

Book review

Futurevision. Scenarios for the World in 2040

**Richard Watson and Oliver Freeman
Scribe
Melbourne and London
2012
ISBN 978-1-922070-09-8
Review DOI
10.1108/JTF-06-2015-0039**

Announced on the front cover as “the new classic of scenario planning” – in a quote by Adam Kahane –, *Futurevision* proposes four scenarios for the world of 2040 with a strong emphasis on the moral consequences of the envisaged events. These alternative futures are followed by an introduction to scenario planning methods, and an account of how the scenarios were constructed. Finally, the authors suggest transformational strategies to address the issues derived from the four scenarios.

The scenarios were developed in response to the recent financial and economic crises and seek to answer the question of “what underlying social attitudes to consumerism might prevail in 2040 and how might we respond to them?” This places the emphasis on the ethical and ideological consequences of potential developments in resources depletion and socio-economic inequality. The divergent extremes are developed along the axes of “every man for himself” vs a collective answer to the challenges of the new world; and of an optimistic vs a pessimistic view of the future.

The scenario titled “Imagine” is one of “radical inventiveness”, where basically technology leads humanity away from disaster into an optimistic future. “Please Please Me: a world of greed” is the individualistic version of the optimistic future, where the “Greed is good” years of the 1990s and the years before the crisis are continued with explosive growth in the BRIC countries. “Dear Prudence: a world of temperance” is a future of “sustainability and switching

things off”, where humanity basically adopts a responsible attitude towards consumption. Finally, “Helter Skelter” is a Mad-Max style dystopia where people approach their future of increasing scarcity with fear and an aggressive defense of their individual interests.

Each scenario is developed as an extensive narrative, the explanatory justification of which can be found in a time-path leading to the different versions of 2040. The path towards “Imagine” sees, among of course many other events, the introduction of Apple’s iMedic in 2015 and a North-African solar grid providing energy to Europe in 2026. The “Please Please Me” scenario is reached, for instance, through droughts and rising food prices in 2015, and a historic low in mortgage arrears in 2019. “Dear Prudence” becomes possible after a political crisis in the UK because of MPs expenses in 2015, and a 22-hour workweek being introduced in Europe in 2022. The dystopian “Helter Skelter” passes through heat waves killing hundreds of thousands in 2015 and skyrocketing inflation in the 2020s.

The elaborate narratives and imaginative timelines show that this part of the book was intended as a pleasant and inspiring read. Although these are generic scenarios, it is not hard to understand the implications of each for travel and tourism, be it new sources of energy boosting transportation in the imaginative world, the massive streams of Asian and African tourists that are mentioned in “Please Please Me”, the limitation of “people miles” that is part of the “Dear Prudence” scenario or the fear bringing travel and tourism to a halt that is implicit in “Helter Skelter”. This makes the scenarios relevant, together with their plausibility and internal consistency which is illustrated in the timelines.

Despite its readability and the practical interest of the four stories, the way the book is structured is not fully convincing for a scenario study. If we consider that

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the purpose of scenarios is not to give an accurate prediction but rather to reflect on uncertainties and disruptions, the process of scenario building is maybe more important than the final outcomes (Lindgren and Bandhold, 2003; Postma, 2013). In other words, the scenarios are vivid, plausible, consistent, and yet not completely satisfactory as the book skips the learning process of creating awareness and discussion about what may happen.

The consequence is that some paths that may have seemed to be plausible routes to the future in the process of analyzing first, second and third degree implications have now lost their credibility. To give an example: religion is a recurrent element in the scenarios. It is less and less so in our real lives, so this hypothetical trend reversal needs a solid explanation. In the *Futurevision* scenarios this explanation seems too thin; my impression is that the origin of our future devoutness lies in an insufficiently elaborated dichotomy between materialism and spirituality.

This maybe somewhat controversial attention to religion is a detail that does not affect the overall plausibility of the scenarios; the example is mainly meant to show that scenario narratives may become more productive if the reader is taken by the hand through the process of designing them. In other words, it seems the insight in uncertainties that lie ahead has been sacrificed to the readability of the narratives. This is however merely a matter of composition, since the book gives a thorough and complete overview of the scenario process including early warning signals, an introduction to scenarios in general and a description of this particular scenario process in the chapters that follow the scenario narratives. The book concludes with another set of narratives

describing the strategic answers hypothetical future governments may adopt to address each of the scenarios.

The general conclusion is therefore that this is an inspiring and thought provoking study that especially focuses on how humanity may evolve morally because of potential disruptions in our lives. The narratives are vivid, internally consistent and plausible which makes them useful as a basis for discussing choices our societies, individuals and businesses face. The explanation of scenario planning is clear and complete, although not sufficiently novel and different from the known manuals (e.g. Lindgren and Bandhold, 2003; Van der Heijden, 2005) to justify its qualification as "the new classic". Even though its composition is somewhat questionable, this is a recommended read for those who need to reflect on the societal context of future developments and strategies; I would suggest to start with the second half of the book at p. 167 and then read the narratives in the first part.

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