



Interview with Riel Miller

«In Catalonia, the key to change are imaginative and creative people»

MAR JIMÉNEZ

Change, flexibility, knowledge and values are critical elements for **Riel Miller**, a specialist in strategic thought and prospection. Miller does not pretend to predict the future but he wants to think the present from multiple different perspectives allowing to build a better tomorrow. In line with this principle, he imagines a society in which knowledge is its basic asset and any activity generates learning. In this context, Catalonia has factors placing it in a good position. Miller is clear about it: «This is a country with truly imaginative and creative people, and this is the key to change.»





You are a prospection expert. What scenario will we find once we leave the crisis behind?

The crisis has reproduced a set of changes in the system we had seen before, so people, communities or companies have modified their habits regarding both production strategies and their way of relating and living. These changes modulate the society. A very clear example is the emergence of the mobile phone. Nobody could imagine that everybody would have one, that it would become indispensable! This kind of change is subtle, it's not dramatic, it requires a certain time and is not preconceived, but it changes what we're creating, the value we produce. This occurs in open systems like those we have today: open in what we produce, in what we are, in the way we dress and think. This way of being and living provides a great potential for change.

Accepting this change requires to be open-minded and receptive?

I wouldn't judge people based on their open-mindedness. The problem is not here but the critical point is that we altogether as a society are able to create the collective conditions allowing such change.

«The essential point is that as a society we create the collective conditions allowing change.»

Could you expand on that?

This interview is being conducted in English. So you had to learn the language previously to communicate with Anglo-Saxon people. Hence this is a quite strict requirement you had to fulfil to do this collective activity. Likewise, we have governments, which are also collective constructs as we want them to build roads, to have an army, to have hospitals. Centuries ago, there was the collective conviction that God chose the king to rule. Today nobody puts the existence of government in doubt. We collectively take it for granted. So with time, our interpretation of collectivity has changed, and it's difficult as we need to understand and assume that there is a collective interest justifying

the existence of a government. Therefore, we have created a collective awareness.

You talk of collective awareness. But this crisis has been characterised by the strive for individual profit, despising collective damage certain activities such as financial engineering could cause. The troubles experienced will give new value to collective interest?

I'm considered a futurologist and people expect futurologists to talk of the future. But to me, the future doesn't exist, we can't know it. I'm very modest regarding our ability to create it. Very often, what we wish and what we think we're doing is exactly the opposite of what we achieve.

There are many examples in history showing that: just look at the reaction to the Great Depression in the 1930s. None of the rulers nor the people fighting it were aware that they were actually creating the conditions for the outbreak of World War II! And to this we need to add that from my point of view, even if we had perfect information and were morally impeccable, we would be unable to foresee the future in complex systems as ours either. For no matter what trends there are and how often a given behavioural pattern repeats over a long time, this is no guarantee for anything. There are no certainties in a complex system. Having said that, this doesn't mean that we shouldn't follow a morality, a set of values. For so far, what we have done was to infringe morality. We build many bridges leading nowhere, we built cities where we shouldn't have. And then we complained about pollution and the effects of climate change.

So what can be done in the light of this?

We need to develop an education for the future, a new way of thinking of the future allowing it to be much more open. All in all, we need to stop colonising the future. We shall not say what the future has to be like. So when you ask me how the future will be, if I am consistent with my scientific stance, I can't give you any answer. However, what I can do is use my information to reconsider the present.



Go ahead.

I make a distinction between three types of present potential. One is related to survival: avoiding the lion, running away from lightning, building the home where one feels safe; that is, preparing to fight against some eventualities that may affect us in the future. Secondly, there is what I call «optimisation»: we look for ways of optimising the present potential. For instance, we sow seeds to grow plants. With labour, capital and steel we build cars. We humans have the essential imperative of surviving, and in this respect, the end justifies the means, so we'll get around anything interposing to our will.

However, and this is the third factor, we also need to bear in mind that we live in a world in which diversity and freedom are important, so nothing is black or white. The important for everybody is what they think as an individual and what they want to do. Parental authority is not accepted, there is no clear pattern telling the way to follow. There is a variety of present potentials. And this has us living a period characterised by extraordinary fear. The only alternative to calm down is to think: «I have my success model and I'm going to follow it anyway». Succeeding becomes a very powerful wish.

