contextual and personal and as such located in wider systems and structures: social, natural, cosmic and spiritual. To tame this future is to know and understand the wider scheme, rhythms and processes within which individual lives are embedded. Once known and understood, practical action can be taken to counterbalance the terror of non-existence and the impending unknown.

Futures Traded

The trade in futures originated from rather similar concerns. It was initially an attempt to create greater security within a context of uneven fortunes in commerce and over a person’s lifetime. It addressed the great variations within and between seasons as well as longer time frames that affected livelihoods. Insurance, banking and the trade in ‘futures’ were born of these sentiments, which appear at first sight to be no different from the knowledge practices associated with the taming of the future. On closer inspection, however, we find that a fundamental shift in perspective and assumption about the future had taken place, which made possible and facilitated the trade in futures. Without this fundamental shift in understanding and approach the trade in futures would have remained a sin. The Christian church was quite clear on this, and so is the Koran. Societies that held a different view were the exception. It was a sin to trade for profit something that belonged not to human beings but to Allah/God. According to religious doctrine the trade in futures was/is theft because it trades in something that could not belong to individuals.

As long as earnings on the future were deemed to be a sin, explains the historian Jacques Le Goff (1980), capitalism and the money economy could not develop since,

for the merchant, time was one of the prime opportunities for profit. There could be no charging for interest, no trading or discounting of futures.

The merchant's activity is based on assumptions of which time is the very foundation – storage in anticipation of famine, purchase for resale when the time is ripe, as determined by knowledge of economic conjunctures and the constants of the market in commodities and money – knowledge that implies the existence of an information network and the employment of couriers.

Against the merchant's time the church sets up its own time, which is supposed to belong to god alone and which cannot be an object of lucre. (Le Goff 1980: 30)

While interest and credit had been known and documented since 3000 years BC in Babylonia, it was not until the Middle Ages that the Christian church slowly and almost surreptitiously changed its position on usury (Le Goff, 1980: 29-100, Wendorff, 1991: 131-146), which set the future free for trade, to be allocated, sold and controlled. For Muslims the ruling still applies today.

Since the late Middle Ages, trade fairs existed where the trade in futures became commonplace and calculations about future prices an integral part of commerce. The trade in futures buys and sells futures for the benefit of the present, for profit in the here and now. It trades not just in goods but the *promise* of goods. This was of particular importance for international trade by sea given that trade ships might be away for as long as three years at a time. It involved global merchants in complex calculations about potential profit and loss over long periods, with goods being traded in absentia, thus establishing the trade in futures as an integral part of the western, capitalist economic system. While banks calculated the monetary value of the future with respect to interest and credit, insurance calculated it with respect to future risk. For regular payment the insurer promised to compensate for potential loss and disaster thus helping to smooth out fluctuations in personal and corporate fortunes. The development of statistics during the second half of the seventeenth century dramatically improved such calculations, affording glimpses of futures with high degrees of probability. (Lewinsohn, 1961: 87-9).

In all these economic strategies the future is commodified. At issue is no longer the embedded, contextual, embodied future discussed earlier but an abstract future, a future emptied of content and divorced from context, a future that can be applied anywhere, any time and exploited for any circumstance. The commodified future is irreducibly tied to clock time and its economic use as an abstract exchange value. This difference between abstract and contextualised futures is of significance. Embodied futures, we need to understand, cannot be traded. Just as Pluto's trajectory cannot be exchanged for that of Saturn so my future is not exchangeable with that of the oak tree in my garden. The commodified future, emptied of all contents, in contrast, can be calculated, traded, exchanged and discounted, anywhere, any time. This difference between empty and embodied, contextual futures is one that will concern us for much of the remainder of this paper.

