

INTRODUCTION: POSTNORMAL HORIZONS

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It is all about gestures. Or more specifically, about ‘hand movement’, which according to an advertisement for Volkswagen, makes you ‘smarter and more popular’. This is why the German car manufacturer has devoted enormous financial resources to develop ‘gesture control’ – you will be able to drive future VWs simply by waving your hands. ‘How much can we say with our hands? What does the future look like?’ The advertisement asks. And concludes, with a clarion declaration: Volkswagen is ‘Making the Future Real’. We are also provided with a convenient code to ‘Shazam’ ‘to see the future with Volkswagen’. Seeing, as they say, is believing.

Is it? Is the future ‘real’? Can it be made ‘real’? The best answer in these best of all possible postnormal times cannot be black or white. It is both: yes and no; and maybe and perhaps. In one sense, there is nothing real about the future: it simply does not exist. It is always a time that has yet to be reached. Moreover, the future will not exist even in the future for the future exists only when it becomes the present at which point it ceases to be the future. As the future does not actually exist, it has to be invented; to put it another way, images, metaphors, ideas about the future have to be generated and projected. Where do these images, metaphors and ideas come from? Mostly from the (recent) past and the present. Collectively, they frame our thoughts and actions about the future; and we are influenced not just by our notions of what happened in the past, and what is happening now, but also by our images of what may yet happen in the future. Thus, while the future is elusive and uncertain, it is also a domain over which we can exercise some influence. That’s exactly why VW frames its advertisement in the image of a technological future.

We cannot change the past; we can only interpret and reinterpret history; but we can't actually change it. We cannot change the present either: that requires instantaneous change which is – as yet – impossible. But our inability to have some understanding of the future combined with the pictures and representations of what we want the future to be does provide us with some ability to usher in those futures we desire. It is in that sense that the future becomes 'real'. Whether we want VW – which is, after all, the company that developed a 'defeat device' that allowed its cars to produce forty times more pollution than the legal limit – to make the future 'real' is another question all together.

'The future' has become all things to all people; it is the best place to find whatever you are looking for. It is the location of western technocratic dreams. It is the site where you turn for love, peace and goodwill to all humanity. It is where all reforms take place. It is where we may meet the end of civilisation as we know it. It is where some wish to come face to face with singularity: the point where man and machine infuse, humans transcend biology, superintelligence is created and transhumanists triumph (around 2045 by the reckoning of Google futurist and inventor Ray Kurzweil). All of which suggests that there is no such thing as 'the future'. There are numerous futures – alternatives that technocrats and luddites, corporations and politicians, right-wing philanthropists and left-wing idealists envisage and try to shape.

But here is the rub: 'the future' is, strictly speaking, not a future at all! It is simply the present extrapolated onto the coming years. It is the extended present that corporations and technocrats, and legions of American futurists and consultants, sell as 'the future', a commodity gift wrapped as technological nirvana. That's what most of the 'predictions' from pop futurists amount to.

Simply extending the present into the future is also a way of colonising the future. The ideology of colonialism is not confined to history; it has a strong futures component. As Christopher Jones, who has spent a lifetime working as a futurist, notes, trend analysis is a basic pillar of futures studies. Trends, by definition, 'are the general direction that some phenomenon is changing or developing'. But there is no guarantee that 'general direction' will continue. Trends are not destiny – they can change, they can be changed, emerging phenomenon may disturb and distort them, and sometimes they

can be thrown totally off course by ‘wild cards’ or outliers, which we call ‘Black Swans’. So scores of assumptions are being made when trends are projected onto the future and used as a basis for ‘predictions’. Such predictions can have a self-fulfilling effect too. On the whole, they express a deep desire for business as usual: for oppressive structures to be maintained, for consumerist culture to march on to its inevitable glory, for society to be led by the nose, by technology controlled by a handful of global corporations.

