

# Some thoughts on terminology, the past and the possible futures of Futures Studies

scritto da Eleonora Barbieri Masini | 1 Aprile 2012



*Introduction: why do we need to define terminology in Futures Studies?*

Since the beginning of interest in future thinking among scholars as well as decision-makers, it has been evident that the need to define such thinking has been important. This is probably because it is important to give a definition to what one is doing. We could say that this is true also of ourselves in the present.

In recent times this need seems to have become even more important. To be called a 'generalist', for example, in the twentieth century would have been very serious, and as time

has passed definitions have grown increasingly important. Every science has had to define itself clearly, as well as identify itself, and even specializations have required a name. I am mainly referring to the social sciences, and especially to sociology, where the process has increased since World War II. Every science has had to specialize more and more, as the sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein emphasises in regard sociology in his report to the Gulbenkian Foundation((I. Wallerstein, *Open the Social Sciences*, Stanford, Stanford University Press 1996)), where he discusses in what ways sociology can be intelligently restructured in light of its history and recent debates. Wallerstein maintains, among other things, that a focus on the future would be very helpful in this restructuring.

In the past (and I shall return to this later) there were many thinkers about the future who did not need to define what they were talking about. The need only arose when numerous sciences or disciplines sought to define themselves at, I would say, the end of the nineteenth century. This is also the reason for the development in futures studies of the need for definitions so as to be identified.

The difficulties arise with the differences among the social contexts, and I would say, also historical backgrounds in the various countries where such studies emerged. Emblematic cases are the use of "forecasting" after the war in the USA, and that of "prospective", "futuribles" and "conjecture" in France, which were two Western countries that emerged from World War II with totally different social situations. Other terms are used in Europe and, as such, are accepted or rejected in different parts of the continent. This happens also for ideological reasons, and a case in point is "futurology". I shall discuss this at length in section 2, recalling that Zia Sardar also poses similar questions in his article in the present issue of *Futures*((Z. Sardar, *The*

*Namesake, Futures, Futures Studies, Futurology, Futuristics, Foresight-What's in a Name?, Futures, in print.....*)).

I will conclude this introduction by arguing that there is indeed a need to define the terms in our area but it should be regarded in historical terms and in the social and cultural context from which they emerge. This raises the question 'Can we define terms once and for all?'

### *Future thinking in historical terms*

All human beings are interested about the future. As John McHale used to say that, humans become such when they start to think about the future, and the future is an important symbol by which humans can make the present endurable and give a meaning to the past((J. Mchale, *The Futures of the Future*, George Braziller, New York, 1969)). I believe that this can be said about past human beings in all cultures and periods of art: when the pyramids were built in Egypt, the purpose was to leave a trace in the future, for posterity; and the same can be said about the Mayan and Inca buildings that we can admire today, or the Great Wall of China, as well as many great buildings and other artefacts throughout Asia. Hence, looking towards the future and future generations is a trait of all human beings.

Plato's ideal state was described from the point of view of a philosopher of his time. It was related to politics and, in some way, to the past that had been lost because of the death of Socrates, and to all the discussions that Plato had had with his friends, and in which they were building an ideal state. Their concept of the future was of something that, so to speak, would happen which is not here. Plato was certainly thinking about the future in terms of "a vision" of a better future. As Cornish((E, Cornish, *Futuring, the Exploration of the Future*, World Future Society, Bethesda, Maryland, p.169)) writes, "He developed the concept of an ideal society in which there would be perfect justice. We would now call his ideal

society a utopia, but Plato developed his concept before there was a concept for it".

A different case, in my view, is Thomas More, the English philosopher, whose Utopia as a possible society from a social and political point of view was based on concepts and values different from those of the society in which he was living. His Utopia was an imaginary island based on tolerance, communitarian spirit, and the development of technology. It was a Utopia considered as a 'no place', from the Greek.

The other writer I wish to mention is Francis Bacon, another English philosopher, who had a vision contrary to that of Thomas More of a society based on the individual and the development of science towards constant progress.

These writers on a future society are tied, in their visions, to their times and cultures, and hence to their social contexts. This is a general point, which is very important when looking at futures thinking over the years, and it should also be considered in the present.

The three above-mentioned authors were not concerned to search for clear-cut definitions of what they were doing in thinking about the future. At their time, the need for definitions was not as strong as it would become later; but their visions were, as said, connected to their culture and hence their society.

Before trying to answer all the questions arising in this regard, I would say that the need for clear-cut definitions is mainly tied to Western culture, which brings me back to the development of sciences in general and their endeavour to define and diversify each of them in its different aspects.

