

**FUTURE MATTERS:
FUTURES KNOWN, CREATED AND MINDED**

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Has the Future Already Happened?

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Title

You may have wondered about my title – it makes no sense you may have thought: The future can't have happened or it would be the present or the past. Take the example of this conference. It has been planned for two years and now, over 3 days, it is becoming reality – it materializes into fact. This evening it will have become the past, become history. So, on that basis the title is nonsensical: once something has happened, it is no longer the future – it is instead the present, the fleeting/extended present, and the past.

But, this self-evident relation between past, present and future has not always existed in this form and I want to propose to you that today it is no longer appropriate for the contemporary condition. I will show you *where and why* that understanding no longer fits and will begin to explore where we might need to look for openings that allow us to think about and relate to the future differently.

Conventional way of understanding the future

From a conventional perspective the future is the 'not yet'. It is the realm of potential and possibility, an empty vessel to fill with dreams and desires, plans and projects. As such it is stretching out in front of us: vast, unlimited and open-ended.

We *know* this future through the study of images, projections and expectations, through people's plans, through their aspirations and through their hopes and fears.

From this conventional *perspective* the future is not fact. Instead, it is an aspect of mind, a conjecture. And, as such, it is not real until it materialises into present or fact.

Let me once more use the example of the conference to give some substance to these points. While we were planning the conference we operated in the planning realm of the ‘as if’ and we functioned in the domain of the ‘not yet’. But every decision was taken on the assumption that the conference was going to happen. Only since it has started, however, has the conference become reality. Only your being here – giving papers, discussing, attending the special events – has turned the plan into reality, and with it has turned the future into the present. As present fact all the earlier possibilities have evaporated. The opportunity has gone where we could decide to have different speakers. We no longer have the option to select a different venue. We no longer have the choice of different caterers. This can be summarised into Brumbaugh’s (1966) statement: ‘*there are no future facts and no past possibilities*’.

On the basis of what I have said so far, my title is nonsense: The future cannot have happened. Once it has happened it is no longer the future. But, as David Ambrose’s stories have shown us over the past three days, this is not the only way of understanding the future. What we need to appreciate is that we have not always viewed the future like this: In fact, in the past the future belonged to the gods. Consequently, what the future held in store for us was in their laps, not in our gift. As such our future was subject to fate.

Knowing Fate and Forging Futures

We can appreciate the difference in perspective and understanding by examining a cluster of interdependent assumptions. These relate to *ownership* (who is thought to own the future), to *origin* (where and when the future originates, its source), to *expertise* (who are deemed to be experts in the future), and to *methods* (what methods and knowledge tools are considered legitimate).

When we extend ourselves back, deep into human history to David Ambrose’s world of mythical stories or, alternatively, to traditional cultures, we find that *ownership* of the future was split between two sacred domains. The future either belonged to the gods or it was set on its path by ancestors. That is, ancestors and gods set the world in motion and pre-determined its development. Moreover, we find that both played an important role not only in this overarching development of the world and its destiny but also in establishing the fate of individuals and societies. In those times and places people were and are mandated to manage and control space but the extra-terrestrials control(led) time and the future.

Experts on the future therefore were people skilled in interpreting the signs and symbols provided by the owners of time and the future. They were either conduits for the intentions of the gods – the prophets and oracles – or they had the task to affect those intentions through sacrifice and other means.

The future that belonged to gods and ancestors was an already *existing future present*. It was conceived as a pre-existing realm because it was pre-determined by its owners. This meant that expert *knowledge* of that future did not empower you to change the pre-determined fate. Rather, expertise grounded in knowledge helped people to prepare for their fate but did not enable them to alter it. Think, for example, of Greek and Nordic mythologies which abound in stories of unsuccessful attempts to avert fate that had been foretold. David Ambrose's stories provided ample illustration of foretold fate that could not be averted.

Responsibility for the pre-determined and pre-existing future lay unambiguously with the owners of the future: You cannot be responsible for what is not at your disposal and over which you have now power. You can merely act responsibly *towards* something which does not belong to you and this is not at all the same as thing as having responsibility *for* and *over* something which you own.

We can see here an important difference to today's secular societies: We assume to own the future: The future, we say, is *ours* to take and shape. We treat it as a *resource* for our use in the present. As such we plan, forge and transform the future to our will and desire. (Further to Wolfgang Sachs' presentation, we need to appreciate that when we ran out of space to colonise we began, and then intensified, the colonisation of time and the future.)

A number of consequences arise from the modern change in ownership. These relate again to the previously mentioned interdependent cluster of assumptions: to ownership and responsibility, to origin and reality status, to expertise and to methods of access.