There is, however, another way that the future is colonised. As Sohail Inayatullah points out, ‘the future is not merely a place but a feeling’ – a sentiment that can be enhanced through narratives. Inayatullah has developed what he calls Casual Layered Analysis (CLA) to dissect and interrogate narratives about the future. His intention is to move people away from what we may call narratives of unthinking futures to narratives of transformative futures. The point Inayatullah makes so strongly is that feelings and emotions provoked by images, metaphors and accustomed narratives of the future have a powerful hold on our perception of the future. As such, I would argue, they can become an instrument not just of colonisation of the future but also of enslaving our imagination. In a workshop I conducted in Istanbul a few years ago, I asked the participants – mostly Masters and PhD students – to imagine and describe what Istanbul would look like in twenty years’ time. Almost without fail, they regurgitated images from well-known Hollywood products: *Blade Runner*, *The Fifth Element* and *Star Trek*.

But such familiar futures are not confined to imagination: they are often given concrete form. In my 1985 book, *Islamic Futures*, I presented a familiar futures scenario for Mecca:

This scenario takes the present development to its absurd, but logical conclusion. The holy city of Makkah continues to see development until every segment of the city is transformed: two-thirds of the city consists of roads saturated with traffic, the remaining part has tower blocks, each one higher than the next. The same developments happen in Muna. The mountains surrounding Makkah and Muna are flattened and given over to highways. To cope with the increasing traffic congestion during hajj, a whole complex of flyovers and spaghetti junctions are built. Consumer shops, fast-food dispensers and petrol pumps occupy every inch of available space. Exhaust fumes in the air make it very difficult to breathe. Lead from the polluted air ensures that even the hardy date palm cannot grow. Makkah and its environment is now

transformed into a perpendicular metropolis; it is a city like any other American city: say, like Columbus, Ohio.

Perhaps I got the city wrong. I should have gone for Houston, Texas. But Mecca today is a product of a colonised familiar future. As is Kuala Lumpur: a product of Malaysia's '2020 Vision', which was distinguished by a total absence of any originality. Both Mecca and Kuala Lumpur are a product of borrowed futures, or what Inayatullah elsewhere calls 'used futures'. The Saudi Vision 2030, with its 50 islands of global upmarket tourism, too is an artefact of a colonised imagination. Pride of place is given to NEOM city project, which

will focus on nine specialised investment sectors and living conditions that will drive the future of human civilisation, energy and water, mobility, biotech, food, technological & digital sciences, advanced manufacturing, media, and entertainment with liveability as its foundation.

God save us all! Both Kuala Lumpur and Mecca, and the NEOM city project, pay no attention to what Maya van Leemput, who incorporates futures in her multi-media art practice, calls 'lived experiences' of the inhabitants, which ought to be the source of images of futures of cities. There is little concern for diversity not just in terms of culture but also architecture, for historical continuity, ecological well-being, or indeed for imagination that is free from the suffocating hold of superannuated used futures.

We need to go beyond the extended present and familiar futures approaches to break the power of the present and open up all our futures to other possibilities. The future is the only arena where real change is possible; but we have to ensure that change takes place within the boundaries of sustainability, it has to be change that we desire and envisage, that leads to a just and equitable, ecologically balanced world.

During my twelve-year stint as editor of *Futures* (1999–2011), the primary scholarly journal of futures studies, I learned two things. First, I came to the realisation that most papers submitted to the journal could be divided, like computer code, into ones and zeros – or optimists and pessimists. The optimists study the future from the perspective of the past and the present. No matter what methods they use – trends analysis and extrapolation, scenario building, cross matrix analysis and even highly sophisticated procedures such as modelling or morphological analysis – the end result in

most cases is more of the same. Except better, faster, bigger, smaller, cheaper. They tend to be scientists and technocrats who work for corporations or the government; and come, on the whole, from industrialised countries. One can say that they give us the western establishment view of the future. They see change in mainly quantitative terms. These futures are designed to stimulate demand for more and more. Amongst the optimists we also find the idealists, ecologists and new age visionaries who wish for cleaner, greener futures and develop elaborate projections of utopian future worlds. They then sit back and hope that the universe has the sense and the good will to transform their visions into future realities. The New Age visionaries – who conventionally came from California before it was taken over by Silicon Valley but now also come from Australia – want to paint the future canvas with love, harmony and not-so-free sex. This is where the leftover dreams of the 1960s and 1970s meet (what's left over of the) postmodern pastiche.

