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The Future Landscape

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Abstract

This working paper is a preliminary study of some central actors in the future landscape. It argues that the future landscape is a spectrum stretching from institutions claiming independent, objective expertise and scientific certainty about the future, to those focused on the social creation of knowledge through participation and public debate. We might call this a spectre encompassing radically different approaches to the *knowability* and *governability* of the future – hence a landscape that stretches from the knowable and governable future to the unknowable and ungovernable. These shifting dimensions in claims to scientific rationality and political control are discernible in definitions of future studies as an activity of knowledge production. What kind of study object is the future, what kind of knowledge can one produce, how, and with what claims to certainty and expertise?

Sammanfattning

Arbetsrapporten Framtidens landskap är en preliminär studie av hur framtiden idag studeras, organiseras och styrs, som en delstudie inom projektet Framtidens privatisering.

I arbetsrapporten har ett antal institutioner och organisationer som ägnar sig åt att studera framtiden belysts. Avsikten var att undersöka definitioner av hur framtiden kan studeras och observeras, samt föreställningar om framtidens styrbarhet (*knowability* och *governability*). Anspråk på att veta något om framtiden samt att kunna styra denna kan sägas skapa ett slags spektrum, som sträcker sig över definitioner av framtiden som i grunden oförutsägbar och ostuderbar, till föreställningar om framtiden som något som kan observeras och förutsägas på vetenskaplig grund. Andra skiljelinjer i detta framtidens landskap är hur olika institutioner definierar framtidens avnämare, dvs. den medborgare, klient eller organisation som har nytta av att framtiden studeras, liksom det intresse, offentligt eller privat, som därmed anses gynnas.

I den ena änden av framtidens landskap befinner sig institutioner som sysslar med framtiden som en slags utopi och kritik, exempelvis UNESCO. Deras framtidsstudier definierar framtiden som ett slags dialog med nuet, och syftar till att identifiera möjliga alternativa utvecklingsvägar, exempelvis i form av biodiversitet eller etnisk mångfald. Framtiden är en slags fantasins produkt, och något som skapas av människan själv genom mänsklig kreativitet och vilja. Gemensamt för dessa framtidsstudier är att de tenderar att identifiera minoriteter, ex. barn, kvinnor, eller ursprungsfolk, som ett slags framtidsbärare, som grupper som står i särskild kontakt med framtiden genom att på olika sätt befinna sig utanför den sas. etablerade modernitetens framstegstankar.

I den andra änden av framtidens landskap finner vi exempelvis EUs forecasting verksamhet, som har en svensk motsvarighet i Teknisk framsyn, och som handlar om att framskriva eller extrapolera vissa tunga industriella utvecklingstendenser. Forecasts behandlar framtiden som något som vi både kan veta något om och som vi kan styra – företrädesvis genom att samla grupper av experter, medborgare eller beslutsfattare (*stakeholders*) kring ett visst ämne och genom att nöta synpunkter mot varandra nå konsensus kring en viss utvecklingsväg och en viss framtidsvision. Eftersom forecasts idag har fått en mycket betydelsefull ställning inom ekonomisk och teknologisk planering kan man tala om dem som en de facto ny styrelseform, i arbetsrapporten kallad *governance by vision*.

Mapping futures – Introduction

The future is a highly heterogenous field. While the post war belief in planning has eroded, studying and anticipating the future has become, more than anything, an increasingly important activity for both private and public actors in recent decades. Multinational actors such as the OECD or the EU have sections and departmental units for forecasting and foresight. International non governmental organisations produce futures studies of specific regions, problems, and developments. The United Nations millenium project is one of the most dominant future visions for the developing world. Most national governments have planning bodies devoted to future developments, varying from government financed institutes for futures studies, national security agencies, and bodies for strategic planning or policy advice. The future has also increasingly become a corporate business, where big corporations such as IBM or Ericsson have units devoted to forecasts and future scenarios. In addition, in the 1980s and particularly 1990s, a very notable phenomenon is the rise of future consultancies who produce future studies for public and private institutions.

Some of the institutions mentioned here have a long history, while others yet are recent innovations.¹ The approaches to the future of these different institutions and actors are dramatically different, and so are the methodologies and terminologies applied. Prospective activities take place for many different reasons and motivations, ranging from utopian dreams of another future to forecasting and scenario techniques with industrial or military purposes. Consider the following ad from the Hawaii Futures Center,

Calling all sculptors, architects, designers, CGI artists, cartoonists, videographers, animators, dreamers, futurists, visionaries, inventors, model builders, culture evolvers, culture jammers, world citizens, pragmatic idealists, transhumanitarians, cognitarians, netizens, hackers, deep ecologists, shallow ecologists, postmodern utopians, visual thinkers, technophiles, technophobes, luddites, sceptics ... (Yes, this means You.) This is an open invitation to help design the Future of Hawaii for 02050. Starting in 02006, the people of the beautiful islands of Hawaii are embarking on a large scale conversation about their long term future possibilities. What might this archipelago – and the world of which it is part – look, feel and live like in 02050, around the time when today's teenagers become grandparents? Many answers are possible. We are responsible for beginning this conversation, which is a chance to inspire people to think big ...²

or this one from the European Union's foresight section,

Interrelationships between science, technology and society are becoming more complex. Therefore, thinking, debating and shaping the future is even more essential today to invest successfully in science and technology, and to make the industrial and societal choices that turn these investments into innovation and quality of life in the long run.³

The first appeals to artists and creative citizens to mould the future of Hawaii. The second aims clearly at identifying important future developments for innovation and industrial

¹ This study leaves out some significant institutions. It does not deal with corporate foresight, while this is arguably today a very important sphere of future thinking. It also does not deal with academia and university based future studies, nor with the reviews, conferences and professional organisations of futurists. I have also left out government institutions for long term planning since these will be the focus of specific case studies to follow. While I do not claim that this paper is exhaustive in any way, I think it provides a sample of futures producing institutions which is sufficiently heterogenous to allow us to study the main dimensions of the future.

