

OPINION AND ANALYSIS

Futures thought and policy initiatives: designer or fad futures?

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FUTURES methodology has become the go-to paradigm in social science and its application to complex phenomena. This has been the case for the past five or so years, especially in South Africa, in think-tank speak and to some extent in policy analysis. This has been especially so when predicting or forecasting scenarios applicable to African development paths. Futures methodologies, for there are more than a few, have become the qualification for forecasting – what becomes – visions of the future. Think tanks, policy makers, and/or policy entrepreneurs in positions of influence then propagate particular forecasts, and these are then planned for, together with paths of divergence [mitigation] or preparedness. Eventually, these futures become more certain and accepted.

Calculations of economic growth, having been ‘fed’ with values based on clumped and sometimes arbitrary indicators, to churn out [impersonal and disconnected] ‘data’ on our futures. Still, in this day and age, we appear to value the ideology of numbers and scientific, hard or ‘big data’ for example, over the observable ‘truths’ around us. (I use ‘truths’ here in inverted commas to indicate that I differentiate between subjective and objective observations).

Perhaps it is the elevation of science and scientific methods that has caused this, and we should be blaming the scientific revolution (18th century thought) and its distillation into mathematical or numerical validation. If this is the case, we should also be blaming the 19th century for placing high priority and excessive value on economic growth over other human abilities and qualities (education, community). It is highly unlikely that anyone will disagree with the notion that most of our forecasted futures are built on ideas surrounding either economic growth or international viability and relations as a result of economic profiles, and ways in which to ‘secure’ an ideal future where these elements are sustainable.

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Now, in the 21st century, it does seem rather archaic and lazy to still be guided by values of bygone eras. Fukuyama's *End of History* (1992) is such a well-known thesis I need not draw too much attention to it here, but could the real end of history have *begun* with the scientific revolution rather than the democratic one? I accept and acknowledge that this tendency, in academia and in general, to place value on numbers and data is not new, but what is new is the aggressive turn towards placing greater emphasis to *predict* futures, which, in view of the excessive reliance on data analysis and computational complexity, in my opinion, comes down to picking one. As anyone who has applied theory to practice, it is immediately apparent that designer or fad futures have no actual bearing on the physical, "messy" reality that has evolved. They can however be influenced and enforced, reinforced by coercive or other means by entities in an influential position to do so.

Computational complexity analysis has become the 'new and improved' recipe for validating such future projections. The dangers of picking a future are of course not hard to imagine. Perhaps what is most salient is, whose future is picked? Ethical and political considerations abound in a world where the future is dictated by those with voices or influence in 'pocket-arenas' filled with exclusive access participants, while vast swathes of people are left to be the passive receptors.

As we move into the future, we will have to choose whether we accept just one of many possibilities, based on economic viability and the value of competition between states, countries, exclusive "clubs" of states or regional organisations, or one where the overall quality of life experience and evolutionary longevity guides a community of world inhabitants. A future where not just rich States, enterprises or organisations, can afford to dictate conditions of evolution for the rest of us, or rich people have access to abundant quality food and healthcare, but everyone on the planet has an equal say and access. This may sound like more 'pie in the sky' than any kind of Futures scenarios or predictions, but the principle remains valid.

Like designer handbags, we do not have to give value to designer or "fad" futures: we can, contrary to popular and traditional governance beliefs that stress centralised control, govern ourselves and create our own futures. While we know that predicting a future as fixed amounts to validating the equivalent of magical incantations, what we do know is that change and transformation is inevitable, it is just the quality that is up for negotiation.

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