

INTELLECTUALS MELANCHOLIA

Jenny ANDERSSON, *The Future of the World. Futurology, Futurists, and the Struggle for the Post-Cold War Imagination* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, 267 p.)

*The Future of the World* is a tour de force of the intellectual history of the 20th century. In the course of its 230 pages, one encounters Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt, Daniel Bell, Olaf Helmer, Johan Galtung, Kenneth Boulding, Robert Jungk, Günter Anders and Ron Hubbard, the science fiction author and founder of Scientology.

*The Future of the World* reconstructs futurology, future studies, and future research—all terms with charged meanings—in a truly global history. It starts with Walter Benjamin's famous metaphor of the angel being exposed to a storm called progress, blowing backwards and being pushed into the future. Walter Benjamin and the pessimism regarding the totalitarian impact of progress in enmeshing humans in what Max Weber famously called the iron cage, is one crucial reference point for thinking about the future from the left.

*The Future of the World* shows how the future remained a concern for the left throughout the 20th century—from Walter Benjamin to Ossip K. Flechtheim to Robert Jungk. But taking intellectual hold of the future has also been a concern for technocrats and the political right, perhaps even more so. For Daniel Bell, Raymond Aron or Friedrich von Hayek, interest in future research, as it became institutionalized particularly in the post-war period, “was an outcome of a quintessential reflection on the possibilities of control on a new kind of mass society and its inherent temporalities” [51].

Andersson's book becomes a global intellectual history by reconstructing the role of future research across the world. The focus is on the United States and Western Europe. However, one chapter also investigates the role of future studies in the communist East and, throughout the book, references are made to the role of future studies in Japan, India and Brazil. Very convincingly the book shows how the actors were influenced by each other and learned from one another cross-nationally and across the Iron Curtain. As such, the author demonstrates that futurology is a truly transnational intellectual project in which scholars and institutions from across the world and with very different ideological orientations participated. And she shows that the future

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studies of the post-war period need to be understood in the context of Cold War rivalry.

Future studies can have at least two different objectives. They can be driven by the conviction that scientific research, with the help of technological instruments, models or computing power, can actually foresee future developments. Prediction is claimed to be possible not only in the natural sciences but in the social sciences as well [78]. For a while, futurologists believed in such a predictability of world futures. But relatively soon, in the 1950s, it became clear to them that foreknowledge of the future was indeed impossible. The future is too complex, too open to be predictable in any meaningful manner. They understood very quickly, however, that despite the impossibility of foreknowing the future, images of the future were powerful instruments that could be utilized for the governance of modern societies. To design and control images of the future leads political and economic decisions in desirable directions, while cognitively foreclosing other possibilities. The future can be used as an instrument of political control; the social sciences can be a social technology to actively shape the future. In this attempt at controlling the future lies a great historical continuity from traditional to modern societies.

On the left, on the other hand, images of the future had a different purpose. Scholars from Ernst Bloch to Robert Jungk and Herbert Marcuse understood that visions of the future, tales of alternative social orders, or utopias can be a liberating force in society. These envisioned alternatives of a better future can become guideposts that direct political action and open up new possibilities for social development.

With these different objectives in mind, future studies played an important role for both sides of the political spectrum. Futurology had its heyday in the 1960s and early 1970s. It has faded, as Andersson shows, since the 1980s, becoming more and more esoteric and losing any academic credibility it may have had. But one may consider how the beliefs of futurologists are enjoying a second life in the technocratic utopias propagated by Silicon Valley entrepreneurs. Already in the 1950s experts at RAND Corporation attempted to develop an algorithm that would steer a fully automated response to an attack from the Soviet Union. Compare this to today's artificial intelligence plans for automated warfare in the future. But Silicon Valley has gone even further than the futurologists of the 1960s: artificial intelligence promises the predictive capacities that futurologists at RAND had deemed to be impossible in the 1950s. No matter whether such promises can be fulfilled, the decisions being taken based on such visions control our societal futures.

Each chapter of Andersson's book opens new and fascinating perspectives to which this review can only refer selectively. One of the fascinating tales told in the book refers to RAND as one of the crucial American players developing future studies as an instrument of active political intervention. RAND started as a research and development unit of the US Airforce but later developed into a think tank that focused on strategy planning and policy planning in the civilian sphere. The RAND Corporation developed an understanding of the social sciences as a tool for rational social development by means of social engineering. Initially looking for a "general theory of the future" [Andersson 2018: 78], it became clear to its director Olaf Helmer—an Austrian from the Vienna Circle—that techniques of prospection need to be seen as instruments for improving decision-making. It was at RAND that crucial techniques of prospection, in particular scenario analysis and the Delphi method, were developed which were hugely successful cognitive tools, spreading globally as instruments of policy planning. They spread not just to policy think tanks, but were also taken over by multinational companies and became a crucial tool in their strategic planning, most famously by Royal Dutch Shell.