² Hawaii futures research center webpage www.futures.hawaii.edu/sustainability.html, 20071119.

³ European commission Science and technology foresight, <http://cordis.europa.eu/foresight/why.htm>, 20071119.

growth. The former calls for creative thinking and public involvement in creating future visions that explore alternative and utopian realities, and thus it sees the future as the potential outcome of ordinary people's dreams and creativity. The second relies on science and innovation as the means of progress.

These are examples of the geography of the future landscape and its intellectual topography. The purpose of this preliminary study is to map this landscape in order to give us a picture of who, how and why are active in the future field today. While the study is by no means exhaustive, it aims to cover some central actors and provide a chart of the dimensions in the future landscape.

The working paper is structured after the problems set out in the research project *The privatisation of the future* – to do with the interplay between science and democracy, the future as governable and observable sphere, and the future as public or private interest. It thus aims to give a picture of the dimensions in the future landscape, between scientific expertise and public involvement, between technological and industrial foresight and civilisation critique, and between technocracy and utopia as facets of governance. The future landscape is a spectrum stretching from institutions claiming independent, objective expertise and scientific certainty about the future, to those focused on the social creation of knowledge through participation and public debate. We might call this a spectre encompassing radically different approaches to the *knowability* and *governability* of the future – hence a landscape that stretches from the knowable and governable future to the unknowable and ungovernable.

These shifting dimensions in claims to scientific rationality and political control are discernible in definitions of future studies as an activity of knowledge production. What kind of study object is the future, what kind of knowledge can one produce, how, and with what claims to certainty and expertise? This includes aspects like the identification of drivers of change, the methodologies and technologies used, expectations of the value of future knowledge to the surrounding community and indeed how this community, ie the relevant stakeholder, is defined, but also the language, symbols and metaphors that make up future discourse, future expertise, and future imagination.

No forward gazing ambition can escape the particular epistemological problems involved in studying the future. Science and imagination are two central, and rivalling, future strategies not only in these contemporary institutions but in the history of futures thought. We can clearly discern, in the contemporary futures field, the tension of the 1960s and 1970s between futures studies and futurology, and between notions of the future as conjecture or image, and notions of the future as science. These post war debates, in turn, fell back on classical contradictions in futures thought, from antiquity to modernity. Is the future an objective, pre-existing sphere of which we may be capable at least of fragmentary observations that can be empirically or deductively transformed into some kind of knowledge about the future, or is the future unbound by all things other than human imagination, and hence only present in our minds and souls? To what degree can it be influenced? Put it this way, there is a fundamental difference between futures studies that take the future as an *is*, an existing object that, while obscure and difficult to define, can still be studied and observed, and those that regard the future as a *becoming* that only emerges with our creative imagination.⁴ In the terminology of modern scientific paradigms, this is the conflict between the future as a material object of study, and the future as a process of social construction.

⁴ POLAK, F. (1973) *The image of the future*, Amsterdam, London, New York, Elsevier.

These differences define the intellectual activities and techniques used in contemporary forecasting, and they also define hierarchies and canons in the future field. They are active components in the production of the image and self image of the future 'expert', and thus in the production of authority and legitimacy. Is the expert studying the future, or making it up in the process? Is he perhaps acting as a catalyst for future drivers, spokesperson, as it were, for the future?

A more concrete way of illustrating these tensions and dimensions in the future landscape is to consider the contemporary usages of notions such as *futures* or *alternative futures*, which are all common notions on futures websites. The notion of alternative or plural futures was a marker of the critical futures studies tradition of the 60s and 70s. Following the ideas of for instance the French philosopher Bertrand de Jouvenel, studying the future should not be a process of achieving certainty about a specific future trajectory, but rather the process of opening up forms of dialogue with possible alternative futures. The plural *s* implied the crucial issue of democratic choice between different paths of development. It was a symbol of the critique of the technocratic planning regimes and the hegemonic notion of progress which informed future thinking in the post war period. In a sense, the *s* stood for an alternative notion of the political, reflecting the intellectual and political thought of the late 60s.

However, the idea of alternative futures has undergone developments in recent decades, developments that seem to reflect some of the key tendencies in the reorganisation of the political and intellectual landscape of the Western world. Today, the notion of plural futures has radically different meanings, ranging from utopian connotations of the radical alternative, to allusions close to the term futures in financial markets. In the tradition of critical futures studies, represented today for instance by Richard Slaughter or Sonyi Inayatullah, the term futures still stands for the potential of thinking otherwise, of conjuring up alternative and challenging dominating images of the future. Slaughter speaks of futures studies as a social capacity, which is distinct from methodologies such as scenario techniques, forecasting or extrapolation in its core ambition to empower people to think constructively about the future as a common and collective project of change.⁵ In contrast, the American Alternative Futures Institute, a consultancy once created by the futurists Alvin Toffler and Jim Dator, uses the term alternative futures in the meaning of pushing corporate clients (and NGOs) to see new development paths for themselves that were previously not available to them and thus seize new opportunities in innovation or influence.⁶ Choosing a preferred future here is about business vision; "what is the most audacious and yet achievable goal you could set".⁷

This illustrates a tendency that is particularly relevant for the project – the way that the language of critical futures studies seems to have merged with management and consultancy jargon in recent decades. This clearly has links to other processes such as the professionalization of futurists and the institutionalisation of futures studies as an academic discipline somewhere between management and planning (problems that are however left outside of this paper).

⁵ SLAUGHTER, R. (1996a) Futures Studies: From Individual to Social Capacity. *Futures*, 28, 751-762, SLAUGHTER, R. (2003) *Futures studies beyond dystopia: creating social foresight*, New York, Routledge Falmer.

⁶ Alternative futures institute, www.altfutures.com, 20071120

⁷ Ibid., Alternative futures institute, *Wiser futures compendium: Using futures tools to better understand and create the future*.

We can see these conceptual tensions also in the term *futures*.