The pessimists use the same methods as the optimists to reach diametrically opposite conclusions. Except they concentrate on the downside of technology and focus on destructive trends. Most futurists of pessimist inclinations tend to be social scientists, philosophers, artists and rather left-wing. All pessimistic futures essentially boil down to what we may call the Terminator scenario. Here, runaway technology produces a dark, dreary and dingy future. The world is controlled by megalomaniac corporations, privacy has evaporated, and cyborgs police the streets. These two alternative futures are, themselves, simply a convergence on a dichotomy, one confirmed by the editor of *The Faber Book of Utopias*, John Carey. Researching this book, published in 2000, he found that human utopias fell into one of two classifications: technological or green, if in many versions of each.

Needless to say, I do not subscribe to any of these views of the future. I belong to a group of futurists who believe that futures are not a priori given, who see the duality between optimistic and pessimistic futurists as largely irrelevant. We appreciate that some methods of predicting and forecasting the future can easily be used to foreclose futures of all others. We note that highly sophisticated techniques, and they have become more and more sophisticated with the rise of Big Data, machine learning, bots and Artificial Intelligence, simply end up by projecting the (selected) past and

the (often-privileged) present on to a linear future. In contrast, we seek a more pragmatic approach that empowers people and opens up futures to pluralistic and democratic potentials and possibilities. Some of my colleagues and other fellow travellers have contributed to this issue of *Critical Muslim*.

Second, I learned that the present itself is not static. It is always changing. Indeed, change itself is constantly changing, and accelerating. The present has changed so drastically and so rapidly that many things we took for granted as norms and normal make little sense. Conventional does not work. Established paradigms are cracking under the pressure of change. Customary and cherished values seem irrelevant. Time-honoured ways of doing things lead to consistent failure. So the present has gone post-normal; and we find ourselves in

a time when little out there can be trusted or gives us confidence. The *espíritu del tiempo*, the spirit of our age, is characterised by uncertainty, rapid change, realignment of power, upheaval and chaotic behaviour. We live in an in-between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have yet to be born, and very few things seem to make sense. Ours is a transitional age, a time without the confidence that we can return to any past we have known and with no confidence in any path to a desirable, attainable or sustainable future. It is a time when all choices seem perilous, likely to lead to ruin, if not entirely over the edge of the abyss. In our time it is possible to dream all dreams of visionary futures but almost impossible to believe we have the capability or commitment to make any of them a reality. We live in a state of flux beset by indecision: what is for the best, which is worse? We are disempowered by the risks, cowed into timidity by fear of the choices we might be inclined or persuaded to contemplate.

Or, as the Italian journalist Ezio Mauro put it, we are ‘hanging between the “no longer” and the “not yet” and thus we are necessarily unstable’.

The zeitgeist of our epoch is well captured by the description of a Prada perfume in the British Airways in-flight duty-free catalogue I flicked through recently. ‘Infusion D’Iris’, we are told, ‘is inspired by a search for balance and harmony in a chaotic and contradictory world’. Whether a ridiculously priced olfactory concoction can bring harmony to the world is a question best left unanswered. But the present is certainly rampant with contradictions and exhibits all the signs of being constantly on the edge of

chaos. Contradictions are ubiquitous: politics everywhere is fragmented, nations and societies are divided as never before, competing interests and groups exist in social media bubbles denouncing and fighting each other. Indeed, the fact that the world is now deeply interconnected has increased contradictions – which cannot be resolved – many manifolds. But the world has also become complex. We cannot, as we used to, isolate problems and solve them for now they are interlinked and interconnected in a web of complexity. Most of our problems – political, scientific, technological, social, cultural, geographical – have become ‘wicked’, that is, they are connected to a host of other problems, incomplete, full of contradictions and constantly in flux in a rapidly changing environment. There are no simple solutions as complex problems require complex approaches. Throw in some positive feedback in a complex and contradictory environment and the end result is chaos. Thus, the accent in postnormal times is firmly on the 3Cs: contradictions, complexity and chaos.

There are driving forces behind the 3Cs. In a world of accelerating change, it is hardly surprising that things happen very rapidly. A single tweet can go viral and have an intended or unintended impact precipitously. Things also tend to happen at the level of the whole world while at the same time reaching individuals and communities in the remotest parts of the planet. And, not infrequently, a number of things happen concurrently. Thus 4Ss – Speed, Scope, Scale, Simultaneity – constantly feed the 3Cs. As news, opinions, statements, messages, blogs, tweets, posts on various social media, as well as actions, policies, and political, social and cultural declarations simultaneously whirl speedily around the globe reaching every nook and cranny, they increase contradictions, enhance complexity and habitually lead to chaotic events.

