

History and the Future of the Real World

John L Robinson
Technology Monitoring Associates
New Zealand

Today, Yesterday and Tomorrow

The sight of a reporter in Iraq killed before our eyes on the television screen by an American helicopter-launched missile brought back uncomfortable memories from the Vietnam war – such as pictures of a prisoner shot in cold blood and of a naked girl running screaming from a napalm attack.

This is the world of the present. It is also the world of the past, across the centuries – stretching back past the two world wars of the twentieth century to so many other displays of military might such as the barbarities of Ghengis Khan and Alexander the Great. And it will be the world of the future. We relive dangerous times.

It is foolish to believe that human actions will suddenly change for the better. If history teaches anything, it is of false dawns, crushed hopes and missed opportunity, of the persistence of folly and the corruption of power. To the constant threat of the powerful center against the disadvantaged periphery must now be added the global harm caused by uncontrolled human activity, still driven by a desire for "growth" despite the increasingly evident signs of increasing environmental damage and the onset of resource wars.

History of Ideas or Reality

A historical overview and a scan across time are essential to provide an underpinning and foundation for futures thinking. Any scenario of a possible future needs to be firmly based on current and recurring trends, on

advances and changes as well as on historical constants.

The focus may be on the ideal, the realm of ideas, or on the reality of concrete experiences; the two intertwine in the development of society and the determination of defining collective actions. Which is now more significant?

Major stresses, and challenges, have been evident within the developed world for the past thirty years and more. Concerns have grown over global limits to growth, including resource limitations, species extinctions and climate changes due to the extraordinary scope of human activity. That same period has seen the frequent failure of the post-colonial enterprise. Independence of former colonies has too often failed to provide a better life as, all too often, inequalities have increased.

One major reaction to the persistent and increasing levels of disparity and stress has been to reach out to the imagined certainties of the past and to call upon religious texts (often with new or misguided interpretations) for guidance, both in ideas and as a rallying point for action. We need not go far to trace that pattern through history; for example, Maori in New Zealand rallied around prophets when suffering from disease-induced population decline and loss of land and mana during the nineteenth century. Today elements of religious fundamentalism are all too evident among ruling and guiding groups across the world, as in Washington, Israel and amongst Islamic activists. This is a turning away from the real to the ideal, from actuality to chimera. At the same time it is notable that ideas follow

and reflect the physical reality and material desires which are preeminent. The concrete reality forms the setting for beliefs.

In our time the selfish "free market" of the isolated individual and fundamentalism are dominant. These are the driving forces behind the increasing global struggle ("war on terrorism"). While there are many counter-currents, such as calls for creative altruism in a desired planetary global civilization, they are feeble in comparison.

If it is to be relevant, the futures enterprise must recognize the crucial messages of history, which resonate so strongly with our real world. The focus must be on the defining reality of the physical world and on social interactions within that concrete matrix.

Patterns of Development and Forecasts

There are constants in human behavior and real physical limits of our planet earth. A major step in the exploration of futures – including multiple possible scenarios and preferred scenarios, tending towards some desired vision – is to understand where we are going now and what of the future is inevitable. Large and dominant forces, beyond our control, must be recognized if futures work is to be more than an exercise in wishful thinking.

Some happenings echo those of the past. Even many trends which appear new to us may repeat past events. Resources have become short in the past, food supplies inadequate, other species driven to extinction, and disease has decimated populations before. Perhaps this time civilization is global and those threats take on a greater significance, but there are many examples in the historical records to guide us in a consideration of what to expect.

Many trends can be traced by following physical measures such as population, land, water and food supplies. Those physical realities may identify problems and raise questions, suggesting necessary reactions. What is the most likely future? Will the problems be overcome? For the answer to that question we may

turn to a combination of systems behavior and the constancy of human and societal characteristics. History suggests that each generation will repeat the mistakes of the past. The desires of the ruling oligarchy so often conflict with the requirement to react and change, and reject the needs of the underclass.

A most probable scenario will take into account those constants of collective human action, relating these to the current pattern of power relations. There may be more continuity and less change in trends than demanded by a logical reaction to the scientific evidence - a resistance to change and protection of the status quo despite the evident consequences.

A probable scenario may then describe a continuing pattern based on past trends. Those trends may be established from the guidance of a variety of sources including global models and historical analyses, as I have done in much of my work.¹ That analysis has been based on concrete evidence, and is cynical and realistic. As a most probable scenario it works. Here are some of the key trends identified.

- Economic growth results in a new set of problems rather than leading to general prosperity. Outcomes include forced consumerism, privatization of public goods for profit generation, increasing inequality and a search (often forceful, including conquest) for new markets. "The paradox of plenty" is then "how the fruits of human progress are destroying modern society and the environment."
- Economic growth frequently results in overproduction, as occurred in the developed world in the 1970s. One common result is overshoot and decline as feedback from failed businesses forces a stock market crash. It was evident that the overproduction of the 1970s would not lead to such a collapse – and neither to a recovery period of full employment. This change in economic behavior is a consequence of government activity and the damping effect of redistribution through the welfare state, and of the powerful global financial institutions.
- The desire for domination and expanded markets will stimulate the growth of a new global empire, which acts in accord

HISTORY AND THE FUTURE OF THE REAL WORLD

with its own goals and not those of other nations.