A common use today of the term futures is with reference to education. To bodies such as the OECD or the EU, futures in education are about the anticipated economic returns of investment in education and higher learning, quite like the term futures in the financial markets signifies the speculation on the future value of investment into a commodity. In contrast, to Richard Slaughter, futures in education are about developing education as a way of opening up young people's minds to long term thinking, in order to develop the competence to conceive of a different future for themselves and the society they live in.⁸

These tensions in contemporary notions of the future go to show that the future field is still organised by fundamental debates on development, modernity and progress. At the heart of these stand not only critiques of capitalism, but also different notions of Man, the modern subject and its capacity to create the future – or be moulded by it.⁹

⁸ SLAUGHTER, R. (1996b) *New Thinking for a new millennium*, New York, Routledge.

⁹ Polak.

Claims to science: American futurology

We find the furthest claims to science in the US institutions of Rand and the Hudson Institute, reflecting the American tradition of futurology. Rand and Hudson were both fundamental institutions to the development of futurology in the post-war period, when mathematical modelling and computer simulation became foundations of prediction. Both Rand and Hudson were central institutions in the future field in the cold war period and their activities still reflect concerns with national prosperity and security, terrorism and national defence systems. In addition, in the post cold war era these organisations work with development and transition countries. Rand, for instance, has a European office which does consultancy work for the EU with foresight processes in the Enlargement area, and Hudson claims an influence in “helping the Baltic countries become booming market economies” as well spreading democracy in the Muslim world.¹⁰ It is a non partisan policy research institute with the objective to promote global security, prosperity and freedom. Its future agenda departs in the ambition to “challenge conventional thinking and manage strategic transitions to the future”. The Hudson institute was founded by the legendary futurist Herman Kahn in 1961 and is still operating in his tradition. The website includes links to several founding texts of Kahns futurology canon, including extracts from *The Year 2000*. The website also contains a quote from Donald Rumsfeld saying Herman Kahn was a giant.¹¹

Both Rand and Hudson claim to do ‘objective analysis’ and effective solutions’, in the tradition of empirical research and boasts a row of Nobel prize laureates among its former researchers. Their reports and projects pass through peer review systems that ‘ensure analyses are free from bias’. References to nomological tendencies in demography, economic change globalisations – so studies aim to detect more or less law bound scenarios. The future is thus systemic, patterned, something that can be discovered through scientific rationality. Meanwhile, these institutions simultaneously claim objectivity and neutral scientific expertise – and influence in having changing the course of the future, which cannot be an objective activity. So the rand corporation claims indeed to have invented the post war world; “almost all defining features of the information age were shaped in part at the Rand corporation”.¹² While it’s a non profit organisation, its methodological principles include that the results should be relevant to the client. Rand has an outlayer in Silicon valley in the Institute for the future, which works with “organisations of all kind to help them make better, more informed, decisions about the future”, but which essentially seems to work with managers of major companies in fostering insights into the future business environment. Its main clients are CEOs and marketing consultancies.

¹⁰ Hudson institute, www.hudson.org, 20071120.

¹¹ Kahn, H, *In defense of thinking* (from *Thinking about the unthinkable*, Hudson Institute, 1982).

¹² www.rand.org , 20071120.

European forecasting : the future as technological progress and common vision

The European Union and the OECD both have prospective units devoted primarily to technological innovation and industrial change. Both units' work has concentrated on a dominant future vision – the idea of the knowledge or information society, which is to both the EU and the OECD seen as driven by economic and industrial competition, and as a question of exploiting the opportunities of ICT and biotechnology. The main methodology used to anticipate the potential in these technologies is foresight or forecasting. For the EU, foresight emerged as a central priority in the aftermath of the Lisbon strategy, which promised to make Europe the world's most dynamic knowledge based economy by 2010. This led eventually to the creation of a science and foresight unit focused on emerging issues in European science and technology, clearly linked to the growth policies of the Union.

Forecasting, usually consisting of Delphi panels and scenario techniques, is a particular future methodology which has increased in importance in recent decades. The role of forecasting is usually to bring together relevant 'stakeholders' – experts, public, policymakers, clients – around a particular technology in order to gather knowledge on its potential use, as well as of possible risks and averse effects associated with it, including assimilating fears from the public and estimating possible social reactions. It is clear that forecasting in this sense has become an increasingly important tool of economic governance, indeed a new form of economic and industrial planning, particularly in the fields of European integration and regional development but also in national development policies, where foresight is a methodology to solve problems of transition and industrial modernisation.¹³

The notion of forecasting is closely related to the term foresight, which has also emerged as a central future methodology in recent decades. However, the conceptual difference between the terms is not negligible – in contrast to forecasts, foresight processes do not aim at casting specific future trends but merely at foreseeing and predicting them. In actual usage however it is not clear that there is a real distinction between the two, neither as conceptual tools nor as methodologies.

The increased use of foresight in recent decades is clearly linked to the idea of the knowledge society, and the rise of the knowledge society as a dominant European future vision, on the EU, the national and regional level. It could indeed be said that the objective of European foresight processes is to create the knowledge society, and that foresight has thus emerged as a new tool of governance or even form of industrial planning.¹⁴

The relationship between foresight and the knowledge society is slightly paradoxical, however. On the one hand, the use of foresight is motivated by the existence of a knowledge future, by the idea that the knowledge society lies in the immediate future and we should prepare for it in order to maintain and procure competitive advantage. On the other, foresight is clearly one of the, if not *the*, main instrument in the political creation of the knowledge

¹³ See for instance UNIDO, Technology foresight summit 2007, Regional initiative on technology foresight for central and eastern Europe and the newly independent states, aide-memoire from conference in Budapest September 2007.

¹⁴ See LOVERIDGE, D. (2007) *Foresight: the Art and Science of Predicting the Future* London Routledge, TSOUKAS, H. & SHEPHERD, J. (2004) *Managing the future. Foresight in the Knowledge Economy* Malden: Mass., Blackwell.

society. The aim of foresight processes is often formulated as ‘creating a common vision’ so that different actors will strive towards the same goal. The European vision book project, which was about the development of visions around the information society and ICT, was explicitly organised to this objective. Indeed the rationale behind the creation of a European foresight unit was the estimated importance to European integration of developing common visions for economic and industrial integration.¹⁵ At the heart of foresight processes is thus the objective of creating coherence around a common future vision and unite potentially divergent interests and different stakeholders around it. We might term this *governance by vision*.

