

A primer on worldviews and sense-making in foresight practice: innovation and cultural values

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Introduction: a perspective on values in futures inquiry

While professional foresight practice deals with questions involving a future-orientation, the point of generating high-quality forward views is specifically to inform decision making and action in the present. The guiding premise here is that more rigorous, more comprehensive and more nuanced forward views will lead to better action. This means that foresight work has an inherent values basis—in deciding what constitutes better action in a given situation, we need to know something about what is most important to the actors and to others who their actions stand to affect.

This is part and parcel with the purposeful nature of human activity: on the whole, our decisions and actions are guided by purposes that reflect our worldviews—the tendencies by which we each see and make sense of our world in particular ways. The view of human activity as fundamentally purposeful rests on a key insight into what characterises us as human beings: we experience the day-to-day flux and flow of events in which we're immersed as meaningful. Or, to put it a little more precisely, we're meaning-making organisms—we organise our experience by seeking meaning in it, and attributing meaning to it. We interpret experiences in terms of orienting stories or narratives, and we often seek to fit our experiences within the stories that we know. Our actions therefore tend to be guided by such stories; the most powerful narratives in this respect are those that coordinate our thinking together collectively, as shared cultural phenomena.

The most effective foresight work proceeds from such understanding and in doing so reaches beyond the surface level of the “objective facts” that represent what seems at first glance to be going on in the specific situations we're dealing with. The Centre for Australian Foresight's approach to this involves not only being broadly informed about emerging issues and developments in spheres including those of science, technology, economics, environment, politics, education, culture & the arts, politics and management, but also paying close attention to the human dimensions through which the perspectives we encounter about these areas are constructed. We recognise and take seriously that the exterior descriptions of how things are, how they might be, and how they should be rest on interior dispositions, habits and tendencies of the individuals who produce these

descriptions, as they think and act together in collective social contexts. Importantly, considering these collective social contexts includes having an eye on the historical roots of present organising narratives and their related habits of thought: in strong foresight work, appreciating the circumstances surrounding past decisions and actions that have contributed to the present situation plays a role equally important to that of the future orientation. This helps to establish a more comprehensive and more reliable foundation for assessing what might happen in the future, what we'd prefer to emerge, and, within the scope of available agency, the range of options that are open for acting in ways aligned with such directions.

By taking worldviews seriously, and especially by recognising them as expressions of deep-seated value preferences, space can be opened to examine different values as legitimate ways of constructing social arrangements that work for those guided by such values. Acknowledging different values—even those in conflict with our own—as legitimate foundations for worlds that can work for their proponents is a long way from mere value-relativism. It's possible to accept the functionality of social forms and ways of life arising as expressions of particular values, while at the same time rejecting the qualities associated with those forms as a matter of preference. We can argue for why certain values are for us preferable to others—and hence for why we regard them as better—without falling into the trap of regarding this greater worthiness as a matter of objective fact, and therefore of having the character of a truth the validity of which is independent of us, hence absolute or certain.

While orienting values tend to surface only infrequently in day-to-day conversation and often remain below the perceptual threshold even for their holders, their influence can be detected in the public arena as visions, strategies and related expressions of what is good or worthwhile. It's not unusual for values to hold us, rather than us holding them—and even less usual to make them the subject of conscious, systematic critical reflection.

Nonetheless, their outlines can be discerned beneath the arguments we make and preferences we express for particular futures over others, and by surfacing them in this way, they can be made explicit—they can become objects we hold and, in the best circumstances, plastic material with which to work.

Exercising such independence—i.e. freeing ourselves from the strictures imposed by assuming our own ethical orientations as objectively correct, and understanding them instead to be a matter of value preference—paves the way for exploring a wider range of pathways that lie open for us to walk, including some less trodden that might otherwise remain too subtle for us to make out at first glance.

As a demonstration of what such an approach entails in practice, in the remainder of this paper I apply this thinking to an issue that attracts an unusual level of attention in contemporary society, and that turns out to be far more value-laden than most discourse on the subject acknowledge—that of innovation.

