

FUTURES IN FIVE SCENES

Jordi Serra del Pino

Scene one

1995: at the entrance of a building I was living in at that time

‘Jordi, what does this mean?’

Ms Garcia was pointing at a new sign I have just put in my mailbox:

Jordi Serra del Pino Prospectivista
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My name was not the mystery. No, the question referred to the ‘prospectivista’ – the Catalan word for futurist. Mrs. Garcia was one of my neighbours, an old lady that had been very friendly with my wife and I since we moved into the building. Not only that, she had some influence in the community and I wanted to let her know that Futures (prospective) was a respectable practice. In retrospect, I think that I also wanted to impress her, let her know what a great thing Futures was and that she was lucky enough to have a trained futurist in her own building. Her look showed true curiosity and, maybe, a spark of anticipation. I started explaining Futures to her. I tried to sound erudite yet accessible; but, before too long, I began to realise that I was losing her. I decided to raise the stakes by improving (or so I thought) the quality of my explanation, but her body language was clear, I was a sinking ship. And there I was, desperately trying to find the most sophisticated examples to make my case, when she decided to put me out of my misery. With a movement of her hand she stopped me while asking a second question.

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‘Just tell me this, do you throw tarot cards?’

That was the proverbial torpedo to my flotation line, I was not sinking, I had already sunk.

‘No Mrs. Garcia, I do not throw tarot cards.’

Her look now was a mixture of disappointment and compassion. At that moment I comprehended that, for her, I would have been a lot more interesting, not to say exciting, if I would have been a fortune teller. It was quite obvious that she had paid no attention to my speech. Her expectations were more in line of knowing if I could tell her if her daughter would find a suitable husband, or if her husband would overcome his breathing problems.

It was quite a blow. It was the first time that I understood, despite many people’s interest in the future, that they might not have an equal interest in Futures. The implications of this realisation chased me, and gave me a great deal to think about. Only years later I would understand that this had been a key moment in my professional career.

Scene 2

1999: in a radio studio

I had foolishly accepted to be on a talk show discussing the year 2000 and how the future may look in the forthcoming century. For some reason the host decided that it could be interesting to combine a futurist and a witch. And I am not making any derogative labelling here, the woman whose name I have forgotten was very keen on introducing herself as a witch. After some preliminary comment I began to realise that the debate would go south quite fast. It started when the host asked us what the differences between our respective approaches to the study of the future were, and my response ignited the hostilities. I had just started to say...

‘Well, to begin with, Futures is a science...’

‘How dare you say that my work is not scientific?’

The interjection came from the witch, she was fuming. Although I did not really state that her work was not scientific, the implication was clear. I decided to ease the tension.

‘Fine, then, if what you do is also science, how is it done? How do you do your science?’

‘Ah, my friend, what I have is a gift, if you possess the gift of witchcraft you can do it, if you don’t have it you can’t. All the women in my family have shared this gift and that is why I can do my witch science.’

I tried to explain that, by definition, science has to be open and accessible for anybody; that any kind of person, regardless of his personal features and skills can learn it and develop it. That, this was, precisely, why Futures can be learned the same way you can learn physics or sociology. Yet, there she was claiming that whatever she was doing was conditioned by the previous possession of a particular set of capacities that could not be taught, only inherited. I thought that my argument was definitive, but she refused to accept it and maintained that her work was as scientific as anyone else’s. By then, I began to see that she was not really concerned by her, should I say professional activity, falling under the category of science or not. The real issue had more to do with respectability, or even, credibility. She assumed that my claim that her profession was not based on science was an attempt to undermine her work, maybe even a subtle way to steal some of her clients. My experience with Mrs. Garcia had made it clear to me that some people would never ask for my services but would gladly visit her; and, I assure you, I was really hoping that none of my clients would go to a witch to explore alternative futures. However, my issue with her witchcraft was not the accuracy of her predictions but two other things.