A significant function of foresight processes here seems to be exactly to create coherence and consensus around potentially differing social actors. So the set up of foresight processes tends to begin with the setting of reasonable targets, objectives, or visions for the outcome of the process, and ‘stakeholders’ are then organised around these. Several foresight evaluations establish that this initial setting of the objectives is of strategic importance – objectives have to be formulated in such a way that consensus can be reached, and they have to be sufficiently close to the political agenda so that objectives become part of policy. Foresight, while often presented as a means of increasing public participation and debate about ‘open futures’ and all possible scenarios, are thus also clearly a technology of governance, a means not to question policy processes but rather increase their efficacy by preparing the ground for implementation. Since modernisation is always a contentious process where stakeholders have very different interests – from business interests of profit and exploitation of natural resources, labour, to public concerns with environment, health, or moral aspects of technology, foresight thus seem to serve as a kind of future communicative process, through which certain trajectories become laid down as a question of democratic consensus.

It is interesting that foresight seems to have been developed as a particular tool of governance with regards to the transition process in post-socialist countries and thus for European enlargement. As such, foresight seems to raise a particular problématique somewhere between planning old style and new forms of knowledge production – expressed by the EU with particular relevance to the former planning cultures of the transition countries as an issue of democratisation,

As these countries are emerging from the legacy of central planning, it might be desirable to further emphasise the expert-driven, bottom up, decision making approach to break away from the highly centralised, top-down system.¹⁶

Meanwhile, the democratic content of foresight processes, and how these new means of planning stand in relationship to the technologies, elites and discourses of governance of previous authoritarian regimes is not clear. In many cases foresight processes seem to be managed by institutions such as Scientific committees of futures research (for instance in Poland and Hungary) that are legacies of central planning.

¹⁵ See *Thinking, debating and shaping the future: Foresight for Europe*. Final report prepared by a high level expert group for the European commission. European commission, DG research unit RTD-K2 Science and technology foresight, September 2002, *For-learn, online guide to foresight of the European commission*, including project case studies of the German Futur, the ManVis project, and other European foresight processes, the vision book, *European visions for the knowledge age* (ed. Paul T Kidd, Cheshire Henbury, European commission Using foresight to improve the science-policy relationship, Final report, March 2006 (commissioned by Rand Europe) Eur 21967,

¹⁶ European commission, *JRC for-learn, on line learning tool for foresight*, http://forlearn.jrc.es/guide/3_scoping/feasi_pos_transi-count-htm, 2008-01-29.

The idea of foresights and forecasts is closely related to the idea of the innovative network, but also to notions of the changing social and political hierarchies in knowledge societies. The notion of foresight is clearly linked, in the present, to transformations of state and political power to what is often called the strategic state or policy learning. The EU argues, in a report commissioned by the American Rand Corporation's Europe office, that the increased use of foresight reflects the shifting boundaries between science, policy and public participation. Foresights aim to involve a wide range of stakeholders. It is emphasised, that in contrast to forecasts, foresights do not aim at producing probable visions of the future. Rather, foresights are a communicative procedure, in which involvement and participation of relevant actors around specific issues is itself taken to hold a future producing function, by producing the vision and coherence for some kind of collective action. Foresights are about stimulating creative thinking and formulating visions that can serve as platforms for action.¹⁷ So regional foresight is motivated in the following manner, as a means of activating stakeholders and putting citizens in control of their own future,

The true *raison d'être* of regional foresight is to make the inhabitants of a territory the architects of their chosen collective future rather than the passive passengers to an imposed future. Foresight contributes to improving the quality of governance by activating the stakeholders and citizens of a region. Regional authorities have a key role to play in communicating policy related inputs to central government ministries and their agencies in the region. These inputs have greater credibility when they arise from an open process of deliberation involving regionally based stakeholders. Foresight favours interaction between decision makers, companies and civil society in order to build open futures and to share common visions. By widening the debate, foresight creates a renewed freedom of action and reinforces the confidence of the stakeholders. In public life, this range of possible futures gives meaning to democracy.¹⁸

How this process of stakeholder participation takes place, or indeed how relevant stakeholders are identified or perhaps even constructed, is not clear, and nor is the relationship between stakeholder interest and policy objectives. The notion of stakeholder is nebulous – stakeholders are often defined as all relevant actors, ranging from high level policy makers to business interests to consumer organisations or citizens. Theoretically, foresight and forecast exercises place experts on the same level as layman knowledge and public involvement – in the process creating new forms of expertise.¹⁹ Foresights require political support in order to have a function as a policy tool – hence most foresight guides encourage setting the foresight, its topics, participants and objectives, in ways that are complimentary to a relevant policy agenda. Thus they are often a kind of expertise gathering and public anchoring of particular political priorities, for instance in infrastructure and technology.

It could thus perhaps be argued that the European Union's use of foresights follows quite logically from its dominant idea of the knowledge society and the drivers that drive it, but that foresights also reflect fundamental problems in the idea of the knowledge society. Foresight is primarily a tool in the political construction of the knowledge society/economy, not a methodology that allows for radically different visions of what such a knowledge society might be. Clearly, the EU vision of the knowledge society is not so much a social one as an

¹⁷ First large scale exercise with foresight networks was in the UK in 1993-1994. The Swedish Technology Foresight 1998-2000 was influenced by this, see MAGNUSSON, L. (Ed.) (2000) *The Foresighted Society: a Synthesis Report from the Swedish Technology Foresight Project* Stockholm Royal Swedish Academy of Science.