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So what do we need to do?

Every individual needs to be able to develop their own imagination, so they can interpret the world from different points of view, which in turn will allow them to conceive different future scenarios. What's important is not the future but how we understand and explain ourselves the present. We can't guess the future but we can interpret the present from different points of view. We can be creative as to the present.



▲ «Diversification is the best production risk strategy.»

Riel Miller

What will the future be like? This is one of the questions a prospection expert like Riel Miller is usually asked, yet he prefers to talk of present potentiality. A specialist in long-term strategic thought, this Canadian has a PhD in Economics from the New York Social Research, a master in Social and Political Thought from York University, Toronto and a degree in Economics and Political Science from the Carleton University, Ottawa. He has spent most of his career at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Ontario government. In 2005 he founded XperidoX: Futures Consulting, a consulting company at which he currently advises the Government of Catalonia.

So the key is being flexible...

The key issue is how to become flexible. And especially, our capacity of creating networks, communities of individuals helping us achieve our present goals. If we have a stronger, more solid world around us that is consistent with our values and more open to our imagination and the capacity of thinking of alternatives, of different stories, we'll be stronger in the future. However, I can't be sure of that, I have no certainty that this is the solution.

«The big challenge we have today is to change the belief that our survival depends on planning. What is crucial is the ability to think of the present in a more creative way.»

What did we do wrong to come to such a big crisis as the one we had? To understand our present, we need to have a look at past mistakes...

There is another dimension to it. Looking back in history is necessary, of course, but we also need to have a look at the present and try to understand it in terms of historical change. If we observe the present from a complex perspective and if we think how to change our aversion to risk or our way of thinking, we can prevent that bridge we built from collapsing. And if it collapsed we would be insured. This is a way of approaching the present by planning it, which gives us safety. But we can also approach the present from the diversification perspective. And from my point of view, this is the best production risk strategy. To cross a river, you can use a thousand boats instead of a bridge. If you lose one boat, it's not so bad, you're more flexible. And in the end, you'll be able to invest in building a bridge. So far, we have been based on planning to reduce fear. The big challenge we have today is to change the belief that our survival depends on planning, of doing what we think will be best for us to face the future. What is crucial is the ability to think of our present more creatively and also the ability to think of the future in a different way.

How can we think of the present in a more creative way?

Look, we don't know what problems we'll have in the future. So what counts is what we know today. I've been working for twenty years in that: what is the knowledge society? How do we define the learning society? To me, it's an imaginary society.

Imaginary?

I want to be imaginative. Just look: from horses we came to cars, which are a faster means of transportation. But the important, the fundamental difference between horses and cars is the way the latter changed the organisation of our cities. What's important is how the car transformed our way of working and living. So the key question is: how is society transformed, and what is the potential of such transformation in terms of our imagination?

So what is this potential?

I've created a very detailed, very analytical framework to analyse the knowledge society, which derives from what I call the «learning-intensive society». The learning-intensive society is a society in which the creation of values has changed. The central idea is that as time passes, there is a change in what we produce, how we produce it and the motivation leading us to produce it.

«In my model, I examine in an imaginary way a society whose main activity is learning. And one crucial aspect in this society is that you can't judge the learning of individuals –a society that is not organised hierarchically but heterarchically.»

Could you be more specific on that?

We used to be an agrarian society for a long time, we were supplied with food, clothes and shelter in villages; later we evolved to industrial production, creating products of all kinds; and then came service production at industrial scale: banks, hospitals, restaurants... There is labour

division in this model, values are structured hierarchically. Now, how do we produce knowledge? We're creating knowledge constantly. Learning creates values, it's a production process. In my model, I examine in an imaginary way a society whose main activity is learning. And one crucial aspect in this society is that you can't judge the learning of individuals. You learn things that are good for you, I learn things that are good for me. And this way, we get away from the principle of the industrial era by which all that was good could be produced in mass. That era was structured hierarchically.

How is your imaginary society organised?

I use the term *heterarchy*, which is the opposite of *hierarchy*. How does a heterarchical society work? It's an imaginary society in which your learning is as good as mine. So in this society, learning is the added value. However, there is a problem, that figures also matter. And here we're back to the crisis.