First, that she was basically predicting the future. The idea of prediction is very problematic for me. For starters, it is one of the most disempowering concepts. Basically, a prediction is a statement of total certainty about a future event, something like, ‘next week you will find a good job’. This kind of statement has two implications that are contrary to the tenets of Futures Studies. One, the future is predetermined and,

somehow, whoever does the prediction has mastered its causal mechanisms; therefore, the future ceases to be a myriad of possibilities and becomes fate. Two, when predicting, the future is reduced to one sole happening, it becomes singular. But for futurists it is essential that the future remains plural because only when the future is plural, human choice matters. That is why we work with forecasts, probabilistic statements, instead of predictions. Thus, a prediction destroys both any notion of freedom in the future and the relevance of human agency.

Second, and more important, knowing what may happen is not enough if it is not properly contextualised. If you are told that you will suffer a serious accident tomorrow, you may decide to stay at home in bed all day. But if the accident happens at your home, while staying in bed, it will have done you no good. For a futurist knowing what may occur is accessory, what is really substantive is to understand why and how it may occur. Only this knowledge will help us to make better decisions, sometimes to the point of altering what you originally believed could happen.

So, I had no issue with the witch's approach. I simply considered (and I still do) that these kinds of outcomes are either disempowering or useless in order to make better decisions about the future. Yet, there was something I learned that day, science was part of the question regarding people's different approaches to the future and Futures. In fact, many people do not cut any slack to Futures being scientific when thinking about the future.

Scene 3

2009: Responding to 'What is in a name'

I had been invited to participate in a rejoinder. The then editor of *Futures*, the monthly journal of policy, planning and futures studies, Ziauddin Sardar wrote a paper, 'The Namesake: futures, futures studies, futurology, futuristic, foresight – what's in a name?', where he picked and developed an online debate on the World Futures Studies Federation list serve, about the implications of the different labels we use in the field. Basically, why some of us talk of Futures, while others refer to Foresight or go by Prospective. Among other considerations, he basically argued that science may be too restrictive a framework for futures to fully develop.

While I could agree with most of the nuances carried by the different tags, I could not avoid feeling uncomfortable with the notion of an unscientific futures. Of course, part of that had to do with the fact that my background in futures is partially from the Continental European School, with a heavy influence of authors such as French polymath Gaston Berger. Within this approach the scientific claim of futures (prospective) is taken for granted. But it also had to do with a deeper issue, my personal struggle to let people know that futures was a serious affair and a respectable professional career. My first contact with futures took place in a Barcelona association, the 'Catalan Futures Centre' (Centre Català de Prospectiva), which was originally called 'Futurology Friend's Club' (Club d'Amics de la Futurologia). However, they had to change their name very soon as the Club became associated with divination arts, like Occult and Tarot. The fact is that in Spain a futurologist is normally someone who pretends to have mastered some hermetic knowledge to uncover the secrets of the future. Futurology is simply a lost word for anything vaguely resembling a scientific endeavour. Personally, and beyond my clash with the radio witch, I have lost count of the number of times I had to explain that futures (prospective) has nothing to do with this kind of futurology.

I guess that all along I had considered science the single thing that distinguishes me from fortune tellers of any kind. By sticking to science, I was asserting, first, my commitment to let others have a chance to express how they would like the future to be; and second, my adherence to the plurality of possible futures as a fundamental principle of my activity. Not only that, by following a scientific procedure to develop my work, I was also letting others gain insight over my practice and my outcomes. In short, I was claiming that what I do could not be further away from fake futurology.

And yet, maybe Sardar was spot on and science is too much of a corset to explore the future in all its richness and diversity. Maybe that is why the unscientific stance to the future is more appealing to people like my former neighbour Mrs. Garcia. Science could be an adequate response to the predictive approach, but it is also true that science has helped to commodify the future to a great deal. Therefore, the answer would be to find a futures perspective that could combine simultaneously a scientific and intuitive line of work, if such a thing was possible!

Scene 4

2011: Preparing my Participation in the 2nd Crazy Futures meeting in Bucharest
Crazy Futures, an annual workshop in Romania that gathered professional futurists with scholars and students, was an engaging forum to discuss and debate futures theories and methods. That year, Ziauddin Sardar one of the meeting directors, had presented his new paper 'Welcome to Postnormal Times'. It was quite timely, because, by that time, he and I already had several discussions about why Futures was falling short. Sometimes, we would say that the data or information we were using was not very good, or just not good enough; in other cases, we would agree that some of our methods need a serious overhauling and God knows that we had been trying different approaches, theoretical and methodological, all along.