¹⁸ European commission, *Foresight and the transition to regional knowledge based economies*, policy orientation report October 2004, Eur 21355 p. 3

¹⁹ See WYNNE, B., LASH, S. & SZERSZYNSKI, B. (1996) *Risk, Environment and Modernity. Towards a new Ecology* New York, Sage.

economic and technological one. It follows from this that EU foresight activities have focused on the use of ICT and not on the possible visions of the European public of desired futures. A striking contrast can be found in the alternative future study conducted by a small group of European policy advisors in the wake of the increased debate on the future of the EU in recent years. This study contains a number of possible, yet highly imaginative, scenarios for the future of Europe, and in contrast to the foresight activities, it explicitly takes into account the way that social reactions might create very different European futures from drivers of technology and industrial integration. So the study proposed a possible future where tensions of integration and transition, in the form of jobless growth, increasing social divides in the wake of information technology, and mass unemployment, soaring stock market profits made some rich while poverty and destitution led to riots in European streets until governments were forced to put unemployment at the top of their agenda. Eventually, a European Forum calls for a 'rediscovery of the human dimension' – giving everyone the right to be useful other than through the pursuit of productivity alone, and all European citizens are given the right to devote years of their working life to collectively useful tasks outside of the market economy, culture, voluntary work, child care, services for the poor.

The Forums provided a platform for groups whose voices were not usually heard: young people, women, the excluded, small businesses. They received a total of one hundred million written contributions and emails.²⁰

The study was unprecisely dated to somewhere between 2005 and 2010.²¹

OECD – the future as risk management

The OECD has an international futures programme, also mainly devoted to foresight, early warnings and strategic governance.²² It also has a clear focus on risk and future studies as a form of risk management. Its policy paper, *Long run prospects: policy challenges for a world in transition*, says,

A concentrated effort will be needed to bring the unfolding reality of the 21st century Transitions into line with people's ideas of what is desirable. Clearly policy is what will make the difference, both for creating the conditions conducive to 21st century transitions and to ensuring that opportunities are grasped while risks are effectively managed.²³

The future is thus somewhere between opportunity and risk.

The future studies of the OECD are, quite like the EUs, clearly influenced by the notion of the knowledge society as an ongoing transformation with radical effects on politics, identities, hierarchies and governance.²⁴ 'Transitions' consist of 4 causal forces; the diffusion of technological breakthroughs, economic interdependence and increased competition, diversity of social status and identity, ongoing dispersion of power and responsibility, leading to less hierarchical and less rigid methods for decision making. So 21st Century Transitions speaks of

²⁰ *Scenarios Europe 2010* p. 41

²¹ European commission, Forward studies unit. *Scenarios Europe 2010, five possible futures for Europe*. Authors Bertrand, Gilles, Michalski, Anna, and Pench, Lucio R. EC Working paper July 1999.

²² OECD International futures programme 2004, 2007.

²³ *Long run prospects: policy challenges for a world in transition*.

²⁴ See OECD *Infrastructure to 2030: mapping policy for electricity, water and transport*, 2001, *Governance in the 21st century*, 2000, *The creative society in the 21st century*, 2001, *The future of the global economy. Towards a long boom*, 2001, *21st century technologies: promises and perils of a dynamic future*, and conference series 1998-1999 on 21st century transitions.

‘seamless global knowledge sharing’ as well as of a long economic boom in which enhanced freedom and responsibility enables individuals to control their future. 21st century Transitions will put a premium on personal accountability and internal motivation.²⁵ This has implications for the governability of the future. 21st century transitions will be accompanied by the decay, resistance and adaptation of existing forms and methods of governance, along with the emergence of entirely new loci and means for making and implementing decisions.²⁶

Another report of the futures programme argues that the future will be characterised by ‘dynamic governance’, in contrast to old forms of governance which will become increasingly ineffective. Dynamic governance is defined by policy learning, creativity and ‘spontaneous determination’.

The primary attributes of today’s governance systems – the usually fixed and permanent allocations of power that are engraved in the structures and constitutions of many organisations and the tendency to vest initiative exclusively in the hands of those in senior positions in the hierarchy look set to undergo fundamental changes. Harbingers of change in the first attribute can be found in highly supple organisations ... that are capable of regularly redistributing responsibility according to the nature of the task rather than on the basis of a rigid authority structure. That spontaneous determination of the most appropriate level for wielding power and taking responsibility goes hand in hand with the weakening of the second attribute of most prevailing governance systems, a decline in hierarchical or top-down methods for determining goals and means. Gradually, at the leading edge of many economies and societies – particularly in areas where the production of intangibles and personal customisation are becoming dominant – initiative is shifting to the people who have detailed knowledge of what is desired and what is possible. Traditional leaders in either workplace or the public sphere can no longer specify in advance exact outcomes or methods. Instead, in the context of shared missions and common rules, the objectives and techniques are being left to the unforeseeable innovations and creativity of the individuals and groups that have a deeper understanding of the specific needs and resources.²⁷

The OECD interprets this as a process of democratisation and diffusion of power in society from old elites to new citizen-subjects. “Looking to the future, there are signs that the governed of yesterday could become the governors of tomorrow.”²⁸

In a world of creative innovation and policy learning, the role of government is not to control but to set the standards and priorities upon which presumed diversity thrives. Also to the OECD there is here a new premium on *future vision* – but not in the form of guiding images of the future for governance, but in the form of allegiance to common standards, codes of conduct and a “minimum set of shared values”. These values are to do with industrialisation, which the OECD understands as directly linked to democratisation and hence to a better future. So abandoning industrialisation might preserve rural ways of living, but would cut off the possibility of introducing other desirable life styles, and ‘stepping back from an open and more integrated planet’ might help to preserve tradition but would probably foreclose progress towards the greater tolerance and creativity that the organisation sees as the likely outcome of a more dynamic and tightly knit world.²⁹

²⁵ OECD *21st century transitions*.

²⁶ OECD Policy brief, *Long run prospects: Policy challenges for a world in transition*.

²⁷ OECD *Governance in the 21st Century*. OECD Future studies, 2001.

²⁸ *Ibid* p 7.

²⁹ *Ibid* 26.

