

Visions of the good society in the past and beyond the polycrisis

A collection of blogs about past futures and our future

by **Bo Stråth**, 24.07.2024

In the two books exploring planetary perspectives, *The Brandt Commission and the Multinationals. Planetary Perspectives* and the *Ujamaa and Ubuntu. Conceptual Histories for a Planetary Perspective*, the key question deals with futures in the past and what relevance those futures might have for our own future. The two books are the result of the thinking and discussions in two major research projects, *Conceptual History and Global Translations* and *Europe 1815-1914: Creating Community and Ordering the World*.

The planetary perspective

When the Sputnik in 1957 initiated the space age the feelings of a technological break-through and triumph in the Cold War was only one of the reactions in the world. The possibility for the first time to see the planet from outside itself without borders, only land and oceans, as a finite dot in an endless universe, spread eeriness, too. Thoughts of human hybris and the Cold War becoming a space war frightened people. German historian Reinhart Koselleck found that “our globe... has become a closed spaceship roving in an endless universe.” Already before Sputnik, the Swedish writer Harry Martinsson published his verse poem *Aniara* about the space transporter with 8000 emigrants from the Earth bound for Mars, escaping environment pollution and wars, clashing with meteorites and getting off course, but defying them continuing towards what had no end. Questions of what the meaning is underpinned the angst of the time. Hannah Arendt warned of Earth alienation, hinting at the risk of humanity’s destruction of itself. The eeriness of the time was connected to a long tradition of warnings about the destructive forces of the machine age, Nietzsche being one of the strongest voices in that chorus. Today, the warnings deal with the transcendence of the human embodiment of reason into artificial intelligence. Who makes up the forces which programme AI? Who controls AI and who is it controlling? Who assumes the moral authority to replace Kant with anonymous algorithms?

Dipesh Chakrabarty comments on Arendt's warning of Earth alienation by saying that it leaves us with two alternatives, to feel homeless and accept the angst as a human condition or to confront it and begin working towards planetary unity in which all humans come to identify with the planet as their home and, by implication transcend racial, ethnic, religious, and class borders. His choice is to explore this second alternative. Chakrabarty's invitation to the world's human inhabitants to "work on" planetary unity distinguishes that unity from utopian historical projects about final world unity, which are teleological and self-propelling towards a final goal inherent in the historical process itself, such as liberal market globalization, its Marxist counter-story, or other similar mystifications. To "work on..." implies hard work, facing and coming to terms with disagreements about how to shape the future and within the context of difficult discursive disputes, where nothing is predetermined. It is strenuous work by humans, with humans being responsible for their success or failure and their destiny. Human agency and responsibility, rather than beliefs in goal-bound automatic processes intrinsic in history itself, are appealed to. There is no History – singular, and with a capital H – whether it's called Liberalism, Socialism, Nationalism, the End of History, or anything else. For good or evil, there are only human-made histories – in the plural. This is the planetary perspective that is the point of departure of the two books and this blog site.

[Continue reading: Provincializing for a Planetary Perspective](#)

The arguments

The argument in the books and here is that one cannot predict the future by drafting a trend forward from history. Prognoses are problematic because history is contingent with future events or circumstances that one cannot be aware of beforehand. Sociologist Max Weber talked about *Chance*, opportunity or possibility to be taken or not with consequences depending on the choice. Neither the chance nor the choice can be foreseen.

However, there is nevertheless a need for visions and imaginations of the future, yes, even for plans about how to shape it. Future doesn't just arrive from nowhere. It is shaped by human action. The question is by whom. The shaping of the future is full of power implications. Often the questions about the future deal with the good society, what it is and how to create it. Of course, such questions are permeated by interests, ideologies and power. It is crucial for the debate to know who the human agents behind the interests and ideologies were and are.

What the good society in the future means is thus contentious and difficult to define but impregnated by vested interests and power on this controversial ground of human action and human responsibility or irresponsibility. Thinking, wishing, and

planning for the future, knowing that what comes is full of surprises and impossible to catch, the fact that it is always escaping and under continuous reshaping, is part of the human condition, a crucial aspect of life itself. The main point is that the planet is the framework of the debate and the disputes. There is an overall concern about the planet as a whole. A new conceptualization of life on Earth based on thinking the planet is the goal.

A second argument is that the series of connected deep problems of our time, described as a polycrisis, must be related to a declining capacity to think and shape the future. Beliefs in progress and a future that is better, whatever that means, are dwindling. Such beliefs produce social dynamics whereas the lack of them lead to stagnation and feelings of crisis. When the world is seen as a zero-sum game in a stagnating present hostility grows. The idea of planning the future culminated in the 1960s. The market-radical globalization narrative about the market as a self-playing piano that emerged in response to the global crisis around dollar, oil and world hunger in the 1970s repressed the idea of planning the future. Against this backdrop, the argument is to confront the beliefs in self-propelling forces, called Market or something else, and instead to emphasize the role of human agency and human responsibility for shaping the future.

The argument of the books is furthermore that getting out of this situation of declining horizons of expectation needs an action-promoting planetary perspective on the future. A planetary perspective promotes alternative expectations to those which deal with hostility, xenophobic nationalism, and geopolitical power. A planetary perspective requires new knowledge and new ways of thinking, looking beyond national and geopolitical demarcations, connecting politics, economics, ecology, and biosciences. It is about planetary cohabitation not only between humans but all life on Earth.