A cultural values approach to thinking about innovation

Reflecting its association with the ways in which human practices change—and, as is usually the hope—improve through time, the issue of innovation occupies a position of special significance in foresight thinking and practice. The level of attention directed towards innovation, both within contemporary societies generally and the foresight field in particular, provides some clue to its role as a repository of, or signpost for, cherished cultural values. Indeed, we can see this reflected in the way that societies are sometimes viewed in terms of an impulse towards and struggle between innovation or conservation, one tendency in competition with the other for the hearts of a people. The technological histories of Europe and China are often told in such terms—Europe the inquisitive seeker of the new, China the great harmonizer, striving for stability; and today, China and America, or China and Europe, are contrasted with one another as shifts are perceived to unfold in the dominance of one motivational value, order or change, over the other. We hear also though that the contemporary narrative has shifted: Chinese culture today seems to shed the carapace of tradition without a backward glance (at least that's the official image); Europe has turned to circumspection (some might even say regret) as it takes in the aftermath of its past exuberance; the USA continues to soar above other nations in creative spirit and appetite for technological novelty, but can the early signs of its wavering enthusiasm be detected? Strikingly, within analysis that pits innovation and conservation against one another in this way, innovation is often portrayed in virtuous terms as an unalloyed good; conservation suggests a kind of lethargy, or stagnation—a sense of a people having "given up". For example, such a tone can be detected in a recent interview with Thomas Barlow, author of *Between the Eagle and the Dragon: who is winning the innovation race?*—the metaphors adopted for the sub-title point towards the organising narrative here, and suggest the worldview at play.¹

Given the esteem in which innovation tends to be held today, it's worth reflecting for a moment on how historically recent this preference is. Even if we were to extend the period over which such an attitude has prevailed back ten millennia or so to the emergence of agriculture, we'd be looking at a time span representing less than one per cent of the overall human project. For the vast majority of our species' time on the planet, the type of

¹ *Winning at innovation* 2013, RN Saturday Extra, 18 May, accessed 6 July at <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/saturdayextra/winning-at-innovation/4691552>.

disruptive innovation that we embrace so openly today has tended to be maladaptive. Under circumstances in which human well-being depended more immediately on intimate and embodied understanding of a social group's local environment and its responsiveness to long-established practices, too-rapid innovation could spell disaster. Periods of rapid change in the way that we organise are far and away the exception rather than the rule—even if the weighting we give our most recent experience suggests otherwise. From such a perspective, there would seem to be merit in leaving open the question of whether recent experience is by default our best guide to the degree of innovation appetite that's in our longer-term collective interests.

Periods where conservation—or at least, a low innovation rate—has proved adaptive are not limited to pre-history. Even in societies post the agricultural revolution, wherever we find expansion curtailed by resource limits and related factors, the historical record also tends to show a preference for what has worked well in the past over experimentation with the new. Rapid innovation may be favoured where it's affordable, rather than necessarily for its inherent value. This wouldn't be inconsistent with the circumstances under which innovation presently enjoys such favour.

In light of this, it seems reasonable to wonder about what alternatives there might be for thinking about the relationship between innovation and conservation that can better accommodate the full range of experience. A different model might bring to light useful options for response, should we find ourselves in circumstances diverging from those that have supported the historically recent pro-innovation trend so well. The approach that I'll outline here moves away from describing the state of a social entity—such as an enterprise, a nation or even a civilisation—as being "innovative" or "conservative". Instead, we can view innovation as the process by which social entities conserve their identity in a changing environment. In this view, social entities are either successful in conserving their identity (in which case they continue through time), or they are unsuccessful (in which case they don't). In other words, innovation as conceived here isn't good or bad; rather, it either is or is not successful in enabling conservation of identity. Following from this, whenever a social entity's environment is subject to change, then while its identity is conserved, we can say that successful innovation is occurring.

In a moment I'll show how this model can account for conventional views on innovation. In order to do that, we need a basis for understanding identity in the social realm—what is it, specifically, that is conserved when an entity continues? From an observer perspective, we might define a social entity's identity in terms of certain objective characteristics and behaviours, such as numbers of members and their roles, organisational structure, or

conformance with formal and informal institutions including laws, rules, codes of conduct and conventions. While such an approach allows identity to be discerned from outside by inference, a principal characteristic of social entities, as living systems, is that identity is self-produced from within by the entity's members. As such, identity is a cultural phenomenon associated with the narratives by which members make meaning in relation to shared experience, reflecting the significant values that they hold in common, and a sense of common purpose.

An important implication of this interior perspective is that conservation of identity is a matter not simply of functional considerations, but of the extent to which members continue to find their own experience to be a congruent fit with and hence meaningful in relation to the social entity's principal, founding or dominant narratives. Importantly, conservation of identity doesn't imply that purpose, values or the narratives within which these are inscribed are not themselves subject to change, but that any such change continues to meaningfully organise members' experience. This leads to an expanded view of innovation as relating not only to changes in behaviour, social practices and technology, but to correlating shifts in the cultural sphere of shared meaning through which members make sense of their changing situation. If widespread breakdown in meaning does arise in response to changing circumstances, identity is not conserved, and we can say that innovation has been unsuccessful.