Futures Transformed

The effort to intervene in the future, as I have shown above, can be traced back for some 5000 years. It can be understood as an attempt (in most cases futile) to divert fate or interfere with pre-existing destiny. Contemporary endeavours to transform the

future, in contrast, are far more ambiguous than earlier attempts of intervention. The contemporary idea of transforming the future carries within it a much stronger element of human influence as well as an underlying assumption that the future can be shaped according to human will while, at the same time, retaining the notion that there exists something which is to be transformed: God's world of nature, evolution, genetic inheritance, to name just a few such futures that might be objects of transformation. Where the emphasis is placed along this continuum from intervention, to transformation and creation depends on a number of crucial ingredients: on the subject matter, on the person engaged in the deliberate transformation and on the kind of future involved. It depends in other words, on whether or not the future is embodied and embedded in processes and events or decontextualised and emptied of content. A commodified future, as I have indicated above, is neither tied to destiny nor conceived as pre-existing. Rather, it is an open future, a realm of potentiality to be formed rather than transformed to human will. Emptied of content and meaning, the future is simply there, an empty space waiting to be filled with our desire, to be shaped, traded or formed according to rational plans and blueprints, holding out the promise that it can be what we want it to be.

Many of the inconsistencies we find in futurist writings can be traced to ambiguity on this issue, that is, to the fact that the difference between the principle assumptions about the future are left implicit, rarely thought about or theorised. The quest for knowledge about an embedded, embodied, contextual future and later efforts to tame that realm of existence, I want to argue, need to be understood in relation to and distinction from socio-economic activities that seek to shape, form and colonise a future of our own making. In addition, the pursuit of knowledge about the realm(s) beyond the present needs to be distinguished from the *creation* of the future. Similarly, the contemporary conjecture *about* future events needs to be differentiated from cultural forays *into* the future. This point will become clearer when we explore the idea of the modern future being traversed. Before we move to this point, however, we need to briefly address the issue of increasing uncertainty.

There seems to be agreement amongst scholars concerned with the future that contemporary futures are marked by far greater uncertainties than were encountered in traditional societies. This rise in uncertainty is associated, for example, with the pursuit of progress and accelerating change, with the reduction in structural certainties and with the increase in mobility of just about everything: people, objects and information (Brown, Rappert and Webster, 2000; Lewinsohn, 1961; Jouvenal 1967; Ling, 2000; Nelis 2000). Marx came to a similar conclusion some 150 years ago on the basis of his detailed analysis of the emerging capitalist system.

Today, I want to argue, we need to take that analysis further and develop it in different directions. I mention here just two examples. To better understand the growing uncertainty observed in contemporary societies there is a need to take on board the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on the one hand and to take account of the decontextualisation of the future on the other. This essay is not to place to provide a detailed analysis of either of these examples. All that can be done here is to mention some of the key points in need of consideration. Regarding the relation between ICT and the rise in uncertainty, the following developments seem to be of importance. With contemporary communication technologies, succession and duration have been replaced by seeming instantaneity and simultaneity. That is to say,

Duration has been compressed to zero and the present extended spatially to encircle the earth. For people with access to ICTs, and those implicated in their effects, therefore, the present has been globalised and, as Virilio (1997) points out, intensity has taken over from extensity, bringing with it the possibility of concerted action in ‘real time’. The crucial element is not, however, the vastly increased speeds involved but, rather, the networked nature of information that is distributed simultaneously across space. It is the loss of causality and sequence, rather than the associated speed and acceleration that so dramatically inclines this system of information transfer towards indeterminacy. When in principle everyone has access anywhere with the potential to influence everyone, certainty is no longer attainable (Hassan, 2003).

Equally important for the rise in uncertainty, I want to propose, is the abstraction of the future from its embodied and embedded position in socio-economic, political and socio-environmental processes and events. Empty and open, the future can be filled with anything, with unlimited interests, desires, projections, values, beliefs, ethical concerns, business ventures, political ambitions... Empty and open it becomes a free-for-all, unbounded, unlimited and thus fundamentally and irreducibly indeterminate. In contrast to the context-bound future, the abstract future of contemporary economic and political exchange is fundamentally uncertain and unknowable. At the same time, however, it is wide open to colonisation and traversal.