But 'Welcome to Postnormal Times' proposed an intriguing alternative premise: nowadays reality is different, in an unprecedented manner, because change has changed. Of course, someone could object that almost every generation has had the perception that its time is like no other, that either they are enduring the worst moment in history or the most promising one (maybe even both simultaneously). Yet, the point is that present day societies have some first-time specificities. To begin with, the world has never been as complex as it is today, not only because there has never been as many people on Earth as there are now, but mostly because the human population is interconnected to a degree like none other in the past; and let us keep in mind that one of the features of a complex system is the presence of many components interacting in multiple ways. From this perspective, there can be little doubt that we are living in the most complex moment in human history. But there is a second element, Chaos. Again, chaos is hardly new on Earth but, precisely for the extraordinary increase in the number of humans, as well as their actions and interrelations, the potential for chaotic behaviour has increased exponentially. And thus, we see constantly how minor happenings transcend their local context to become global events with impact that look totally out of proportion; the speed and reach information and communication technologies have conferred to our actions has boosted this feature to, one more time, an unparalleled level in history. And third, as Sardar points out, a world that has become complex and chaotic ends

up frequently being very contradictory: initiatives intended for a good purpose end up provoking just the opposite, discourses that cannot be further away from the actions that embody them, advances in knowledge in some fields reveal phenomenal ignorance in others. But mostly the growing evidence that some of these contradictions cannot be resolved because simple, binary approaches fall short in a world riddled with complexity and chaos. Yet, the most essential feature of Postnormal Times is that it is a transitional epoch. As Sardar puts it we are 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.' Whatever we choose to name it, this is not an end state, we are moving towards a new era of which we comprehend very little. Therefore, it may be unwise to try to build very solid structures as we just do not know what they have to be, what purpose they have to accomplish, for how long they have to stand.

There was another point in Sardar's piece that really caught my attention. The whole postnormal thing was coming from a previous paper, a 1993 article by Jerome Ravetz and Silvio Funtowicz, entitled 'A new Science for a Postnormal Age'. In that paper Ravetz and Funtowicz argued that something does not seem to work with science, actually, it has not been working for a while. Scientists have been unable to reach consensus on critical issues such as climate change. And it does not really matter if this disagreement has been due to the fact that some scientist believe that we still lack conclusive evidence or because they have let other factors bias their scientific criteria and judgement. Whether it is one case or the other (or worse, both) science has failed. Science's promise was to shed a light that would cast away ignorance and uncertainty. If science would state something, we would know and, therefore, there would be no doubt; and, in those cases in which we would not know, its rigorous application would lead us to an unquestionable conclusion. And yet, it has taken decades to reach a minimum consensus on the matter of climate change and, despite the fact that its first effects are already punching us in the face, some still question its existence. In short, we live in a moment in which a scientific fact does not carry more weight than any other kind of fact (I can almost hear the witch in the background telling me 'I told ya!'). However, Ravetz and Funtowicz were not advocating giving up on science. On the contrary. They proposed to create a new kind of science, one better equipped for

such occasions ‘where facts are uncertain, values in dispute, stakes high and decisions urgent’. In a nutshell, they reasoned that normal science was almost solely concerned with the product of any given research; essentially, the end result of the research is consistent with the methods applied. For them, that is just the beginning, the first P, the Product, but we need to consider additional elements: the Procedure, how the research has been conducted is relevant in itself; the Persons, the personality and idiosyncrasy of the researcher is pertinent; and finally, the Principles, the values, phobias and phobias that were brought (consciously or unconsciously) into the research. Thus, we pass from focussing on one P to four Ps, giving us little choice but accepting that scientific evidence is also contextual.

Could it be then that the witch and I were not so far from each other? If so, the relevance I had been giving to science all these years could it be just another form of hubris. Maybe the lesson I failed to learn from my encounter with Mrs. Garcia is that the future is too powerful a notion to be captured with a single stance. For years I have been saying that the approach to the future has to be, necessarily, transdisciplinary; that no disciple alone can grasp on itself the future and, nonetheless, I had limited myself to a single (mental) approach. Very postnormal indeed!

Scene 5

2017: in a voting station during October 1st Referendum in Catalonia

This was the day Catalonia held a referendum to decide if it should be independent from Spain. The Spanish state had decreed that the referendum was illegal and cannot happen. Around 18,000 policemen had been deployed to prevent it from taking place.

