

# OpEd

## The Future Factory

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In Nathaniel Rich's novel *Odds Against Tomorrow*, a futurist by the name of Mitchell Zukor is born from the ashes of Seattle, the city devastated by fire. In the wake of the Seattle disaster, American corporations turn to a new industry, the future industry, no longer in the realm of assuring financial futures but in the business of insuring social and economic futures in the face of impending climate apocalypse. The point of futurists is not, as one would think, to predict the next disaster, but, rather more cynically, to give companies the insurance of having attempted to predict and foresee dangers to their environment – so that they can protect themselves against liable suits by arguing that they have protected capital and employees to the best of their future knowledge. In short, futurists help companies relinquish responsibility for disaster management. It's a smart and funny novel, following the reluctant futurist, in reality a postdoc in mathematics, as he accidentally finds himself employed in the quickly expanding offices of the FutureWorld consultancy firm in Manhattan.

As I started gathering materials and interviewing futurists, actual ones, for my book *The Future of the World* in 2011 and 2012, my main interest in them was one

of intellectual history and science and technology studies. The book makes the argument that futurology and futures studies emerged as subfields of Cold War social science in the 1950s and 1960s, and that they contributed in important ways to the making of social science imaginaries around the temporalities of the Cold War order, the logics of change in post-industrialism and postfordism, and the evolution of a larger political and social system. They disagreed on whether the latter was caught in equilibrium or prone to dangerous disturbances. While futurology seems like a quirky topic, future research was a most serious activity and also enacts, or so the argument goes, an important postwar debate about the scope of and limits to human rationality and about the possible malleability of and human control over coming time. As futurists struggled to shape the future, they turned prediction into a specific kind of social technology and market-making device. The long-standing logical problem of the self-fulfilling prophecy became a virtue as futurists discovered that images of the future could be used as ways of actively shaping perception and action. As forecasters at RAND set out to find the opti-

mal future preference, they gave clear priority to their own visions and tastes of what a post-Cold War world should look like.

This makes the activity of prediction a highly particular form of knowledge production, and the chapters of the book trace the surrounding epistemological, and political, debates about objectivity, facticity, subjectivity and expertise that this unleashed. However, the central argument of the book is that, equipped with modern tools of prediction such as the scenario tool or the less famous Delphi method, futurists turned themselves into experts – in fact into a highly specific and arguably new body of expertise in what might be called world futures.

World futures become knowable to futurists through a set of eclectic repertoires of 'knowledge', and through these repertoires of knowledge, futurists construct claims to influence and authority in modern societies. Most of these forms of knowledge, which include epistemic principles such as not only observation but participation, not only verification or falsification but influence on action, defy the scientific canon of thinking about knowledge. Over time, what was in the 1950s and 1960s an interesting debate in futures studies about the role and limits of human rationality within what others have called the postpositivist turn, has changed fundamentally and in sometimes disturbing ways. Future research – which in the 1950s and 1960s attracted key thinkers in the social sciences such as the economist Kenneth Boulding or the sociologist Daniel Bell – migrated in the 1980s and 1990s from the established fields of social science into the more experimental fields of risk studies, artificial intelligence, and neuroscience. During these decades, futurism also struck a deal with an exploding market for paid advice. Futur-

ists can be found in think tanks and consultancies such as the Washington-based Institute for the Future, where they monitor world developments, create artefacts of globalistic knowledge such as the so-called State of the World index, and use scenarios and Delphis as the basis of participatory, but usually expert-led, exercises in future creation. These can include hooking up global networks of experts on, say, governance issues, or conducting UNESCO workshops on how to reimagine the future with women and children in sub-Saharan Africa. Other futurists strongly resemble the futurist J. P. Yates of another novel, James P. Othner's *The Futurist*, who is described by Othner as "a Futurist. Which is to say he makes a very good living flying around the world dispensing premonitory wisdom, aka pre-packaged bullshit, to world governments, corporations, and global leadership conferences. He is an optimist by trade and a cynic by choice. He's the kind of man who can give a lecture on successive days to a leading pesticide manufacturer and the Organic Farmers of America, and receive standing ovations at both." I have met several Yateses in the course of my research, including one oil-drilling Texas consultant who did futures

work on global warming, and another who strongly argued that climate change was good news as it would push earthlings to colonize the universe.

Most futurists are more boring than that, however, and mainly involved in forecasting for governmental and corporate institutions, which means that they are involved in a form of future work that can be as disciplining as it is emancipatory and that somehow seems directly caught up in the governmentalities of neoliberal capitalism. The very lack of solidity in knowledge claims about the future give them a seemingly particular kind of influence in contemporary market societies. As Jens Beckert has shown in *Imagined Futures*, forecasts and other forms of future-making abound in our inherently unstable societies because these societies are desperately in need of forms of stabilisation, and we also live in societies that seem to prefer to postpone solutions to fundamental problems to the future rather than deal with them in the present. Both futurism and prediction are involved in this management of social conflict over time, with consequences that are hard to ascertain partly because the kind of expertise embedded in future prediction is opaque. To predict is not

to foresee the unexpected. To predict, and to forecast, is rather to set out guiding images and narratives of coming time so that forms of social and economic coordination can be achieved. By influencing the coming actions of others, one's desired image of the future can become real, whether that image is conducive to constructive human action or not. In this manner, it is reasonable to think that forecasts are not simply mere artefacts of the imagination, but also that in fact they are projections of socioeconomic interests and reflections of the power structures of global capitalism. After 1989, futurologists opened markets and collaborated with post-socialist regimes to create new civil societies in Eastern Europe, and contemporary futurologists are employed by structures of global governance ranging from the UN and the EU to the World Economic Forum and the world's largest corporations. In the financial markets a debate exists about the accountability of financial forecasts, shown in the aftermath of financial crisis to be involved in the manipulation of expectations in the name of stability. What forms of accountability should we ask from other futurists?