Futures Traversed

The future, emptied of content and extracted from historical context, invites imagination and inventive action. It is ready to be populated with the products of progress. An empty future conceived in terms of money is there for the taking, open to commodification, colonisation and control, available for exploitation, exploration and elimination, as and when it becomes appropriate from the vantage point of the present. I would like to go as far as to suggest that the emptying of the future and its subsequent equation with money were central preconditions to the progress enjoyed by industrial societies, to the economic growth experienced by those societies and to their colonial ventures. When the future is decontextualised and depersonalised you can use and abuse it without feeling guilt or remorse. You can plunder and pollute it with impunity. You can forget that our future is others’ present and pretend that it is yours to do with as you please, with your imagination, creative skills and technological prowess the only boundaries to your activities. This is the base assumption upon which our present affluence and domination has been created and which we carry forward to ‘our’ future. Today, it does however, become ever more difficult to keep up the pretence.

The fiction, which took us to the height of economic wealth and global domination, is starting to disintegrate, the embodied future rising from its suppressed position. We are beginning to recognise that our own present is the empty and open future of our predecessors: their dreams, desires and discoveries, their imaginations, innovations and impositions, their creations. Our progress and our pollution, our colonial and contractual responsibilities as well as our global institutions, markets and finance are their empty, open, commodified futures in progress, are their creative imaginations working themselves out in and as our embodied and embedded present. We are the recipients of their pretence, their illusion, which is for us inescapably real in its consequences.

Our present is their created future, their commodified future and their colonised future. Our present is their uncertain future, where ‘all that is solid melts into air’. Our present is their discounted future, their future which was exploited commercially for the exclusive benefit of their present. Our memorials are their political aspirations, their pursuits of ethnic cleansing. Today we still pursue that same illusion, still live the same pretence. The future is open, way say. We cannot know it. It is open only to our imagination. It is ours to forge and to shape to our will, ours to colonise with treasured belief systems and techno-scientific products of our mind, ours to traverse, ours for the taking.

As long as everyone colludes, the house of cards stays in tact. In a globally connected and interdependent world, however, not everyone is willing to play the game of ‘lets pretend’. Not everyone is willing to concede all of the world’s treasures, present and future, to the player with the strongest card. From across the world, competing claims on the future are making themselves heard. ‘Others’ want their fair share of the potential bounty. Others still want very different things. Meanwhile, claims are being filed for the results of past pretences of emptiness. Accusations accumulate about past wilful blindness. Predecessors’ glorious creations rebound as nightmares. The costs have to be paid, the disasters rectified, the cancers endured. Despite mounting evidence against the belief in the empty and open future, however, this perspective shows little signs of getting weaker. Despite strong countervailing pressures it retains its dominant position, continues to be put into practice and proliferate. It still gathers strength through political rhetoric, scientific promise and the quest for economic wealth. It is spread and perpetuated by management gurus and a large majority of the fraternity of futurologists. The empty and open future unites them in a common belief and this belief in turn provides them with the tools to forecast their own creations as possible desired futures, as ‘futuribles’, ‘possidictions’ and probable potentials. The embodied, historically embedded, contextual future of processes, productions and pursuits, in the meantime, is airbrushed from the picture, traversed and negated.

Today, this negation¹ requires our most serious attention and its transcendence is the urgent and important task facing scholars and practitioners who have come to recognize the global effects of the elimination of embodied futures in progress. At the level of scholarly engagement this requires a shift in perspective and focus, demands historical perceptiveness, asks for a thorough knowledge of temporal relations and calls for a trans-disciplinary outlook. At the practical level it necessitates compassion with an eye for justice and an acute awareness of the interconnectedness, interdependence and interrelatedness of everything. As such it calls for some of the conceptual skills and practical tools that ancient societies and non-western cultures had honed to perfection: to understand processes and events in the wider scheme of things, to recognise connections and implications, to appreciate things in their continuity and emergence, to know the future as embodied in things and events, embedded in processes and as carrying forth the deeds of the past. This entails that we understand ourselves not as objective observers and voyeurs but as implicated participants, inescapably responsible for that future in the making, irrespective of how far down the line and where latent effects may emerge as symptoms.