If the present is becoming postnormal, then, to use the title of the 2013 Exit Calm album, ‘the future isn’t what it used to be’. It too is creeping towards postnormality. So binary, bipolar opposites – artificial or natural, optimistic or pessimist, utopian or dystopian – approaches to making sense of a plethora of alternative futures are now irrelevant. The future is not one, a priori given tomorrow. A better way of understanding futures is to see them as three, distinct, unfolding tomorrows, which may sometimes be sequential but more often occur simultaneously. The first tomorrow is the extended present, a product of deeply embedded trends. The second

tomorrow is that of familiar futures, an outcome of recognisable images borrowed from films, television, novels and advertisements, metaphors that have gained common currency and conventional narratives lassoed on the frame of galloping change. So far so recognisable. The third tomorrow, however, is a radical place: it is the unthought futures – futures beyond the conventional and the predictable. Unthought futures are not unthinkable; it is just that we do not think about them largely because they are located outside our conventional framework of thought and action, or, if you like, dominant paradigms. Unthought futures require us to question our basic assumptions and axioms, and move towards truly uncharted futures territory. It is the unthought that breaks the shackles of extended present and familiar futures and leads toward genuinely decolonised futures.

Ironically, futures are also the unthought of contemporary Islam. In other words, futures is conspicuously absent from modern Muslim thought as though the basic assumptions of Islam do not permit reflection and consideration of the future. When I first started exploring and writing about futures in the late 1970s, I was dumbfounded to discover that the only mention of the future in Islamic literature occurred in relation either to prophecies or to the Day of Judgement – as though there was nothing between now and the Hereafter. The ‘Unseen’ seems to be located firmly beyond the grave; and, it seems quite clear to me that some highly pious individuals had died and then returned so that they could, in vivid detail, describe the *Spectacle of Death Including Glimpses of Life Beyond the Grave*. More recently, future has been associated with what has come to be known as the *ijaz* literature devoted to the dubious and disingenuous pursuit of alleged miracles, codes and prophecies of the Qur’an.

In sharp contrast, the Qur’an specifically asks the believers to be conscious of their history as well as their future: ‘Beware of that which is before you and that which will be after you, in order that you may receive Mercy’ (36:45). As Mirza Sarajkić notes, ‘when we approach and read the Qur’an from a futures perspective we discover that it is the book of futures par excellence. By its content and context, it is thoroughly oriented towards the futures’. However, both classical and modern commentators and interpreters of the Qur’an ‘have followed a centuries old set pattern. Key Qur’anic terms relating to the future have been given certain meanings at the expense of other potential meanings, and both classical and the modern commentators

have firmly stuck to those meanings'. Sarajkić points out that the term for the unseen (*ghayb*), can mean the Hereafter but it also means 'the unknown', 'that which is currently absent and not visible but which can indeed be present and be visible in the distant time horizon'. The Qur'an uses a number of different terms for futures: *al-ġadd*, tomorrow; *ghayb*, the unseen future waiting to be known; *akhirah*, the ultimate future; *nazara*, reflections on futures. Moreover, the future in the Qur'an is always plural and impregnated with God's signs and signals which can be studied and explored. Sarajkić analyses a number of verses – 'O you who believe! Be aware of God, and let every soul reflect what it has forwarded for tomorrow, and be aware of God' (59:18); 'the future belongs to those who are aware/conscious' (7:128) – from a fresh, futures perspective to reveal a text that constantly urges the believers to reflect on all our tomorrows. Sarajkić's conclusion is categorical: 'there is little doubt that the Qur'an regards thinking, studying, and exploring alternative futures systematically and seriously as an intellectual responsibility of highest order for the Muslim community'.

