

# BRIEFING 14

## IN PURSUIT OF THE FUTURE

**ESRC PROFESSORIAL FELLOWSHIP 2003-6**  
(RES051270049) The Research is concerned with the way the future is known, anticipated, planned for, secured and produced. It seeks to connect isolated fields of enquiry and works toward a comprehensive, socially relevant theory of the future.

### FUTURES TRAVERSED

The temporal world of processes is not like space and matter. When we move across space, the territory that is being traversed continues to exist but, when we traverse time, the future is eliminated and transformed into an ever expanding present. When the future is approached with tools appropriate to space and matter contradictory processes are set in motion. The pursuit of speed, the quest for control and the politics of posterity can illuminate those relations as pre-condition to identifying openings for change.

#### Speeding into the Present

The valorisation of speed is intimately tied to an economic perspective on the future: when saving time also saves money, acceleration becomes an economic imperative. However, while money can be quantified, accumulated and saved, this is clearly not the case with the future. Futures diminish and get absorbed into the present as they are colonised and time is traversed. Moreover, speed reduces our capacity for extended vision. When walking, for example, we can see the landscape, our vision is unbounded. With increasing speed this vision is progressively restricted to the immediate space and moment. This is a troubling relation when, at the same time, the quest for acceleration in transport, for example, produces ever greater time-space distanced environmental effects.

With information and communication technologies (ICTs) the present is extended spatially to encircle the globe. The informational future that previously existed between the sending and receiving of a message is negated with the global present. By anticipating the recipient reading a message and writing a response we placed ourselves in *their* present, which is for us the future present. This constant movement between present future and future present, as well as the capacity to routinely extend ourselves into future presents, is eroded when all focus, effort, power and prestige are invested in the now.

Where communication is not only instantaneous but also networked across space significant consequences ensue for planning and predicting the future, as demonstrated by recent collapses of banks, financial services and entire markets in the East. When everything is interconnected and interdependent then assumptions based on material objects in motion no longer apply. Processes become unbounded. The unique moment disappears. Communicated information loses its location: it is both nowhere and everywhere. Ephemerality and transience re-emerge, negating hard fought-for certainties and stabilities. Established values of continuity, preservation and conservation become problematic at best, obsolete at worst.

In distinction to transport and ICTs, genetic modification traverses not just space and matter but also time. It negates millions of years of co-evolution. Reproduction cycles are dramatically speeded up or cut out altogether and potential effects extend into an open future. The scale of potential financial gains associated with this phenomenal traversal and compression of time is matched only by the associated potential for unintended and unforeseen consequences.

#### Blindfolded at the Controls

During modernity control of the future had been achieved by placing process and connectivity outside the scientific frame of reference, thus treating materials *as if* they were bounded, static, a-temporal, and insisting on the irrelevance of context. The pretence, however, could only be carried so far given that our technologies are imbued with social values, our knowledge practices are caught up in one-way systems of metabolic energy exchange with the environment, and both in turn are leaving legacies into an open future. Radioactive waste management, for example, is a pertinent case in point where control of outcomes has become synonymous with wishful thinking.

#### Politics of Posterity in Liberal Democracies

Liberal Democracies have developed historically within the limits of a politics of space and matter. Their sphere of responsibility extends to a nation's territory, its resources and its wealth distribution. They are in charge of things that can be measured and counted. However, with policies on climate change, nuclear power and its waste products, the regulation of chemicals, strategies about genetic engineering, for example, politics has entered the future worlds of tens, hundreds and even thousands of generations hence. Today's politics of posterity, therefore, are not just experienced by voters and their children but by an open-ended chain of generations without vote, voice or advocates to speak for them. This means it operates without a mandate. By producing these long-term futures the present of successors is appropriated. *We* thus operate in *their* temporal territory as uninvited migrants and trespassers in their rightful domains.

For the production of long-term futures politics draws on three dominant institutions: science, economics and law. All three however, are highly *unsuitable* for the task of guiding future-creating policies: Science takes its evidence from accumulated knowledge of past and present matter and space. It works with the *facta-futura* distinction and consequently treats the future as both immaterial and unreal. Economics operates from the present for the present. Its forays into the future are thus parasitical on successor generations of humans and fellow beings. It treats the future as a resource like any other material resource, consequently making a category mistake whose effects ripple through the entire system of instrumental economic action. Law is guided by precedent and arbitrates future operations on the basis of past and present matter, space and social relations. These inappropriate assumptions and associated socio-political practices amount to *institutionally constituted irresponsibility*. The politics of space and matter thus founders in the temporal realm of future making and future taking.

Efforts to transform, traverse and control futures tend to result in unintended consequences whilst paradoxes seem to bloom proportional to the temporal reach of the actions involved. The task, therefore, would be to make both tools and institutions more appropriate to the contemporary condition.