In what respect?

This crisis is a paradigmatic example of disconnection of patterns regulating individuals, institutions covering these patterns and what we actually do. The crisis is a symptom showing that a part of the institutions and our thought patterns are incompatible with our way of living. There is one point illustrating this misadjustment: identity. Who am I? What's the sense of my life? I ask many of my students why they are at university and they're unable to give an answer! They're there because they're supposed to, as they previously attended school and will need to work after. And their parents are concerned because they want to plan their future! However, this Facebook generation is much more spontaneous. So the key question is if we can give them enough confidence to build their own world.

Do young people have this confidence now?

I don't think so. Our collective mindset is important here, and so is letting them do. But at this point, the crisis appears as an important element generating a sort of struggle for power. On the one hand, it has demonstrated that the

system doesn't work and the conditions under which we used to live have changed, and on the other, the crisis and the uncertainty it has caused have led us to reproduce past patterns to reduce risk and feel safe.

«Uncertainty caused by the crisis leads us to reproduce past patterns to reduce risk and feel safe but they are no good because conditions have changed.»

These patterns are now obsolete...

These patterns used to work in the past but are no good now because conditions have changed. If we're in a crisis it's because things we've done so far have taken us there! The problem is that we are very strongly inclined to react to such situations by trying to reestablish the conditions of the past. The focus needs to change, we need to be imaginative. If we introduced things such as *cybercitizenship*, new intellectual property laws, new transaction systems, if we created the conditions to do *microbanking*, the old intermediaries, the government, the banks, the big companies, the business brand as a concept, labour as a concept, all these things would be in doubt! Just think that in the past we did so radical things like introducing universal mandatory education, which meant a massive change, but now we're unable to remember the impact it had! This led to absolutely radical change! Children stopped working, schools had to be built... We need to be imaginative to build a society considering and giving value to learning –the learning generated in this interview, for instance.

What's the role of the government in this society?

The government has still the underlying responsibility of setting rules and laws. I call it the TCP/IP condition, the internet protocols. It's a very strict, arbitrary protocol that allows us to connect to each other. Hence the government is still very important to define the basic rules of the game.

Does the government have to take care of education in this knowledge society?

In the urban industrial society, the goals of school have been very clear so far: making sure that workers know to get up early, show up at work in time, shut up and accept the orders of the boss. But conditions have changed now. Just two days ago, I went to my daughter's school to attend the end-of-term party, and I asked myself, who are these people? Why am I here with these people? Why am I a subject exposed to the continuous presence of people I don't care about? And this is so because in the office and in the city we've learned to be constantly in the presence of people we don't know, we don't care about but with whom we need to be in good terms so they don't get angry with us. And we created schools to learn to behave this way.

«In the urban industrial society, school has served to make sure that workers get up early, show up at work in time, shut up and accept the orders of the boss. But conditions have changed now.»

You put everything in doubt! What you are suggesting is a revolution!

What I would like to convey to you is that things aren't permanent. Back in time, life in villages and cities wasn't as it is now. I'm only asking why we take things for granted. And it's because our imagination about the future is already set. We assume that there will be more schools, more universities, more cities, more factories... Our imagination on the future is based on the present and pushes it in time! As I told you before, our challenge is to be imaginative on the present in order to build the future we wish. A free, different future in which life makes sense, in which we're happy. I take the underground every day. Am I happy there? Just because I use it every day, can we say that the underground is a positive thing? No! Another example can be work. Why does everybody need to have a job? Is work good as such?

No! We can assert that work per se is not inherently good.

What needs to be our life goal?

We need to respect our purposes. And the purpose of people today is to lead a satisfactory life and to know who we are.

«The entrepreneur in the classical sense will still play a role, he won't disappear. But the hierarchical production and organisation model will stop being predominant. The model will change.»

So far it seemed that the life goal, the obsession in life was to be successful.

The key question is how we define success. I believe in the right to succeed. To my understanding, having success is leading a life that makes sense, in which I do things every day that allow me to learn and don't force me to live under a hierarchical structure.

But we're living in a hierarchised world in which success, at least so far, has not been perceived as you define it.