There is indeed a tradition of futures thought and reflection in Islamic history. And it starts with the Prophet Muhammad himself. Consider, for example, the detailed planning over a number of years involved in the *hijra*, the migration from Mecca to Medina. The *hijra* itself was made on the anticipation of a more viable future for the then small Muslim community and involved exceptionally detailed planning – including escape routes, laying false tracks, providing adequate food and provisions for the journey, moving individual families to Medina over two years, to even moving Ali, the Prophet's cousin, into his house. Think also of the Constitution of Medina and how much futures thinking went into creating an all-inclusive document that forged Muslims (immigrants as well as residents of Medina), Jews, Christian and pagans into a unified community of the future; and provided rights and attributed responsibilities to each community. Abu Bakr the first Caliph, foresaw the expansion of Muslim lands and realised that future needs could not be fulfilled with the existing system of administration. He therefore developed a new, and profoundly flexible, system of administration and management which could adjust to future needs. Umar, the second Caliph, realised that the future survival of the Muslim ummah was dependent on available resources, and that all resources

could not be consumed by one generation. He refused to distribute the conquered lands of Syria, Iraq, Iran and Egypt amongst the conquerors. In doing so, he went against the Sunnah – example – of the Prophet, explicit wishes of his companions, and even risked conflict. He declared that the newly required resources were for ‘succeeding generations’, and set them aside as future resources for the rapidly expanding Muslim community.

Future consciousness is also embedded in a host of Islamic concepts. The notion of *ijtihad* (sustained and reasoned struggle), for example, is concerned primarily with change and with shaping and reshaping futures. The concept of *khilafah* (trusteeship of human beings) adds another dimension of accountability and futures. The planet and its environment is a trust from God that has to be managed appropriately and passed on to future generations. The institution of *waqfs* (pious foundations), that can be traced back to the time of Umar, and adopted in the West (minus the spiritual dimension) centuries later, is specifically focussed on conserving and preserving resources for generations to come. Indeed, futures concerns are an integral part of the original objectives – *maqasids* – of the Sharia as evident in the future oriented logic of the, now long forgotten, institutions of *haram* and *hima*. *Haram* were inviolate zones around cities in which development was prohibited by the Sharia to ensure that the city does not suffer from pollution, that flora and fauna are conserved, and the city survives the future. *Hima* were reserves for the conservation of wildlife and forests designed to prevent deforestation and sustain the ecology of a region.

Classical Muslim philosophers and thinkers show a keen awareness of the future. For example, ibn Sina (980–1037) imagined a future world based on the liberated intellect where rationality was supreme. Ibn Rushd (1126–1198) argued that, apart from God, only human intellect was eternal and the future should be guided by it. His friend and colleague, ibn Taufyl (1105–1185), wrote what is considered to be the first philosophical novel, *The Life of Hayy*, and placed his protagonist, who spontaneously emerges from the slime, on a desert island in an attempt to show just how such a world can be created. Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), who according to a new biography by Robert Irwin was quite obsessed with the future, provided a theory of the rise and fall of civilisations and how history moves in cycles.

The future is, of course, a consequence of both the past and the present. Or, to put it another way: futures thinking requires prospective, the

inclusion of knowledge from history and an appreciation of changing contemporary reality. Recognition of the importance of studying and exploring futures for Muslim societies ought to begin with a futures readings of sacred texts and the rich intellectual history of Islam. The eleventh century philosopher and theologian, al-Ghazzali, divided knowledge, from an Islamic perspective, into two branches: *fardl-ayn*, or individually requisite knowledge, which is essential for all individuals to survive, such as social ethics, morality, civic law; and *fardul kifaya*, or socially requisite knowledge, vital for the survival of the community as a whole, such as agriculture, medicine, and engineering. Every community must have some members who pursue the main disciplines of socially requisite knowledge. If no one undertakes the endeavour, say no one studies medicine for example, the whole community suffers. Futures studies is now a preeminent *fardul kifaya*: to study and explore alternative futures, to envision and shape their own futures, has now become an obligation (*fard*) for all Muslim communities everywhere.