It was Sunday 5.00am, inside the polling station everybody is up and ready. I was part of the group that had been taking turns protecting the place during the whole weekend, like other people in many stations all over Catalonia. There were about fifty of us; we listen to the last instructions and get ready for a long day. We want to vote because it is the only way we have found to express how we would like the future of Catalonia to be. Many of us believed that we were making history, I couldn't help but feel, deep in my guts, that we were building the future. At 7.00am we got out of the building to organise the access to the station

to discover that hundreds of people were already queuing outside. It started to rain but nobody moved. Volunteers were requested to sit in the tables and manage the voting procedure, and I decide to enlist myself. Finally, the ballot boxes arrived and there was a first burst of joy, they were quite ugly, but they could not look more beautiful to us. We made the final preparations and got ready for the voting. Then things began to get nasty, footage of the police attacking other stations began to arrive and, all of a sudden, we became fully aware of the risks and stakes at play. We were scared but mostly we were shocked and raged by the brutality of the police charges. Almost immediately the hacker assaults, to prevent the referendum from occurring, started and uncertainty began to take its toll on us. It just could not be; being this close and still not being able to have the referendum! The line of people waiting to vote kept on growing, the elderly, sick or disabled were taken into the station and everybody was holding their breath. Finally, a decision was taken, we changed the system and began to register voters manually, the central referendum authority had a backup census and could check for irregularities afterwards. A second outburst of jubilation spread when we announced that we can carry on with the referendum. For a while we just focussed on the feeling of joy, some people cried when they voted, others thanked us for being there, some asked permission to take a selfie but all shared a sense of communion. Whatever happens in the future we will always remember that, facing incredible odds and all sorts of hurdles, we stood and fought for our dreams and hopes.

It was a very long day. We punctuated the high moments with those of fear and indignation. A couple of times we even applied the panic protocol to hide the ballot boxes. I also had my dark moment when I learned that my son and wife were beaten (not severely though) while protecting another station. And I have to admit that, for a while, all I wanted was to face the agents that hit my family and hit them back. Nevertheless, we managed to finish the referendum peacefully in our station, count the votes and sign the official records. It was 9.30pm when we got out of the station to announce the results, the street was still full of people, the yes had won overwhelmingly and there was a final rush of joy. We jumped, danced, sang, hugged each other, cried and clapped. We had won, in more than one sense of the word, we had won. I returned physically, psychologically and

emotionally exhausted. I had been talking for years about the importance of getting involved in the construction of the future, but I could not have imagined that it could be such a straining endeavour.

So yes, we won but, at the same time we did not. Catalonia became the first postnormal state in the world. According to Wikipedia, Catalonia was a republic for just nine hours. To be honest, I cannot really explain what happened afterwards. I know the basic facts, but I cannot say why we failed to fully implement the republic. My guess is that the Catalan leaders feared an escalation from the Spanish government response leading (many) deaths and (even more) injuries on the streets. And judging from the repression that unfolded in the following days it is hard to think otherwise. Nowadays we have several people in jail facing manufactured charges that may keep them imprisoned for the rest of their lives, others have had to go into exile and over a thousand other persons have been charged. The Spanish state, with the king at the forefront, has decided that preserving the unity of Spain is more important than the rule of law and democratic principles. The authoritarian face Spain has been known for in the past resurfaces again; and although it is clear that Spain has the force to prevent Catalan gaining independence (with the European Union looking at the other side) it seems obvious that it may provoke its own collapse as well. So, if anybody asks me now if Catalonia is a republic or a region, I just reply that it is a postnormal country, because it simultaneously is a republic, a region, none of them and both. You cannot be more postnormal than that! But I have also learned two important lessons from what happened then and the following months.

The first one being that the old futures promise that it is possible to envision, forecast and build preferred futures is not entirely true. Maybe it was at some point, maybe it was true that by generating enough consensus and by coordinating the present actions some futures were built in the past. But I do believe that the world today is far too complex and chaotic for such a linear approach to work. Nowadays, the number of connections and interactions with a chaotic potential are very high, so high, that planning may become an exercise in futility and frustration. However, I am not saying that I have given up on planning or the future. Looking at tomorrow as a plethora of possibilities with a myriad of outcomes and implications, while considering the diverse alternative

itineraries we could travel, is far too deep in my nature. I am a futurist, this is not just a job or something I do, it is an essential part of my being and that is why the second lesson is so painful.