The point on differentiation of terms for all future thinking should be viewed in its social and cultural context, and it is not surprising that the need for clear definitional terminology is felt mainly in Western societies. At the same

time, there seems to be a need to extend such clarity to other cultures, especially amid globalization, for example to Latin America where the term “prospectiva”, in Spanish as the major language, used to be commonplace but has begun to be replaced with “foresight”.

Luis De Molina, a philosopher and theologian of the sixteenth century sought a definition of looking into the future, but mostly in regard to its philosophical and theological content and use. De Molina was looking for the connection between the knowledge of God and free human will; a connection which he called “scientia media”((E. B. Masini, Luis De Molina as a Precursor of the Basis of Philosophical and Ethical Thinking in Futures Studies, Futura, Finnish Society for Futures Studies, Helsinki, Finland, vol.1/2009, p. 12)).

“In his main work, *Concordia*, De Molina argues that God wants to save all men, but this depends on their will. He gives them all possible means to be saved although not in the same measure. This is what is called a ‘contingent future’, which is thus related to God’s prescience because we can attribute to God a certain future knowledge of contingent futures without impinging on human freedom((E.B.Masini, id. p.12))”.

Thus De Molina speaks of “futurum” and “futura”. “God not only comprehends possible creatures but also ‘super-comprehends’ them without impinging on their free will”((E.B.Masini, id.p.12)). From this perspective, we can see the difference between “futura” (all futures) which God understands for all times, and “futurum”, one future related to human freedom among the many possible ones, always in the awareness of God’s knowledge of it and hence of many possible futures.

After De Molina’s reflections, the Molinism movement began and sought to blend the grace of God with human free will. The Molinists drew the concept of “futuribilia” from De Molina’s thought but they disagreed with him on various important issues, and mainly on the question of how God knows all

futures, "futura". De Molina wrote on this last topic but he never used the term "futurabilia".

De Jouvenel, in his extremely important book "L'art de la conjecture" ((B. de Jouvenel, L'Art de la conjecture, Futuribles, Edition du Rocher, Monaco 1964 (in the Italian Version, L'arte della Congettura, Vallecchi Editore, Firenze, 1967, pp.27-28)), cites De Molina in relation to the debate between Voltaire and Maupertuis in the eighteenth century on the symmetry between past and future, and he writes about the difficulty of the topic analysed by De Molina due to its metaphysical nature. Concerning De Molina's stress on human freedom, de Jouvenel maintains that conjecture is not knowing and understanding but having an opinion, a thought, an imagination. It is interesting, however, that de Jouvenel used the term "Futuribili", and ever since it has been employed not only in France and Europe but throughout the world. Futuribles are, in fact, the many possible futures which are imaginable and plausible for us. Futuribles will be discussed further in the next section.

Zia Sardar also correctly mentions Marinetti, the Italian writer and founder of Futurism, the art movement based on strong nationalism and direct action in society. But, to my knowledge, the term was never used to denote thinking about the future.

One more contribution worth recalling is that by the sociologist William Ogburn on social change. Ogburn was appointed by president Herbert Hoover to the President's Research Committee on Social Trends in 1929. He used the method of looking at the long-term trends from the past and projecting them into the future, using mainly quantitative data. It is interesting, as Bell recalls, that Ogburn, also emphasised the "increasing role of government and the growth of large business" ((W. Bell, Foundations of Futures Studies, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick (USA) and London (UK), vol.1, pp.7-8)); an indeed interesting indication

for the recent past and present times made in 1933. It is important also to recall Harold D. Lasswell, who started in the '30. his efforts to create what we now mainly call futures studies while developing policy sciences as also Bell recalls.

*Futures studies and terminology, their relation to the different cultures in which they emerge*

Before going into details on the various terms and their use, I shall briefly discuss the hypothesis, also put forward by Zia Sardar in his article in this same issue of *Futures* as well as in other writings, on the link between terminology and the culture in which it is created and used, and which argues that many terms now used are mainly European in their origin and are in general of Western origin.