The future as dialogue and utopian critique

In contrast, we distinguish a number of institutions in the world whose perspective on the future is the future as dialogue and construction, and as an opened process of prospective or conjecture. These perspectives are characterised by the rejection of science and objectivity, and an emphasis, rather, on the future as freedom and will, along with notions of knowledge based on uncertainty, openness and plurality of discourse. So the Unesco's prospective office explicitly rejects the idea of knowledge of the future and the idea of the future as science.

La prospective est question de l'imprevisible dans un futur avant tout marqué par l'incertitude. Elle laisse intacte le libre arbitre de l'homme.³⁰

Prospective studies deal with the unforeseeable in a future marked more than anything by uncertainty. They leave Man free to choose.

The work of the UNESCO bureau of prospective thought is also clearly marked by the development critical strand in futures studies and the ambition to question notions of progress and speak of the future as a question of human values and choice. There is thus a clear critique of technology, and an emphasis, rather, on human dialogue with possible future developments.

The 21st century cannot be reduced to a monologue, not even a technological one, and forward thinking cannot in our view be other than dialogues of the future.³¹

This is clearly influenced by the French notions of prospective or conjecture, in which forward gazing activities are understood not as science but as a question of interaction with a study object that indeed comes about as a result of that very process. In the notions of prospective and conjecture, as developed by leading theorists of a French school of prospective thought such as de Jouvenel or Gaston Berger, lies the idea that studying and talking of the future is a deeply moral and ethical activity which cannot be based on scientific objectivity but involves fundamental value concerns. In this prospective tradition, the UNESCO has recently been working with founding a *future ethics*, taking into account not only epistemological problems of futures studies but also the effects of present day long term thinking on minorities, populations in the third world or in Western city ghettos, and unborn generations. This activity it defines as 'giving a future to the future', in a sense saving prospective thought from the short termism and deterministic future narratives of other future gazing activities.³²

It is interesting that this future ethics identifies a different stakeholder - a different future subject - than do the activities of the EU or the OECD even when foresight processes are aimed at citizens. So the activities of the UNESCO - a perspective that it has in common with those that seem to uphold the tradition of critical futures studies such as for instance Richard Slaughter or the Islamic futurist Sonyi Inayatullah - seem to identify actors and groups such as women, children and young people, ethnic minorities and Third world populations as a kind of particular future subject, and as agents that somehow have a special relationship to the future. This relationship seems to lie in the way that these groups are presumed to represent different notions of progress and development than the mainstream technological

³⁰ The Unesco Conseil du futur was created in October 1999, see directive n 99-218.

³¹ Jerome Binde, p. xii, in UNESCO (2003) *Keys to the 21st Century*, Oxford, Berghahn.

³² Ibid.

modernisation narratives of Western planning. Somehow they are in contact with another future and thus become portrayed as a kind of utopian citizens. Another striking difference is that the concern here is with global futures and holistic perspectives on development, including not only philosophical issues but also sustainability, critical perspective on globalisation, issues of citizenship and participation.

These development critical and utopian notions reflect in the methodologies used. In lieu of foresight processes which tend to be organised around experts panels, these utopian perspectives work not only with a different kind of experts (Sennett, Bauman ...) but also with citizen panels, focus groups of young people, art exhibitions, or public seminars. The Club of Rome thus works with a panel of under 30's, the tt30 thinktank, which is an internet based platform of young people who come together to give their perspective on what the Club calls the *World problématique*. The world problematique is essentially the predicament of the world, a holistic perspective on the threats and risks confronting the contemporary world in the perceptions of young people. It includes aspects such as the role of violence in contemporary society, human rights, consumptive life styles and values, weaknesses of civil society, access to goods, and quality of governance.³³

The Declaration of the Club of Rome states,

We, the members of the Club of Rome, are convinced that the future of mankind is not determined once and for all, and that it is possible to avoid present and foreseeable catastrophes – when they are the result of human selfishness or of mistakes made in managing world affairs. ...

The virtue of optimism that becomes rooted in the human spirit would appear to be an essential requirement of our times. We believe that, in order to counter current trends of either arrogant triumphalism or pessimism or resignation, we must adapt an attitude of confidence based on personal commitment and optimism, willingness and perseverance by all responsible citizens. We believe that every human being can choose to take charge of his or her own future rather than be a victim of events. Imagination and creativity of every individual, combined with a greater sense of social responsibility, can contribute to changing our attitudes and making our societies better suited to cope with the multifaceted crises that trouble the world ...

We trust in the capacity of men and women to express and live in accordance with their ethical and spiritual values while respecting the diversity of humankind. We call upon women and men of good will, especially the young people of today, to share with us this work of reflection and action.³⁴

This, then, is the future as a social construction of all men and women in the world, and as the activity and perhaps even moral obligation of each and all to take responsibility for future developments. With this perspective, future studies become an activity not of science but of emancipation, a question of freeing the subject from imposed futures, while also making the future a creation of the subject's activities.

While this contains a kind of radical democratic perspective, it also gives the futurists, hence the professional future gazer, a particular role as the catalyst or enabler of future emancipation. So the director of the French organisation *Futuribles* Hugues de Jouvenel says

Contrary to the past where facts have already happened, the future is not determined. This means that, by its very nature, it cannot be the subject of scientific knowledge. The future can evolve in a number of possible ways, and the first task of the futurologist – since he cannot aspire to say in advance what the future will hold – is try to anticipate what may happen, what are the futures in germ within the present.³⁵

³³ Club of Rome, tt30, *The world problematique*.

³⁴ Club of Rome, www.clubofrome.org, 20071120.

³⁵ Hugues de Jouvenel, *The nature of the future*, in *Keys to the 21st century*.