Exactly. We've seen many contradictions around us, people driving a Ferrari but committing suicide because their life didn't make sense. Just consider that the question of work/family reconciliation is becoming increasingly acute because people have been squeezed and they don't accept this anymore. And this is positive.

Will the crisis help us reorient our way of life?

The crisis has shown that things aren't working and that we need to start thinking that we need to change them.

In this knowledge society, companies should modify their production patterns. They are now essentially hierarchical.

The past is still very present in how we think of reality. We need to bear in mind that the industrial society will still last for centuries. It will stay present –beware, I'm making an assumption!–

in how we talk and how we think. And companies will still play a relevant role and be structured hierarchically. Just note that the way Steve Jobs translates his great idea of the iPhone into a mass product is based on a hierarchical organisation, similar to how Henry Ford organised production. We've turned the process more efficient, we've created networks, but it's still fundamentally hierarchical. So we could say that the farmer, the knowledgeable entrepreneur in the classical sense will still play a role, he won't disappear. But this production and organisation model will stop being predominant. The model will change.

Where are we going to?

Companies will not be final product suppliers anymore but will instead become intermediate producers of tools consumers will be able to modify and adapt to their needs. This is already occurring. See the iPhone: you can download a lot of applications, you can configure it to your taste, according to your needs. The new key question will be: how can I use this tool? We're very clear about what a car is good for, but we don't know what the iPhone will. This is a crucial side to the present process of change. The consumer will become as much supplier as customer as they are inventing what use will be given to a certain tool.

The consumer becomes much more relevant in the production process.

Exactly, this is a crucial change. On the tip of the industrial society pyramid there used to be the creator of concepts, the genius. And at its bottom was the executor, the human who was replaceable and worked with a machine, represented by Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*. Right now, the crucial element for companies is on the consumer side, in a process defined as **mass customisation**. Demand is the key.

This new organisation of customised industrial production will be applied, apart from devices like the iPhone, to other sorts of manufactured products such as T-shirts?

Customisation of T-shirts is probably a very local thing, but we're moving into this direction in all

areas of manufacturing. What will be critical is the capacity of saying how we can help our customers so they do what they want. And we also need to help them know what they actually want. Because I think it's wrong to assume that they know it. The challenge of codesign, of coproduction is a dual challenge on both the offer and the demand side. It's a big change for many companies. But if we look at some of the most successful companies, you'll see that they're those already doing this sort of adaptation. It's not easy to say, but I believe that a part of what is happening is evolutionary.

General Motors is dying and, to be frank, I don't think this is bad. It's obviously difficult for people losing their jobs, but if we had decided to preserve agriculture as it was a century ago, we would have many more people on farms but we would be poorer. We took a decision, we chose a society that changes so we can be freer and more efficient. What do we do with our freedom? This is our problem. But I think the evolutionary process is important.

«In mass customisation processes, demand is the key. It's a big change for many companies and some of the most successful are those already doing this sort of adaptation.»

However, people think especially of price in times of crisis, and standardised things are often cheaper than customised items. How do you explain this contradiction?

I'll give you an example. They're currently looking for a manufactured product that kills malaria mosquitoes. I read that some researchers went to a local shop and bought products manufactured in mass. And they used these cheap products to mix them and make a new one killing mosquitoes. Industrials think: «I can supply many parts of the world at a very cheap price to create the customised product you want.» This mediation, this skill is still highly valuable. If you want to do something but at a lower price you need to be the smartest.

How do you see the situation of Catalonia in the revolution you're suggesting?

Let's set aside statistics and look at the activity of the country. What we can see is a formidable internal capacity of design, quality, interaction and problem-solving. This is a historical and cultural capacity and gives much force to the country. However, if all this is left aside and they want to try to imitate some other place to ensure success, if they want to be, for instance, like Silicon Valley, there's a risk of not respecting the strength to bring about change. There's a danger of making the wrong choice when we're scared. In the current crisis, this is one of the most delicate issues all over. In the light of this, the most

important, and I think Catalonia can do it, is to build the future your own way, starting from the present potential and being imaginative. This is a country with truly imaginative and creative people. And this is the key to change.

«Companies will not be final product suppliers anymore but produce tools consumers will be able to modify and adapt to their needs. This is already occurring with the iPhone but we're going to see this in all areas of manufacturing soon.»

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