In the past, I have sought to show how thinking about the future differs among countries and especially among cultures. Here I shall recall as an emblematic case the thought of Ashis Nandi who uses the term "utopias" and argues that they are always related to the culture in which they are born, and hence to its values. He discusses a Third World utopia, stressing that the difference among cultures, because of their often painful histories, impinges on how people in those countries look at the future. He uses his well-known concept of "continuity between the victors and the victims" to describe a Third World utopia in which a certain theory of suffering is always present. Hence "A Third World utopia – the South's concept of a decent society – must recognize this basic reality. To have a meaningful life in the minds of men, such a utopia, we must start with issues of man-made suffering which has given the Third World both its name and uniqueness"((A. Nandi, *Towards a Third World Utopia*, in *Bonfire Creeds, The Essential of Ashis Nandi*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 442-443)). He also speaks of a vision of the future, but I do not think he ever uses other terms related to the future. Although Nandi, a very well know writer, comes from India, his outlook can be

extended to all Third World cultures. This also means that we cannot develop futures studies without looking at our past, or we would only be inventing futures that might have low likelihood of becoming real in the future.

For Africa and the future I would like to refer to a book: "Futures of Cultures" stemming from many group meetings organized by UNESCO((E. B. Masini (ed.), Futures of Cultures, UNESCO, Paris, 1994)) in which Elikia Mbokolo speaks of the dynamicity of cultures in relation to those of Africa and stresses the centrality of living cultures for the past, present and the future. He calls them the 'resistance of cultures' while Dennis Goulet, in the same book, calls them 'cultures of resistance' in the Latin American context. Resistance is in many cases the core of a culture which in Africa forms the strong connection between present generations looking at past and future events which are not separated but related and which reappear, at least in specific moments of individual and social life, in thinking about the future. At the same time, the terms used at the international level in Africa are either of French origin like "prospective" in the francophone part of Africa or the same, to my knowledge, as those used in other Western countries.

As for Latin America, a culture which Antonio Alonso Concheiro((A. A. Concheiro, Futures of Cultures in Latin America, in the Futures of Cultures Project vol. II., Coordinator Eleonora Barbieri Masini, UNESCO, Paris, Report March 1992)) terms a "mestization" of cultures raises the continuous need for identity in Latin American people and poses the question of whether Latin Americans really wish to be part of European culture as they often are considered to be and maybe feel. He adds that there is a sort of embedded orientation towards the future in Latin America, which I have also found in my research on women from various countries in Latin America countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Chile and Argentina((E. Masini and S. Stratigos, Women, Households and



Change, The United Nations University Press, Tokyo, 1991)). At the same time, in these countries, maybe also because of these contrasting views, people working in Futures Studies have for long employed the term "prospectiva", as used in Spain and deriving from the French term "prospective", more recently "foresight", is being used as well.

At the beginning of his article in this *Futures* issue, Zia Sardar discusses the difficulty of getting rid of the past in thinking about the present and the future, as in J. Lahire writings which he cites. This is a point I agree with, and I would also stress, when looking into possible futures, not only the difficulty of getting free from the past but also of understanding the weight of the past on the present and on the future, as Nandi explains concerning the present and the future. It is interesting to note that both these writers (Nandi and Lahiri) are from India, but their concepts are worldwide.

*An effort to understand some terms mainly used: futures studies, futuribles, futurology, prospective, prevision, foresight*

I have often written about Futures Studies and must say that the World Futures Studies Federation has greatly helped to make this term the most widely used in many countries. Its definition derives from the thought of many people truly interested in future developments of society in all its dimensions. During the 1970s John and Magda McHale included all types of thinking from extrapolation to utopia in Futures Studies, while Yhezkhel Dror wrote about many alternative futures and Jim Dator strongly advocated use of the double S, in both futures and studies.

This is just to mention a few participants to the debate on Futures Studies and its terminology in those years, when, after various historical events such as the oil crises, many alternative futures had to be considered, not just one. The

consequence was that futures derived, for example, only from trend extrapolation were not sufficient. Indeed, Jim Dator was especially insistent on the use of this broad term for the many alternatives of the future, and this should be stressed today, when it seems to have been overlooked by many future-oriented studies as well as in the present debates on the subject. The specificity of Futures Studies, as the name of the *Futures* journal also shows, is in the importance of using plurals.

Wendell Bell, in his book *Foundations of Futures Studies* (Wendell Bell, *Foundations of Futures Studies* id, vol.1, pp.68-70)) devotes a chapter to "What should the new field be called", in which he discusses the various options for futures studies, futures research, and the futures field. He also mentions the debate, if this can be called a field, and recalls a suggestion made by Roy Amara in 1981. In any case, he opts for Futures Studies in acknowledgement of the difficulty even among writers in the area in Western countries.