The futurologist is thus the one who is able to discern the future germs in the present and give these a presence, in the process also making them embryos of future change. In other words, the futurist is the one to help people choose desired futures. The futurist Sohail Inayatullah defines futures studies as “the study of alternative futures including the world views and myths that underlie them” and the futurist as the one who “employs time, especially future time, to transform the present. Through deeply democratic processes, the futurist helps organisations and institutions move from the default future to the preferred future”.³⁶

Inayatullah works with the notion of alternative futures, which is as we have already seen ambiguous. Inayatullah directs a thinktank called Metafuture, which is clearly at the utopian end of the future spectrum. Metafuture’s orientation is esoteric, influenced by Asian philosophy, Islamic modernism and a certain addition of new age thought. “Will meditation provide more economic and social value than current investment in biotechnologies?”³⁷ Inayatullah’s writings include “Alternative futures of the Ummah” and writings on the Gaia against the artificial society.

Hawaii Futures is the futures study center of another central figure in the contemporary futures field, Jim Dator.³⁸ Its website begins with the statement “any useful statement about the future should appear to be ridiculous”.³⁹ Thus useful thinking of the future is thinking that is so divergent that it challenges established conventions and seems to defy logic and rationality. Through such original visions, new futures are opened.

Hawaii futures work with a range of alternative future methodologies, including the collection of future artefacts, exposed in exhibits of future archaeology which aim to provoke and spur citizen imagination. One of its projects is the Chinatown futures project, which discusses alternative futures for Chinatown, between cultural museum, corporate investment engine, outpost of a new global power, quarantined ground zero (presumably in the aftermath of an avian flu outbreak) or transformed society.⁴⁰ Futures studies are defined in the following manner,

The future cannot be predicted. However, each of us has a role in the construction of whatever futures come to pass. Humans have never before had more influence over the futures of our environment, our biology, and indeed, all of life. Futures studies encourages the contemplation of many possible futures, and facilitates dialogue between groups with competing or conflicting visions.

Richard Slaughter runs a thinktank called Foresight International in Australia. Futures studies have a history in Australia going back to the Australian Commission for the future, which was created by the Labour party in the 1980s. Richard Slaughter is one of the more wellknown contemporary futurists and possibly the main contributor to the epistemological development of contemporary futures studies. To Slaughter, foresight – or social foresight, is the ability to “create and sustain a variety of high quality images and understandings about futures and apply these in a range of socially useful ways”. Futures studies are thus a social capacity –

³⁶ www.metafuture.org, 20071120.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Dator has been particularly influential in recent years in Finland, where a Futures academy consisting of a network of Finnish universities has been created and where there is Finnish centre for Futures studies in Åbo akademi. Dator worked with the Futures Committee of the Finnish parliament in 2006, see MANNERMAA, M., DATOR, J. & TIIHONEN, P. (Eds.) (2006) *Democracy and Futures*, Committee for the Future, Parliament of Finland

³⁹ www.futures.hawaii.edu, 20071120.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

about societies' collective ability to think about the future – “constructive responses to altered global conditions, including new dimensions of hazard and risk”.⁴¹

Consultancies: the future as pitch

Arguably a central trend structuring the future landscape in the 90s and 2000s is the rise of consultancies working with future trends and corporate future visions. These occupy a kind of hybrid space between what seems to be lobby or PR work for specific clients, and quasi scientific activities such as commissioned research projects on future topics. Most of these consultancies draw on the language of objective expertise, while simultaneously offering targeted knowledge to specific client needs. Their activities often include seminars, workshop and conferences, publications where the consultancy pens publications on particular issues often with a pseudoscientific form and content, and taylor-made services such as ‘find an expert’ or we organise for you a scientific workshop on the future of consumerism. These consultancies thus claim a position as expertise, but one that is not based on notions of future as science or academic study, but as a kind of flexible and specialised knowledge in tune with the corporate environment and client needs and where they often claim a specific position as a kind of bridge between scientific or academic knowledge and the business environment.

So Kairos future, which was created in 1993 by a former associate of the Swedish institute for futures studies, Mats Lindgren, claims to want to combine academic research and futures studies with business interest, strategy, and short term change.

När jag tillsammans med Ivars Jegers startade Kairos futures sommaren 1993 ville vi skapa en ny typ av konsult- och forskningsföretag som kombinerade långsiktig omvärldsanalys och framtidsstudier med konkret strategi- och förändringsarbete. ...Med de erfarenheter vi hade från forskarvärlden, egen konsultverksamhet, näringsliv och förvaltning hade vi också andra idéer. Vi ville ha ett företag, inte ett nätverk av lösa konsulter. Vi ville satsa på mångfald av människor med skiftande bakgrund med gemensamt fokus. Vi ville bygga ett konsultföretag som inte enbart arbetar i det dolda, utan som också deltar i det offentliga samtalet genom publika studier, publicistisk framtoning och föreläsungsverksamhet. Kort sagt: vi ville skapa en miljö där vi kunde förena idéer med affärer, kunskapsgenererande verksamhet med strategikonsulting, teknik med humaniora, allvar med lust och energi.⁴²

When I started Kairos futures in the summer of 1993 we wanted to create a new type of consultancy, which would combine long term analysis and futures studies with concrete strategybuilding. We had experiences from academia, consultancy work, business and public administration. We wanted a company, not a network of consultants. We wanted a plurality of individuals with heterogenous backgrounds. We wanted to build a consultancy that would participate in public debate through public studies, publishing, and lectures. In brief, we wanted to create an environment where we could join ideas to business, knowledge production to strategy consulting, technology and humanities, seriousness with fun.

The consultancies discussed here have various specialties, targeted at different kinds of clients, and they also work with slightly different future methodologies. However, there is a future language in common for these consultancies, which shares characteristics with management language, and which overall draws on the idea of the future as a pressing

⁴¹ SLAUGHTER, R. (2008) Integral futures methodologies. Editorial from special issue of Futures 2008. ., www.foresightinternational.com/au

⁴² Kairos future, vd Mats Lindgren har ordet, www.kairosfuture.se 2008-01-14.

concern and urgency - “the future is near” - ⁴³ and sees it either as a threat to the client’s activities, or as a source of client opportunity.