The first consequence of changing ownership relates to the question 'who is *responsible* for the future'? Our responsibility *towards* something that is owned by others, changes into our responsibility *for* the future as soon as we have assumed ownership. As *makers* of the future we become responsible for the *outcomes* of our future-creating actions.

The second shift relates to both the *origin* and the *reality status* of the future. In contrast to predecessors we do *not* think of the future as already existing or pre-determined. We think of the future as created by us in and for the present. We see ourselves as the owners, producers and managers of an *open* future, which we shape to our plans and intentions. The future is assumed to be subject to our will, even if it does not always work out the way it was planned.

This means, in our hands the future loses its determined quality and emerges as a domain of *possibility*, as a realm of pure *potential*, which we influence, co-produce and realize. And this, by the way, is the case even where we have a deep trust in fate, credit the stars with the power to affect our destiny or hold strong religious beliefs. In such cases we live with the paradox of a future that is simultaneously open and determined, without giving much thought to the matter.

Regarding its *reality status*, this future of ours is ‘not yet’, not material, not factual and thus has no reality status. Only the factual present and past (as I have already indicated) have the status of factual reality.

The third shift relates to *expertise*. Modern experts on the future are no longer specialists on ancestors, gods or the stars. Instead they are experts on people and their behaviours. Consequently they are drawn not from religious elites but predominantly connected to the academic fields of business studies, economics, history, politics, psychology, sociology and social policy. These contemporary experts on the future have to know not the future present; they have to know the *past* in order to be able to *calculate the probable future*. And these probable futures are established not with reference to individuals and unique events but calculated on the basis of aggregates that produce projections about probable averages and rates of change. Thus, collective, historically sedimented knowledge rooted in the *factual past*, is the foundation upon which contemporary experts on the future conjecture about the ‘not yet’. Past repetitions in nature and society allow for anticipation and comparison. As such, repetition acts like a projected conceptual structure and scaffold for action in the present.

However, the more we create futures, the more intensely we pursue progress, the faster we change society in the process, and the more interdependent our creations are, the less those projected structures hold, and the less the past can act as guide for knowledge of the future. With the modern pursuit of progress and innovation, for example, the aim is

precisely *not* the repetition of the past but the pursuit of the new and novel.

This clearly has consequences. In contexts where we are the owners of the future who pursue progress and innovation rather than stability and permanence, the past contains only very limited useful knowledge (in the sense of information not in the sense of wisdom) about the future. Carefully constructed scaffolds and structures of stability and certainty *dissolve into processes*. All that is solid melts into air, to use Marx's evocative phrase, and prognoses of future effects and outcomes have to be built ever more on conjecture, fantasy and imagination rather than fact and secure knowledge rooted in the past. And in such contexts experts inevitably disagree about their calculations of probability.

This puts the ball right back into the public court since, in such contexts, there is no way of answering, with any degree of certainty, the questions: 'What will be?' 'What will happen?' 'What does the future hold? When these questions become futile we find ourselves in the realm not of science and empirical analysis but in the realm of *morals and ethics*. The old questions need to be replaced with new ones that are more appropriate to the contemporary condition. We need to ask instead: 'What *should* happen?' 'What is the *right* thing to do?' 'What might be a *just* solution?' Importantly, these are not questions that science or economics can arbitrate (not even the law as it is currently designed but I can't deal with this here). Instead, these are questions of values, of morals and of ethics. As such they belong in the *public domain*: they have to be addressed by us, not as experts of a particular field but as *citizens* who are all implicated in the decisions and actions that are carried out on our behalf.

The fourth consequence of the modern approach to the future relates to *methodological issues*. Interestingly, many futures methodologies are *focused on knowledge*, concerned with knowing what is fundamentally unknowable. If the future is open and subject to human design and if we acknowledge that human actions are interconnected and mutually implicating, and that people can act in the light of new knowledge, then knowing *the* future becomes a contradiction in terms.

Futurologists have recognized this long ago and are pursuing instead *possible, probable and preferred* futures. They do this with methodological tools that range from, for example, Foresight and Delphi methods, to horizon scanning, back-casting and scenario building. And we had a number of presentations at this conference which demonstrated one or other of these methods. What we need to appreciate, however, is

that all the methods are still operating in the futures sphere of knowledge: knowledge to gauge potential outcomes of actions and knowledge to provide a better basis for action.

Futures methodologies on the whole do not study the nature of future-oriented *actions* or the *ethics* involved. Instead, the future dimension of actions and ethics forms a largely implicit part of the disciplines concerned with those social spheres. And, where the disciplines have pretensions to the status of a science, the future becomes a highly problematic domain of study.