For this model to be useful, it should be able to accommodate conventional understandings of innovation, including its framing in opposition to conservation. It can indeed do this, following from our earlier observation that Innovation—designated here with capital "I" to differentiate it from the general innovation process by which all social entities attempt to conserve their identities—is itself afforded the status of an identity-defining cultural value in modern societies. In other words, today we find a strong and widespread preference for conserving Innovation as a defining cultural value. In effect we see here innovation practised "for its own sake"—on the basis that what comes later, particularly in scientific and technical terms, is regarded as inherently more valuable than what preceded it. This core value sits at the heart of a particular cultural vehicle for organising meaning, the narrative of technological progress.² The defining characteristic of this and related cultural narratives of progress is that history is shaped by a built-in tendency towards advancement.

A major variant on this treats innovation in more functional terms, as the means for delivering the productivity gains that promote the identity-defining value of economic growth. This is associated with a close cousin to the narrative of technological progress, the

² Greer, JM 2013, 'The god with three heads', *The Archdruid Report*, 24 April, accessed 6 July 2013 at <http://thearchdruidreport.blogspot.com.au/2013/04/the-god-with-three-heads.html>.

narrative of economic progress. Economic performance measured in GDP growth has met such success in crowding out broader indicators of national wellbeing that today few who rely on it are aware of the caution offered by Simon Kuznets, the inventor of the index, that "The welfare of a nation can...scarcely be inferred from a measurement of national income...".³ This is a situation that the Australian National Development Index (ANDI) is working to address, through innovation in measures of well-being.⁴

In terms of our model, we could say that ANDI is seeking to support the conservation of identity at the national level via innovation that brings formal measures of wellbeing into better alignment with the broader values of Australian citizens. To appreciate the challenges faced in doing this, though, it helps to recognise how the present cultural orientation is geared towards conserving economic growth and its related institutions, albeit through processes that are themselves innovation-oriented. Both the established commitment to values centred exclusively on economic growth, and the ANDI initiative that seeks to challenge that commitment, are employing innovation processes to conserve identity. Each approach, though, entails different appreciations of the changing environment within which it works, and hence different appreciations of the values towards which innovation should be directed—if it's to meet with longer term success in conserving identity for the Australian people.

One final example follows closely from the dominance of values based on economic growth in defining national identity. It's particularly worthy of attention here given its frequent framing in terms antithetical to innovation, and demonstrates the model's utility in moving beyond the limitations of such an outlook. The specific situation I have in mind is that of sustainability-oriented responses to some of the perverse consequences of innovation-driven economic growth. The valuing of precautionary action in sustainability discourse is often cited as evidence of an antipathy towards or even disdain for innovation. Drawing on our model though, we can view this in terms of the expansion of identity to include values of biospheric integrity, where these are seen to be threatened by a narrower adherence to economic growth as the principal identity-defining value. On the one hand, we have proponents seeking to conserve economic growth through productivity-enhancing innovation; on the other, proponents seeking to conserve biospheric integrity through impact-mitigating innovation. Both orientations seek to conserve identity through processes of innovation. Once again, what differs is the view of the relationship between the social entity and its changing environment (now including the extent to which those changes are

³ Kuznets, S1934, 'National Income, 1929–1932', 73rd US Congress, 2d session, Senate document no. 124, p. 7, accessed 6 July 2013 at http://fraser.stlouisfed.org/docs/publications/nipab/19340104_nationalinc.pdf.

⁴ Australian National Development Index n.d., 'What is ANDI?', ANDI, accessed 6 July at <http://www.andi.org.au/>.

themselves coupled with the entity's processes of innovation), along with views on the nature of the identity to be conserved, and what is therefore likely to constitute successful innovation.

We can see in this last example how "sustainability" itself occupies a nexus between innovation and conservation—it entails the conservation of values we're not prepared to relinquish, through innovation in the structures by which our societies are organised, in the ways they relate with their environments, and in the stories by which we make sense of experience.

Implications

In this paper I've attempted to make the case that the strongest and most effective future-oriented inquiry digs beneath the surface-level appearances of what is going on in the world, what might happen, and the pathways open before us, and in doing so brings to bear on these matters an appreciation for the underlying values that motivate purposeful human action. Carrying out such work has immediate practical implications, as it leads to more flexible ways of making sense of the situations that individuals and groups are dealing with. This flexibility in turn opens up the space of desirable and feasible actions that can be taken in response. Given the attention and resources that it commands, innovation thinking and practice stands to gain particular benefit from opening up alternative perspectives, with a view to responding as effectively as possible to the challenges that we expect it to address. More generally though, the values-sensitive approach to futures inquiry that I've outlined offers an opportunity to move beyond an over-reliance on the convention-dictated default understandings of any of the important conceptual tools and ideas employed in dealing with human challenges.