

How do intellectually off-stream metaphors capture the essence of post... societies?

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Abstract

This paper presents a collection of insights generated in the pursuit of a better analogy or metaphor. The metaphor sought for is one that could be deployed to imaginatively portray one's understanding of 'what the future might bring'. What we are after then is a metaphor to express things not there yet. In order to capture the essence of what to expect in the years to come, scholars, companies and especially countries more and more look for the best description, some analogy or similarities of the past, and indeed, the distant past. For instance, and as described below, a demographic outlook for the aging and depopulated Europe in the next decades is sometimes being compared to the aftermath of the 14th century Black Death. On a parallel account, the quest is also for the list of candidates for the future social scientific description of social habitat in some parts of Europe. It is no secret, however, that the way we name things and processes heavily impacts on the ways and forms we treat them afterwards. One could even say - it is the naming that socially constructs a phenomenon¹. Under such an angle, the shortlist of metaphors to describe a state of affairs in the future should be of paramount importance. To some extent, even more than the actual occurrences of predicted trends. The 'frames of reference' in the sticky format of a metaphor could be more powerful than a constraining device on popular understandings.

During the last three years, due to various consultancy engagements, I had a chance to get acquainted with the ways corporations and states do strategising. Those familiar with the field should immediately note that despite

¹ Think of what has happened with 'creativity', 'creative industries' or creative economy'. Not known until late 1990s, the self- description 'a creative city' has become a buzz word in self descriptions of even the most conservative urban policy makers and scholars.

widespread scepticism about the very possibility of the creation of credible future visions, the number of various plans, scenarios and strategies escalate with every day. On the one hand, there is less and less certainty in what we could reasonably predict. Extrapolation of the past trends (although clearly an exercise blind to the warning of Humean kind) currently are more and more treated as scenarios. The scenario, creating in turn multiple futures, increases even more the feeling of uncertainty about the future. For, if there are three and more different future paths open, there is more pressure on our current decisions and choices. On the other hand, it is indeed over the last decade that we have witnessed an avalanche of different strategies - short, medium and long-term.

The strategies do not only increase in numbers. They become more powerful as decision making tools. They become parts of the collective decision, making a paradigm. Interestingly, corporations and nations more and more lean towards the future to define or even construct their identity. This stands in quite a startling contrast with the practice of modernism - to look back, to find some continuity with the past. For the purposes of strategy building, academic and private research units design and exercise numerous investigations, organise conferences, design new study courses. Strategising becomes a very serious exercise of self-reflection. Instead of constructed history, constructed future is the big thing of the day now. Moreover, it does seem that quite a few European societies in their self reflections – research papers, policy documents, country strategies - utilize the language of the ‘unprecedented’. They describe the future trends as something unparalleled before, unknown before - be it demographic shifts, climate change, technological breakthroughs or the rules of economic games (e.g. attention economy) [\(on development discourse, see Hettne 1995, 2007\)](#).

Not surprisingly, and in response to such claims, quite a few members of academic communities deploy rather traditional moves of ‘rebuttal’. Instead of joining the ranks of futurists, they attempt to capture the essence of or try to tame that something allegedly new by drawing analogies to what is known or has already passed. In other words, they match the claims of something allegedly unprecedented with the presentation of the past examples,

series of events as precedents of prototypes of the current processes. It is not uncommon to read meticulous historicists' accounts of just how old the processes, say, of globalisation actually are; how predictable the technological breakthroughs have been (e.g. with reference to the notorious 'Kondratieff waves') and that postmodern society in fact frequently closely resembles what we are accustomed to call 'pre-industrial societies'. Nearly everything called 'new' turns out to be something known for ages, merely forgotten.

"Hidden in the montage of rubbish are the now outmoded dreams and fantasies of earlier generations turned into junk" ([Hetherington, 2004:159](#))

The trend to seek a historical parallel, even if seen as a mere escalation or aggregation of instances, invites a couple of rather simple explanations. First, no doubt, if the states (or companies for that matter) compete in the symbolic realm, they better activate a strong, preferably proved and colourful precedent. No doubt, another simple explanation given to such intellectual exercises is familiarisation. In this paper I attempt another familiarisation. Quasi scientific reference would be that a search for historical metaphors and analogies is a natural feature of our brain/cognitive apparatuses. Our brain merely attempts to accommodate new knowledge via embedding it into the existing set of accepted propositions and conceptual networks. One may also claim that to familiarise is to appropriate, to put under some control. Naming, defining, framing inevitably bring some control over the matter. If the future seems daunting, the fate doomed or gloomy, and uncertainty freezing, a good historical analogy may well do the work of liberating and suggesting at least some pre-emptive moves. In the context of corporate and, especially, national strategies, the integrative drive increases the value of a good analogy. It is since the 1960s and probably the first strategies of military assaults developed by the Rand Corporation that the tendency to view spheres of social life as tightly linked has begun to dominate the minds and later the expectations of policy makers and public in general. The propensity of some simple, succinct yet very apt metaphors to do the public relations work has exacerbated the quest ('the Empire of Evil' 'the Second Republic', the Dutch disease, tribal society, frontier mentality etc.) and the value of such an outcome.