Futurology is a term which provoked much discussion on its appearance and seems still to do so today. I wish to clarify both its meaning, starting from its inventor, and its use in the past and in the present. Ossip Flechteim coined the term in his very important book, *History and Futurology* (O. K. Flechteim, *History of Futurology*, Verlag Anton Hain Meiseheim, am-Glan, Germany 1966, p. 73. Also in Eleonora Barbieri Masini, Luis De Molina as a Precursor of the Basis of Philosophical and Ethical Thinking in Futures Studies, id. p.8)) dedicated to Eric Fromm and with an introduction by Robert Jungk. He recalled that in 1943 he had used the term 'futurology' for what he hoped would develop into a "real science of futurology"

It is important to clarify what Flechteim himself has to say about the term. In fact, he attempts to analyse history and futurology as two aspects of social understanding, and at the

same time he writes: "Futurology... cannot work with the chronological sequence of detailed facts; instead it will avail itself of interpretation, generalizations, and speculation to a considerable high degree. In this respect, its kinship to cultural anthropology, theoretical sociology, and social philosophy becomes apparent". Later on the same page, he writes: "Indeed, if the relationship between sociology and other social sciences was better established, we could be tempted to think of futurology as a division of sociology, sometimes historical sociology"((O. K. Flechteim, *History of Futurology*, Verlag Anton Hain Meiseheim, am-Glan, Germany 1966, p. 73. Also in Eleonora Barbieri Masini, *Luis De Molina as a Precursor of the Basis of Philosophical and Ethical Thinking in Futures Studies*, p.8)).

I think if this thread had been followed, many discussions on the term could have been amplified. At the same time, I agree with de Jouvenel, whose already-cited book on "L'art de la conjecture"((B.de Jouvenel, *L'art de la Conjecture*, id. pp. 30-31)) has a chapter on futurology where the author stresses the importance for people interested in future thinking not to imply that there is a "science of the future" able to tell us exactly what is going to happen. It was for this reason that he rejected the term "futurology" because it might make people believe that scientific results can be offered for the future, while he stressed that the future is not something related to "objects offered passively to our knowledge". I agree with this statement

This is why he coined the term "futuribles", his purpose being to underline both their imaginative character and the many possibilities for the future. According to de Jouvenel, we cannot speak of all "futura" – the things that will be (see de Molina) – but can only look at possible futures, which are those, which are imaginable as well as plausible. This is how I would say that the concept of futuribles((B. de Jouvenel, *L'art de la Conjecture*, id. pp. 33-35)) is in line with the

plurals in Futures Studies and de Jouvenel has been one of the first scholars to use the plural already in 1964. At the same time, in fact, the use of the concept of “social futures” by John McHale) is present in his book *The Future of the Future* in 1967((J. Mchale, *The Future of the Future*, George Braziller, New York, 1969, introductory phrase)). In the same book McHale, uses as introduction, the famous phrase:

The future of the past is the future

The future of present is in the past

The future of the future is in the present

Which, I believe, is still today a source of reflection.

It is interesting at this point to discuss the term “prospective” coined in France by Gaston Berger in the 1950s, Berger was a philosopher and later a manager, and used “la prospective” by transforming what was an adjective into a noun, as Thierry Gaudin mentioned to me recently.

The term is very important both for its meaning and for its widespread use in francophone Africa and in Latin America, because of its use and meaning in Spanish as well. In Latin America, as I already said, it is recently being replaced by “foresight” as used in Europe.

“Prospective” has been used by Michel Godet for many years. In a recent book with Philippe Durance, which has been translated also into Italian, he argues that “prospective” is nourished by history, and with reference to what Berger writes, that “the past serves to demonstrate those things that do not change as well as prevailing trends which are useful in formulating hypotheses and guidelines ....”((M. Godet with P. Durance and A. Gerber, *Strategic Foresight la Prospective Use and Misuse of Scenario Building*, Dunod, Paris 2008, in the Italian version Michel Godet and Philippe Durance, *La previsione strategica per imprese e territoriale*, 2009, p

.6. <http://www.cnam.fr/lipsor/eng/publications.php>

<http://www.cnam.fr/lipsor/laboratoire/publications/data/PrevisioneStrategica-Dunod-2008.pdf>)), at the same time he, as Berger does, underlines the importance of human values and aspirations leading to action. For Michel Godet, “prospective” emphasises choice and action: whence derives the distinction between “preactive” and “proactive” acting before or after the event has occurred, hence the connection between understanding, through qualitative or quantitative data, a situation as well as, choosing and acting, “strategic planning” which is central to Godet’s thought. From this arises my conviction that “prospective” comprises a rigorous analysis of the past and the present and at the same time an important normative component which I believe is present in all futures studies with different levels of normativity and is well expressed also by followers of “prospective”.