The reasons why I have been so devoted to futures have been wrong. Deeply wrong. Futures is one of the last products of the promise of modernity: science will produce the knowledge that will let us master our destiny. If we think about it, we can see how science was already providing a way to rule nature and space, it was just a matter of time before it would do the same with time itself. World War Two supplied the momentum, something like that could not happen again or, at least, not in the same way; therefore, we needed a better way to manage the future. And it makes perfect sense that we approached the analysis of the future the same way we did in other fields, using all the tricks in our intellectual bag: we resort to linearity, duality, induction, empiricism and the whole lot. They had worked beautifully in other endeavours, just consider all that we had achieved, the future would be no different. Yet the future proved to be hard to objectify and to commodify. To begin with it could not be turned into a single entity. Even when there would be a strong pressure to move to a specific future there would be the need to generate (or keep) an alternative, if nothing else, to prove that this alternative would be a disaster. No, futures realised very soon that the only way to make human choice relevant was to have a plurality of future possibilities, of futuribles. Second, we also discovered that there would be occasions in which the future was better explained, captured or anticipated by non-scientific means. Thus, imagination, art, utopias, science fiction, pulp literature, comic books, movies and television series have frequently provided greater insights into the future than science. So, it is now that I realise that the tension between scientific futures and 'the future', and my clashes with Mrs. Garcia and the witch, were the symptoms of a deeper issue. Futures cannot be a purely scientific enterprise and, more to the point, it has never been. So yes, maybe futures was modernity's last son, but it was more a bastard than a legitimate offspring. From the very beginning, it has been tainted with some non-scientific (pre-, alter- or post-modernity) contributions and that is what makes it unique and problematic. It does not really work as a science, but it does not want to be something else. Futures

has to find a way to reconcile its mixed heritage to make the most of its scientific and un-scientific legacy.

Nonetheless, there is something that needs to be done imperatively. It has to rethink its purpose. Futures cannot be about managing, let alone, controlling the future. If the postnormal hypothesis is true, the future cannot be managed or controlled, but it can be navigated. And precisely because we are living in postnormal times, anticipation is more critical than ever. Ravetz and Funtowicz were absolutely right: facts are uncertain, values in dispute, stakes high and decisions urgent. And the only way to improve our odds is to get better at anticipating, to enhance our capacity to spot potential storms over the horizon and, also, to find safe ports in the uncertain, complex and chaotic sea we have to sail to make our navigation less turbulent and more promising. But in a postnormal context our modern lineage may be more part of the problem than that of the solution. We have to come to terms with the fact that modernity, progress and the associated worldview have a great deal of responsibility in the creation of most of the predicament we currently find ourselves in. Consequently, it would be quite naive to expect that the factors that created the situation could be capable of coming up with a viable true alternative. Within the postnormal thinking this would be a good example of the deepest level of ignorance, what we call invincible ignorance. The kind of ignorance that is not a result of what we do not know but, precisely, of what we think we know. To quote the former American Secretary of State, Donald Rumsfeld, these would be the unknown unknowns. And we cannot beat invincible ignorance by trying to learn more (or better), even by trying to expand one's conscience. No, we can only defeat invincible ignorance by unlearning. That is, by questioning the assumptions of our worldview, by challenging the foundations of our knowledge, by lighting the implicit premises in our understanding of the cosmos. And this is precisely what I am trying to do these days. The painful part is that Mrs. Garcia and her question were right; or, as we like to say within the postnormal framework, they were partially right. My scientific background could be the single main factor blurring my understanding of the future. Hence, I have to question my status as a futures/future 'expert' and, by doing this, hopefully, strive to be a better, maybe truer, futurist.

But I do not feel bad about it. Actually, I guess I should consider myself lucky. After all these years tangoing with the future, I get to see it under a totally different light. And this also means that I get another chance to start anew, to begin a new journey. What I have learned all these years has brought me here and, once again, the future offers me the possibility of an exciting adventure. All things considered, it is not a bad deal. Wouldn't you agree?