Building the good society through work



Building and cultivating for the good society. Visions of the future in the distant and near past, Europe and Africa. Ambrogio Lorenzetti, The allegory and effects of good government. Fresco (1338-1339) in Palazzo Pubblico, Siena. Photo: Fabio Lensini.



Sam Ntiro, Mural paintings about work for good community on the Arusha Declaration Monument, Arusha (1974-1977). Photo Dominicus Makukula.

Work was a key dimension of construction of community in Medieval Europe as well as nation building in Africa in the 1970s. Work keeps societies together but also divides them. Work is a concept full of power implications. Labor as work connotes honour and pride as well as toil and hardship. Work oscillates between providing personal satisfaction through the mastery of a skill and being a commodity on a market for sales and purchases. Work means both identification and alienation. In languages where work is *travail* and *trabajo*, the connotation to toil and hardship is clear. In languages where the worker is *operaio* and *ouvrier*, the connotation is to work as a product of skill. Work in the fields and construction work are frequent

figures in nation building and other community constructions. Work connotes shaping, creation and community.

However, labour as a commodity on a global market in a trend since the 1990s, connotes exploitation and feelings of not belonging to any community. The globalization and individualization of work and the digitization of the world since the 1990s have fundamentally changed the meaning of work and labour. How this shift connects to the present polycrisis remains an open question. How has the globalization of work caused erosion of labour standards, and how do new patterns of exploitation contribute to polycrisis? When labour performed in global just-in-time production chains, where cheap labour moves to where it is expensive and production to where labour is cheap, and a global proletariat emerged in privatized service work in nursery and cleaning production, work disappeared from the neoliberal discourse where the key reference point was capital and labour a commodity. The question is how to bring global labour back in again as a human factor with the capacity to articulate self-interests and protest, as well as with discursive power and ambitions to participate in building a world society as an alternative to the world as a market. Humans have political, economic, and social rights beyond being a resource to manage. Labour must be at par with capital; as opposed to capital, it has no owner outside itself. At par means that it is not subordinated to capital. This normative distinction is important to maintain in a time when artificial intelligence transforms labour into capital. The necessary reconceptualization of capitalism for a planetary age must reconsider the role and status of labour as mastering instead of being mastered by AI and robotization. The question of what work and labour migration will look like in a planetary age is central to visions of a good society in the future. Who regulates labour, and how in a planetary age?

Continue reading: [The Concept of Work in the Construction of Community](#)

Expectations and disappointments

An intellectual source of inspiration for thinking the future in a planetary perspective is [Reinhart Koselleck](#), who made past futures a key target in the study of history. He explored how losers and winners in history reflected on their past experiences and how they imagined their futures, for sure differently. He was curious about how what had been their imagined futures one day became their new experiences of dreams that had failed. He explored how the disappointment about experiences of failure became the point of departure for new visions and expectations of the future. The past future became the past to learn from.

Over time, experiences of disappointment piled up, and one day, Koselleck said, the accumulation of them might be so big that the capacity to outline new horizons of expectation would come to an end. He said it as a warning or doubt about progress, but it was no prognosis, he emphasized. It couldn't be because we can think about the future, but we cannot know it. Such a point of collapsing future with no horizons of expectation would mean quite a different end of history than what Francis Fukuyama predicted in the liberal euphoria around 1990.

Although history is always open and with alternatives, full of surprises, histories in the plural, not History in the singular, and not goal-bound despite all plans with goals for shaping the future, Koselleck's warning of collapsing future because of the accumulation of disappointment should be taken seriously. His warning is more relevant than ever. Therefore, it is urgent to fight against it becoming real. Resisting the threat means work on new horizons of expectation, on visions of a different future than that which is frightening and threatening us. This work means debate on alternatives and thinking the unthinkable. A crucial part of the work is the conceptualization and reconceptualization of the future, to put new names on new phenomena or redefine the meaning of old concepts.

Visions of the good society have often invited to radical revolutionary thinking and prophetic predictions, which in the attempts to implement them ended in the opposite, the hell on earth instead of the earth in the heaven. A key target of this blog series is to explore visionary action-promoting alternatives to such extremes, utopias and visions as provisional and preliminary under continuous revision in feedback to actual developments and debates about alternatives, the visions as ongoing work on progress, as work in progress, realizing how contested the idea of progress is. The work on thinking alternative futures must be earth-bound as well as look up towards the untested making possible what conventionally is impossible.

Finally, planetary unification cannot mean the elimination of differences. On the contrary, it must mean speaking up about it and building community on it. Planetary unification must be established on a shared understanding of difference. North and South, East and West, Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe have histories that are shared through entanglements but experienced differently. A planetary perspective deals with a growing understanding of how and why they were experienced differently. Victors have different understandings of peace than losers, for instance, as Reinhart Koselleck noted when he remembered how he on 8 May 1945, as a German prisoner of war, put on a 100 kilometres foot march to Auschwitz to clean up after the unspeakable atrocities there, listened to the sound of the peace bells from the churches. What is peace, he asked. At a more general level, the colonizers' memories and histories differ from those of the colonized. But still, they are

entangled. The memories are different, but the history is shared. This insight must be a planetary perspective's point of departure and target.

Here follows a collection of shorter texts, articles of 5,000-7,000 words or blogs of 2,000-4,000 words, exploring the prospects of thinking and envisioning the future with a planetary perspective on a historical ground. Comments on the contribution are welcome, and if they contribute to moving the debate forward, they will be published on the blog site.

How to quote:

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