Furthermore, the methodologies are largely those appropriate for *matter* and *space* but *inappropriate* for the temporal realm. They tend to focus on the products (the socio-material outcomes) of action and not the action, on the symptoms not the processes, on the material but not the temporal side. Without a thoroughly temporal analysis of the interweaving of past, present and future and *processes*, however, most of what we need and should study escapes our methodology.

Let me briefly explain with the example of *nuclear power*. Decisions made in the middle of the last century about nuclear power *determine* and *delimit* not just our present but the present of thousands of generations hence. We can't see, or touch, or smell or taste the reality of those effects. We don't know that reality the way we know other things (spatially located matter) through our senses. Only our cells recognise the effects and they already live that reality.

Of course, we can talk about *past facts* of nuclear power. We can talk about the bombs that were dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, about the post-war nuclear treaties, about new countries having joined the previously exclusive nuclear club, about the committees charged to come up with recommendations about nuclear waste, and so forth. All these are past and present facts extending into the future.

What we can no longer do in such a context is to oppose the factual past and present to a non-factual potential associated with an empty and open future. There clearly *is* potential for action but this future is anything *but* open. It is anything *but* empty. It is anything *but* an empty vessel to be filled with our desires. It is instead an extremely crowded domain. Moreover, this domain is not spatial and not material but *temporal*. It is a *process realm* where past decisions and actions influence and delimit current decisions and actions. Here certain futures are set in train already. Just think of the legacy of nuclear waste, the unpopularity of nuclear

power and associated protests, the fact that certain unwanted guests have infiltrated the previously exclusive nuclear club or the massive costs involved in ‘new build’, decommissioning and radio-active waste management. You might further think of the associated globalisation of crime, business, illegal trade and the potential for and terrorism. All these ongoing processes and futures in the making play a crucial part in what decisions *are* being taken today, what decisions *can* be taken, and what decisions *make sense* to be taken.

What we also need to appreciate is that we tend to *bracket* out from our concerns the full depth of extension into the future that is appropriate to the reach of the consequences of our actions. With respect to nuclear power we are talking here not of the already unusual timescale of 20 to 50 years of planning not even a couple of hundred years but a timescale of many thousands of years to which our serious attention is required if the timescale of responsibility is to become appropriate to the time-scale of effects of our actions.

Politics of Posterity

Politically, this is extremely difficult territory. Our representatives in local and national government have no mandate to operate in this vast temporal domain. Their mandate is 4-5 years. Since most political decisions have effects that outlast their creators, we the public give them an *implicit* mandate to effect us and our children, at a push even our children’s children. But here we are already pushing the boundaries of *our* legitimacy of consent: Can we be sure that our children and our children’s children would approve of our consent and agree with the rationale for our thinking and acting? Of course, we can’t be sure. Governments certainly have no mandate since the people and species that will be affected by those decisions have *no voice* and *no vote*.

Once you become aware of these temporal issues you realize that we have *no political structures* in place that address this problem: We have no appointed guardians of the long-term future, no political body with the task to represent the unborn.

Now this is a problem not of science, not of economics, not even of politics. It is a problem *for* contemporary society, which needs to be addressed *by* contemporary society. It is to be handled through debates concerned with what is *right* and what is *just*. Wolfgang Sachs has given us ample examples of what might be involved here. As citizens we need to hold those debates in the full knowledge that our decisions and actions and their effects make us *trespassers* in the future present of others, that

we are inescapably *illegal immigrants* in *their* worlds; and that they have *not* given their consent.

We can only achieve such a shift in perspective and concern if we reconnect the social spheres of action, knowledge and ethics. Moreover, given that certainty of knowledge is not available for the contemporary process world of futures in the making, we need to approach the ethical domain not as the third element in this tri-partite domain but as the first one. Where knowledge is patchy or not available, furthermore, we need to establish a *direct connection* between action and ethics and stop making ethics dependent on knowledge about outcomes of actions. We need instead to utilize knowledge as a helpful but subordinate source to responsible action.

Finally and in summary let me suggest that we need to accept and embrace the recognition that creating long-term futures is *not* exclusively an economic, a scientific or a political decision realm. It is not even a decision realm based on the agreement between all three. Rather, the futures of our making, the process futures that are set on their way are futures that *have already happened*. Those futures are our collective responsibility, which means that they require our collective effort as citizens. This collective effort involves all sectors of society – old and young – all domains of skill and all knowledge practices.

I hope that with this conference we have taken a step in this direction. So let me thank you all for coming and for your tremendous contributions to this process.