- Humanity has colonized the entire globe; other species are increasingly driven to extinction and the global environment is changed by human activities.
- Global resource are limited. The world is experiencing the end of the era of cheap oil – as evident by the shift of the USA from exporter to importer in 1970 and the subsequent oil shocks, and the current resource wars.
- Some complex models of the 1970s suggested that the world population could not be adequately fed and that food shortages might occur around 2030. Current concerns with water supplies repeat that message. A historical scan suggests that the crisis will be followed by disruption, social breakdown and war.
- As stresses continue and increase, existing forms of government will be challenged. The most likely alternative to free market liberalism, given the collapse of the Soviet Union and the denigration of socialism, will be the fascism of the strong leader, central control and conformity.
- Such changes will not come as sudden one-off events, but will develop over a period of time. There will increasingly be foreshocks presaging global crises. Many are evident now, and in the case of the end of cheap oil, the process has been ongoing since 1970. Yet despite such clear indications that global crises are on the horizon, if not with us now, adequate action will continue to be lacking and the world will react with surprise to each event.

Self Protection of the Status Quo

The forecasts noted above have proven robust, identifying the major trends from 1980 to the present day. That link to reality follows the original intention which was to explore the probable future, and not to describe a preferable future or a desired vision. The method was to base the scenario on historical events and real-life material conditions, to move out from the past and present into the future rather than

to work back from a desired future. In developing such a set of expectations, I consciously recognized my own world-view and paradigm, and my wishes for a better world. I then set these aside and made an attempt to look reality in the face, to consider the failures and horrors of past history and to acknowledge the realities of power and the role of the dominant oligarchy in the global market.

One particularly significant feature of the real world has been the denial of global problems and challenges, despite the increasing scientific evidence. Already as the 1980s began there was a turning away from that recognition and a refusal to acknowledge the warnings of limits and of impending global catastrophe. One consequence has been the waste of the past several decades; instead of changing collective behaviors and solving those clearly identified problems, the overwhelming reaction has been to continue down the same path, to add to the problems rather than to turn towards a solution. In the words of the cartoon strip possum Pogo, "I have met the enemy and he is us."

The major reaction was, and is, to set up a self-protective smoke-screen - to move the focus of debate away from the concrete reality to an apparently learned and erudite discussion of irrelevant details which act to puzzle and confuse the audience. In that way the fact that "the emperor has no clothes" is forgotten.

In 1982 I noted one example of this process in the appearance of some rather curious pseudo-science, taking scientific concepts far from their origins in a process of near mysticism. My analysis suggested that rather than focus on details,

it may be of greater value to consider why so much obvious nonsense is being propagated at this time, and then to return to a more rational discussion of the real world and the many problems to be solved there, and thus to refuse to be diverted into arid intellectual cul-de-sacs. ... we wish to note the source of the logic in the propagation of such ideas. ...

The answer is to be found in a systems behavior. The first goal of any system is to remain in existence. While a system is healthy and appropriate to the historical situation (even if failing to satisfy

criteria such as justice and liberty), reality may be described clearly and simply – there is a fit between paradigmatic perception and the physical world. But once a system is inappropriate, failing and under attack, it will set up a number of protective mechanisms. The role of the pseudoscience criticized in recent copies of *The Ecologist*, and of official economics, is two-fold: the legitimization of the status quo, and the production of diversions to draw attention away from the obvious failure of the system and the need to make substantial changes in the system. ...

Thus in large-scale projects in the global problematic, attitudes derive from the source of funds and suggest a continuation of the present system. Prestigious prizes from the establishment also go to establishment thinkers ... Thus "experts" are both created by the system and used by the system for legitimization purposes.²

The focus of futures thinking will determine whether the enterprise adds to an understanding of the consequences of current long-term trends and thus assists an educated debate in a search for solutions (or, perhaps all that is now possible, mitigating actions) – or whether futures research provides a cover for ignorance and becomes part of the problem. My analysis, based on complex computer models, on extensive scenario studies, on historical precedent and on my own judgement, suggests that we live in a very worrying world. We live within the most ominous of the 1970s scenarios in a world which is drifting towards an even greater set of global crises, unprepared despite the many warning signals. I do not think that we "doomsters" are crying "wolf" – rather the more pessimistic forecasts are proving robust.

Given the physical reality of our times, given the power of the new empire, given the recognized shortage of water supplies and the potential for food shortages and the consequent disruption, given the inevitability of resource wars which have started already, it is essential that the futures enterprise seize the moment and focus clearly on the "global problematic" (the phrase of the Club of Rome, formed in 1968 when such global problems had become evident) and define ideas which recognize those concrete realities and which may

help to guide humanity through some "interesting times".

Correspondence

John Robinson
131 Eden St., Island Bay, Wellington,
New Zealand
johnrob@paradise.net.nz

Notes

1. Robinson 1989, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2002
2. Robinson 1982

References

- Robinson, John L. 1982. "Legitimation of a Failing System." *The Ecologist* 11(6).
- _____. 1989. *Excess Capital*. Technology Monitoring Associates.
- _____. 1994. *Rebuilding New Zealand*. Technology Monitoring Associates.
- _____. 1996. *Destroying New Zealand*. Technology Monitoring Associates.
- _____. 1998. "An Exploration of the Late Twenty-first Century." *Journal of Futures Studies* 3(1): 29-50.
- _____. 2001. "The Immediate and Future Relevance of Forecasts" (the future may be with us as foreshocks precede forecast events), article for New Zealand Futures Trust.
- _____. 2002. "Controlled Evolution or Third World Collapse?" *Journal of Futures Studies* 7(1): 145-152.