Be it as it may, such offers of metaphors can also be viewed from an evolutionary point of view – as a proliferation of options and their struggle for survival. The metaphors that would survive would shape our upcoming notions of what is real, basic, natural, primary, and traditional. In other words, the survivors should become our new conventions of descriptions of social worlds. Before we explore some of the proposed metaphors and reflect upon their chances of survival, we need to identify some of them in the fields of public participation, economy and demography.

So far the best record of imposing the analogies and metaphors as well as strategic outlooks belong to the tribes of economists and finance managers. To a great extent this could be attributed to their prominent role in the public policy making. However, the more people engage in the Future Search, Public consultation processes, the Open Space technology exercise, the wider is the pool of **alternative** metaphors.

Let me mention a few examples of such metaphors. First is an array of various ‘post’ societies. Postmodern, postindustrial, postnuclear, postbureaucratic and the like. Then come more substantial analogies. One very clear example is the use of the ‘Black death’ analogy to describe what is going to happen demographically in Europe in the next few decades. The unprecedented low birth rate and unprecedented life longevity, despite moderate immigration, still point to nearly an inevitable trend of aging and depopulation. To the extent that some countries might be close to extinction demographically if the current trends continued (Ukraine, France, Spain, for example). The average age of a Spaniard or an Italian in a quarter of century could be beyond 50 years. Even in the ‘new Eastern European countries’, such as the Baltic States, in 2030 there would be more of those over 80 years of age than all pre-school children. It seems that there is no easy solution to find a new demographic balance. All solutions require a substantial shift in the ideological outlook, values and/or the social fabric (e.g. to change the ominous use of reproductive technologies, accept large numbers of migrants from outside Europe). The time of the Black Death is frequently mentioned as a closest analogy to this link - demographic depopulation - values and social conventions, After wiping out half or in some places two thirds of the population, the Black

Death led to a more intensive involvement of women in the economic and social life, the weakening of the feudal social ties and dependencies, a more secular outlook, more prominence of towns in economy and society and so on. The relaxation or even the reformation of the ideological and the social regime is what is also suggested to happen over the next few decades in future Europe.

Another demographic analogy links some processes of the postnuclear family to the pre-industrial family. Indeed, given the life longevity and a smaller number of children from one partnerships, at the same time as having more partnership, the 'family' becomes more inclusive, the boundaries less clear cut. There are more grandparents per one child than ever before. The home work integration means that production comes back home again, the knowledge distributed in the networks of relatives and friends competes strongly with centralised, bureaucratically supplied 'knowledge'; breast-feeding becomes the norm again, centralised production (in factories) is vanishing as a central principle of economy. In other words, if one wants to understand what is going on in the present Western kinship system, have a look at the life of the large pre-industrial country families/households.

Some of the analogies are even more radical. The immensely rapid development of digital technologies outcompete and may lead to the extinction of those information technologies (e.g. print) that we have become very much used to. Indeed, the rapid visualisation (at least 3D) of all information, integration of communication channels, technologies that substitute handwriting (or make it nearly obsolete), 'death sentence' to newspapers and sometimes even books make some people refer to the lives of the so-called traditional societies for helpful analogies. If it happens that sophisticated literacy may no longer be required (all kinds of ready-made templates, in vivo systems of turning voice into print or other formats), then our society may approximate the societies, which do not use writing. Or, if put otherwise, the well known oral cultures in which memory systems are

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substantially differently constructed from those of writing cultures². [Could we expect a variation](#) from the current hierarchies of intellectual authority [in this case too?](#)

So we continue. We might refer to the 'death of lecture'³ and return to the guru systems of education where one authority teaches a bunch of chosen followers personally. Some claim that the post-national state period, that we are allegedly entering, resembles the pre-Westfalen period in European history. Even more so and quite plausibly, the international relations are much better understood from the 'anarchist point of view' with no overarching global structures and substantial parallels with the Prisoners Dilemma aspects. The evolutionary game theory would easily draw analogies from the early historical periods not only of the human kind but even the animal world.

As an outlook, the evolutionary approach may suggest yet another explanation of the initial question posed for this **essay**. Namely, why should we recall some past analogies, carve out episodes from one context and place them in another with the hope that they might suggest an idea of a solution to a particular predicament? First though, we need to reckon that standard practices of acknowledging debts, rituals of quotations, repetitions, substitutions, replicas, remnants seem to be all part of a similar game. The power of analogy, the use of off-stream metaphors are in a way an introduction of something akin to extinct species for the next round in the struggle of survival. It is a mutation on the basis of something already tried out. Probably in this sense, there is nothing particularly new or surprising in the very way of calling upon such metaphors. The concepts that used to be powerful are tried out once more. Perhaps it is not us who call upon the ideas; they choose us for another try.

References:

² Oral cultures need to keep all records and claims /counterclaims in collective memory, not in archives.

³ It is cheaper to record it once and make it available online than get hundreds of students in place at the same time.

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3. Herlihy, David V. and Cohn Samuel K. (Eds) The Black Death and the Transformation of the West. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.