I en värld stadd i förändring blir vinnarna de som har förmåga att fånga signaler i omvärlden och att transformera omvärlds- och framtidsinsikt till avsikt och handling.⁴⁴

In a changing world, winners are those who are able to catch early warnings and transform future analysis to determination and action.

In such a world, corporate clients can gain what Kairos calls a ‘cycle of advantage’ by thinking or being ahead. For this they need a future expert, someone to help them challenge conventional knowledge and see future risk and opportunity. Language thus plays on the idea of anticipating the future as a kind of competitive advantage. At times this management language, as already pointed out, can be quite close or even play on the language of futures studies, here in the hope of opening up alternative, giving inspiration or provoking the imagination to find new creative solutions – find paths you never dreamed of.

The themes these consultancies work with also tend to follow a general trend, focused on the futures of capitalism and business, usually including ‘megatrends’ such as globalisation and emerging markets, changing consumer preferences, or the rise of creativity. The Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies’ publications list thus includes books such as *Creative man*,

Creative man contains a likely scenario for the near future and a model for explaining the behaviour of modern man, with a focus on the increasing societal and individual need for creativity. A growing part of the labour force will be working with creativity and innovation in one way or another. In part because it is necessary for competition, but also because an increasing amount of employees will prefer it. *Creative man* is about future creative people and their impact on our society.⁴⁵

The Dream society,

What future of business after the information age? It won't be the latest technology or newest product that will provide the competitive edge. The company with the best story wins: consumers will pay for the story that sparks the imagination, that reflects how we see ourselves and how we want others to see us.⁴⁶

and *All Dressed up Inc.*, which outlines a future for companies where rebellion against the values of consumer capitalism is just around the corner, a future that is in new strategies appealing to do good, instead of looking good, ie some kind of eco, ethico capitalism playing on consumer notions of the better future.

All dressed up Inc. is the voice of consumer capitalism and a description of the mainstream market culture that dominates our lives. Is there an alternative?⁴⁷

These consultancies thus balance carefully between some kind of industrial-techno foresight dimension and utopian dreamwork. Because they live off thinking alternatively and selling ‘unique’ pitches so they have to showcase themselves as divergent, bold and creative thinkers. However, in no way do these institutions work uniquely with corporate clients, but their lists

⁴³ Finland future research center, www.tukk.fi/tutu/about.htm, 20071119.

⁴⁴ Kairos future, filosofi, www.kairosfuture.se 2008-01-14.

⁴⁵ Copenhagen institute for futures studies, www.cifs.dk/en/omcifs.asp, 20071119.

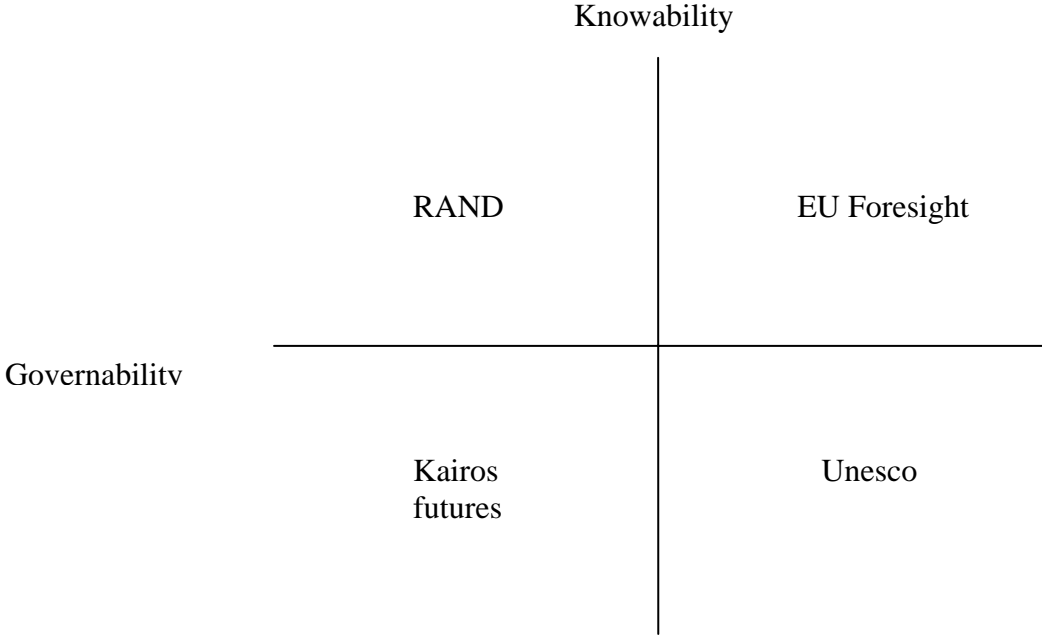
⁴⁶ CIFS, *The Dream Society*.

⁴⁷ CIFS, *All Dressed Up Inc.*

of clients and associated members often include central public institutions such as Ministries, City councils and local governments, and they are thus frequently serving a public interest.

Concluding remarks: the future landscape

While this has in no way been an exhaustive study of the actors of the future landscape, nevertheless it allows us to say something about its fundamental geography and about what we referred to, in the Introduction, as the facets of future governance. It could be argued that the future landscape is structured after two main dimensions, one to do with the knowability of the future and the way that notions of futures studies call to scientific rationality or human imagination, and the other to do with the possibility of governance, steering and control of the future. We might illustrate this in the following manner



In one corner we find those future producers, who like the Rand corporation, claim that it is possible to reach scientific knowledge of the future, and that the future through this knowledge can be controlled. In the opposite corner, we place the Unesco which, with its notion of *prospective* argues that the future is not an object of rationality or control but essentially a sphere of human will and imagination. In terms of governance, this spectre thus stretches from what might be called technocracy to utopia. In addition, other dimensions structure the future landscape and interact with the ones depicted here. The first one of these is the future as public or private interest, or indeed as common or corporate interest. This dimension separates actors working with the global future, such as the Club of Rome, from actors working with corporate or industrial futures. This future calls for different stakeholders – from women and minorities to specific private clients.

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