The obligation has acquired urgency because the postnormal horizons before us actually threaten the very survival of Muslim societies. Both physical endurance and the very identity of Muslims as Muslims is in danger. The Muslim world – spreading from Morocco in the West to Indonesia in the East - is often described as ‘the middle belt’. It is the middle belt of the Earth that will initially face the severest impact of climate change. Already the temperatures in parts of the Middle East and South Asia have reached above 50 degrees celsius. If the trends continue, the coming decades will make it impossible for human beings to live in these regions. A whole generation of new environmental refugees will be created. Currently, three out of four refugees in the world are Muslim. By 2035, this ratio could change to four out of five. Consider another statistic from the front page of the *Guardian*: ‘One in four Europeans vote populist’. The number of Europeans living under governments with a populist cabinet, the report tells us, has increased thirteen-fold: from 12.5 million in 1998 to 170.3 million in 2018. That is, half of Europe now has an extreme right-wing administration. This is not a temporary blip: the populists, according to the *Sunday Times*, have western democracies in a vice like ‘grip’. And contrary to popular myth, they are not ‘alienated white underclass’, angry pensioners and the unemployed in ‘Europe’s wasteland’. Populism ‘cast its net

surprisingly widely across society, scooping votes from full-time workers, middle-class conservatives, the self-employed, people on average or high incomes, and even the young'. How long before Europe completes the historical cycle and returns to its fascist past, aided and abetted by racist AI?

We are forced to rethink most of what modernity and postmodernism made prevalent. Modernisation, constant growth, even the notion of perpetual efficiency now belongs to the wastebasket of history. Even the idea of culture has become unhinged.

If the future is a cultural fact, as some artists and anthropologists seem to suggest, then, Richard Appignanesi tells us, we better be aware that culture – at least in its western manifestation – is decaying if not already dead. The postnormal times are also a postculture period where the key virtues of modernity and postmodernism have become deadly. The nation state has become a 'criminal phantom', democracy is 'without foundation beyond self-authorisation', the media is hysterical, 'western power is enslaved by its own technological facility' and hyperreality 'cancels our existential sense of time passing normally'.

The evaporating normality is also making its mark on futures studies itself. As Jordi Serra, perhaps the most prominent futurist in Spain whose series of thirteen, fifty-minute television shows on futures (*El dia de dema*, 'The Day of Tomorrow') was recently broadcast on Catalan television, suggests the promise of conventional futures studies that 'it is possible to envision, forecast and build preferred futures is not entirely true'. Postnormal times are far too complex and chaotic for such simplistic assumptions. Serra emphasises, along with other contributors to this issue of *Critical Muslim*, that both quantitative and qualitative methods are needed simultaneously for a better understanding of futures. Science is not enough. Imagination, art, and literature have a strong role to play in our understanding of postnormal horizons. So we are forced to concede that 'futures cannot be about managing, let alone, controlling the future'. While the future cannot be managed or controlled, it can be navigated.

However, postnormal times cannot be overseen by old academic disciplines, locked inside water-tight compartments, or timeworn skills and competences. Sustainable futures demand multi, inter, and trans disciplinary approaches. Some disciplines, such as economics and 'development studies' need radical transformations. Others need to be

rethought; area studies, for example, make little sense in a complex, interconnected world where no 'area' exists in splendid isolation for 'experts' to ruminate on! Still others, such as anthropology, should be consigned to history. And a plethora of new inter and transdisciplinary – for want of a better word - 'disciplines' have to be created. Similarly, critical thinking by itself is not good enough, we need a range of new competencies: in futures and anticipatory thinking, inter and trans disciplinary work, coping with incomplete and complex information, appreciating and handling uncertainty, recognising ignorance in its various forms, understanding how phenomenon move towards postnormality (postnormal creep). Futurist and founder of the website 'Work Futures', Stowe Boyd, suggests the skills of freestyling, the ability to adjust to a changing situation; emergent leadership, 'the ability to steer things in the right direction without the authority to do so through social competence'; complex ethics and 'postnormal creativity' – 'in postnormal times creativity may paradoxically become normal: an everyone, everyday, everywhere, process'.

Finally, one may ask, who are we doing futures for? The answer is provided by Cesar Villanueva who has used futures for conflict resolution and building peace. As I have witnessed, he has worked with fishermen, victims of typhoons and disasters, and war torn communities. 'We engage in futures', Villanueva writes, 'not just for ourselves but for our communities, the country, and the world community at large. All four are subject to typhoons be it personal, structural, social, even spiritual'. We trust in God. But according to the Prophet's advice, we also have to tie our camel – to the sturdy pole of sustainable futures to ensure that it remains pluralistic and open for all potentials and possibilities. Let's begin, as the VW ad suggests, with a few gestures!