Based on the work at RAND, futurologists increasingly saw the future as a matter of expertise, which would enable the rational planning of social development. Using sophisticated instruments, experts would identify the best solutions and thus actively intervene in social development for a collective good as defined by them. Expert opinions, articulated through scenario planning or Delphi exercises, showed the rational decisions that had been taken to reach a desirable future. As Andersson demonstrates, this technocratic understanding of the role of the social sciences had its heyday in the early 1960s until it was shattered in the US by the upheavals of the civil rights movement and the student movement against the Vietnam War. As Jenny Andersson describes, Daniel Bell is probably the most indicative person to demonstrate this change. Especially through the "Commission for the Year 2000", founded in 1964 and chaired by Bell, the idea of technocratic and rational planning of social development became institutionalized. Bell's book, *The End of Ideology* [1960], expresses most clearly the idea of rational technocratic planning: it would lead to an end of ideological controversies because best practice could be technocratically determined. Bell was mesmerized by the—in his opinion—irrationality of the student movement at Columbia University, leading to a decisive shift in his perception of the possibility of rational planning. In his 1973 book, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, Bell expresses a profound skepticism with regard to the possibilities for rational progress of mass societies.

“The Future of the World” makes crystal clear the importance of the future as an imaginative realm that is critical for the political purposes of control. Land grabbing in modernity is not primarily—or at least not exclusively—a geographic phenomenon, but a temporal phenomenon. Modern societies—as Reinhart Koselleck showed in his research on early modernity—are characterized by a temporal shift in which the future is no longer seen as predetermined by a divine being. On the one hand, the emerging openness of the future provides space for utopias that envision possible futures that are normatively desirable. But, from a different perspective, this openness is also a danger for political control, and political actors immediately try to fill the open future with their images, thus colonizing or foreclosing the future once again. The struggle over images of the future thus stands at the center of political controversies, a point that Andersson develops masterfully throughout the book.

When reading *The Future of the World*, I was particularly struck by the encounter with a world of social scientists that was highly influential. Their thinking often came close to neoliberal ideas, but they barely receive any recognition in the current discourse on the intellectual and institutional roots of neoliberalism. As in the neoliberals of the 1980s, the Vienna Circle was also a crucial intellectual background for the futurists. Unfortunately, apart from some remarks in the conclusion, Andersson does not systematically connect the futurists with neoliberalism. To be sure, there are important differences between the futurists and neoliberals. Neoliberalism focuses on the redesign of *economic* institutions and claims that market-oriented tools should be extended to society writ large. It is an economic model of society. The futurists of the 1960s are not simply neoliberals. They are interested in social reforms and gain their expertise from much wider intellectual traditions than economic theory. They are technocratic social reformers concerned with social order not market efficiency. But in the 1970s these two groups seem to meet in their diagnosis of a social and economic crisis. And in the 1980s, as Andersson shows, future studies became much more inward looking, advocating an individualistic libertarianism and interest in esoteric science fiction visions of civilizations in space. As the author indicates on the last pages of the book, futurology may also be seen as a root of (neoliberal) Silicon Valley ideology. Such convergences could also be identified in other developments. For instance, institutions such as the Davos Forum could be interpreted as a combination of futurology and neoliberal market fundamentalism.

This brings me to my last point. When reading this book and seeing all the connections and mutual influences of actors and institutions whom

we mostly know, but whose interrelatedness is only revealed by Jenny Andersson, a follow-up project came to mind. It might be possible today to write an encompassing intellectual history of the social sciences in the 20th century. What I mean by this is not an institutional history of the social sciences but rather a book on the different intellectual strands that conceptualized the relationship between society, state, culture and economy from diverse normative and political perspectives; a book that investigates these intellectual currents in their global interactions and in their influence in the realm of politics. Such a history would include the progressive movement, the European labor movement, American pragmatism, liberalism, neoliberal thinking, the Frankfurt School, neo-conservatism, fascism, dependency theories, socialist reform movements. However, it would also include the futurists and their different visions of social development. In *The Future of the World*, Jenny Andersson has contributed an important piece to this major puzzle.

J E N S B E C K E R T