¹ In German I would use the word *Aufhebung* for its triple meaning of ceasing or getting rid of, safe-keeping out of sight and abstracting.

From the perspective of a re-embedded processual future we see the world anew. We re-cognise, that to trade and discount something which does not belong to us is theft after all. The ‘fore-ness’ of matter and the aspirations of others as well as future peoples’ needs and rights begin to re-emerge from the shadows. All that is air congeals into matter. It takes on form, becomes visible and real. As embodied future we can get to know our futures and shape them cognisant of potential effects. We can take responsibility for our dreams and aspirations projected into products and processes. We can accompany latent, immanent, interconnected process-worlds of our making to their realizations sometime, somewhere.

Acknowledgement

This research has been conducted during a three-year research project 'In Pursuit of the Future', which is funded by the UK's Economic and Science Research Council (ESRC) under their Professorial Fellowship Scheme. The research for this paper forms an integral component of the wider project.

References

- Adam, B 2004 *Time*, Cambridge & Malden, MA: Polity Press
- Assmann, J. 2001/1984 *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*. Transl. David Lorton. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.
- Aveni, A. F. (ed.) 1975 *Archaeoastronomy in Pre-Columbian America*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Brown, N, Rappert, B. and Webster, A. 2000 ‘Introducing Contested Futures: From “Looking into” the Future to “Looking at” the Future’, in Brown, N, Rappert, B. and Webster, A. eds. *Contested Futures. A Sociology of Prospective Techno-science*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 3-20.
- Cohen, J. 1964 *Behaviour in Uncertainty*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Ferguson, D. 2000 *The History of Myths Retold*. London: Chancellor Press.
- Franz M. L. v. 1978 *Time. Rhythm and Repose*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Geddes & Grosset 1997 *Ancient Egypt: Myth and History*. New Lanark, Scotland: Gresham Publishing Company.
- Hassan, R. 2003 *Real-time and the New Knowledge Epoch*. *Time & Society*, 12(2/3): 225-41.
- Heggie, D. (ed.) 1982 *Archaeoastronomy in the Old World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hornung, E. 1999/1997 *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife*. Transl. David Lorton. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.
- Jouvenel, B. de 1967 *The Art of Conjecture*, transl. from French by N. Lary, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson
- Jung, C. G. 1972 *Synchronicity*. London: Routledge.
- Le Goff, J. 1980 *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lewinsohn, R. 1961 *Science, Prophecy and Prediction*. Transl. from German by Arnold J. Pomerans, New York: Bell Publishing Company, Inc.
- Ling, T. 2000 ‘Contested Health Futures’, in Brown, N, Rappert, B. and Webster, A. eds. *Contested Futures. A Sociology of Prospective Techno-science*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 251-70.

- Marx, K. 1977/1848 *The Communist Manifesto*, Lessnoff, D. (ed) *Karl Marx Selected Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 221-244.
- Nelis, A. 2000 'Genetics and Uncertainty', in Brown, N, Rappert, B. and Webster, A. eds. *Contested Futures. A Sociology of Prospective Techno-science*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 209-28.
- Ruggles, C. L. N. 1994 British Archaeoastronomy. In S. L. Macey (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Time*. New York: Garland Publishing, 68-69.
- Virilio, P. 1997 *Open Sky*, transl. Julie Rose, London: Verso.
- Wendorff, R. 1991 *Die Zeit mit der wir leben*. Herne: Heitkamp.
- Zerubavel, E. 1985 *The Seven Day Circle. The History and Meaning of the Week*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Zohar, D. 1983 *Through the Time Barrier*, London: Paladin.

Biographical Details

Barbara Adam is Professor of Sociology at Cardiff University. She is founding editor of the journal *Time & Society* and has published extensively on the social relations of time. Her most recent book *Time* (2004) is published under the Polity Press 'Key Concepts' Series. She currently holds an ESRC Professorial Fellowship (2003-6) in which she explores the social relationship to the future. E-mail: adamtime@cardiff.ac.uk web sites: <http://www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/whoswho/adam/>
<http://www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/futures/>