Also Datar (Dossier Prospective et Territoir, la Documentation Francaise) in 1994, and referred to by Fabienne Goux-Baudiment on the basis of Gaston Berger’s early writings, says: “Analyse and understand the forces which structure the future, identify the main trends and the seeds of change. Anticipate their development and act to forge the future”((F. Goux Baudiment, Une nouvelle étape du développement de la prospective: la prospective operationelle, Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Rome 2008, p. 606)). I believe this is also very clear as Godet’s, very valid definition, which takes account trends from the past which have a weight on the present, as well as present decisions and actions which will produce many possible or probable future. Both Godet and the Datar have a basis in Berger’s thinking, which shows its validity at present.

This formulation has induced me, and many others in Italy to define “previsione” in Italian following “prospective” in French. “Previsione umana e sociale” is the title of the course at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Gregorian

University, which was started in 1976((E. B. Masini, *La previsione umana e Sociale*, Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Roma, 1986)).

I think the description of definitions in history and partly in the present, in this article reinforces the hypothesis put forward by Zia Sardar and myself which I briefly described above. This hypothesis underlines the importance of the cultural context in the formulation and use of terms, so that their origin, and not just their use, should be taken into account.

“Foresight”, as well known, has been the most widely employed term in recent times. Although it began to be used in the 1980s, it is now known, not only by many in the area, but also by the general public.

For “foresight” I always prefer the definition given in the Handbook of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions by Michael Keenan and Ian Miles, both from PREST (the Centre for Science and Technology Policy and Management Research of Manchester Business School), which now combines its expertise with CRIC (Centre for Research in Innovation and Competition). The two research groups have merged to form the Manchester Institute of Innovation Research, again at Manchester University, and they are highly active in the area of “foresight”.

The definition runs as follows: “the term refers to approaches to inform decision-makers, by inputs concerning the longer-term view and by drawing on wider social networks that have been used in much futures studies or long range planning”((

M. Keenan, I. Miles. J. Koi-Ova, *Handbook of Knowledge Society Foresight*, European Foundation, Dublin, 2003, p. 20,

<http://www.eurofound.eu.int/transversal/foresight.htm9>)). In my view, this definition brings in the element of participation by those involved with or using foresight, thus

underlining the importance of the social context in which the activity is developing and used.

It is also interesting to note that the term is widely used by the European Commission studies developed in Europe which has brought the English term "foresight" in a sort of dialogue with the French term "prospective" as indicated by Philippe Destatte and Philippe Durance in their interesting work on terminology based on the contributions of many scholars in Europe ((P. Destatte and P. Durance, directors, 10 Mots-clés de la prospective territoriale, Diact, La documentation Française, Paris, 2009)).

What Zia Sardar says about the term not existing in languages other than English is, I believe, true. I hence stress that it becomes increasingly important to understand that concepts and terms are always related to the socio-cultural contexts in which they emerge, and they are often extraneous to the societies into which they are imported and used.

### *Conclusion and proposal*

I have looked at some of the terms most widely used in futures studies, as well as at their origins, in search of their possible social and cultural bases both in historical terms and in their developments and uses, so as to debate the doubts on definitions with which I started this contribution. Zia Sardar, in his article goes beyond my doubts with his four laws of futures studies; and in his conclusion, he states that we need to look at the past of futures studies so as to learn from mistakes and achievements. However, I wish to add to his point on the scarce understanding of cultures other than the Western ones that we should investigate the ways in which other cultures think about the future and look for concepts and terms different from the ones that we, from the West, know and use.

Hence my proposal for all of us engaged in the area is to make

the effort to understand futures thinking in social and cultural contexts other than those which have emerged in Western cultures but which we transmit throughout the world. This would be both an act of humility by all researchers and an important contribution to the futures of futures studies. I propose to call it "a liberation movement" for futures studies to which we, who are engaged in futures thinking, may contribute by including those thinkers from other cultures who have generally used Western terminology.

Wendell Bell describes in his Foundations of Futures Studies((Wendel Bell, Foundations of Futures Studies, id.vol.1. p.72)) the great contribution to Futures Studies by many authors in different countries around the world. This prompts me to state that not only is there a need to look at what besides Western culture can be found in other cultures in terms of future-oriented thinking, but also to rely on many thinkers in non-Western countries who know how to search in their own cultures for such concepts and terms. This could be a contribution by the futures studies field to the understanding of existing as well as emerging cultural contrasts in countries and at the world level.