

Introduction

It's 2011, in Paris, at the headquarters of UNESCO, on an underground floor full of meeting rooms. I have been invited to participate in an EFF-LA seminar (European Forum on Forward Looking Activities), one of the many consulting groups in the European Community. As usual in these meetings, participants begin by introducing themselves to each other. The tour of the table started somewhere on my left and I am one of the last to present myself. After listening to a long series of self-celebrations, as if by reaction, I spontaneously start like this: "I am a failed sociologist." My statement, in that situation, sounds so unexpected that everyone who has to speak after me is careful to point out their failures.

It was an obvious case of *reframing*. But why did I present myself as a failed sociologist? I did it because, despite my graduation with full marks and honors, I never succeeded in being a sociologist. Even if in the meantime I have done something else (specifically becoming a philosopher, and the worst subspecies, ontologist), I have always had a vague sense of unease about the apparently unbridgeable gap between what I had acquired as a student and what I put into practice as a researcher. It took me almost thirty years to reconstruct the cause of that impasse: the sociology that I had studied as a young man was completely aimed at the past. In it there was no *forward-looking framework*, no way to frame the future. But what's the point of a sociology that refuses to look at incoming problems?

This question has at least two different but intertwined aspects. On the one hand, it refers to the idea of science that guides the discipline, and on the other it raises the question of how to use the future. Science is still dominated by the practice of looking back (at the data), thus observing the future only within the limits of extrapolations from the past. The

transformation from science oriented towards the past to science oriented towards the future,¹ or the very idea of exploiting scientific research to “generate future,”² are themes under development, but still completely in the minority.³

The second aspect involves explaining in operational terms what an expression such as “working with the future” refers to; that is, what does a futurist do? Obviously, I do not intend to refer here to the exponents of the avant-garde movement founded at the beginning of the last century by Marinetti; I use this term to indicate a new figure: that of the *professional of the future*.

Apart from a few minor references in Chapter 4, the book does not deal with the first aspect of the question (that of the nature of science), except implicitly, but instead examines the second and describes the main components – theoretical, methodological and operational – that distinguish the work of a professional of the future.

Having already dedicated an entire book⁴ to the theory of anticipation and coordinated the *Handbook of Anticipation*,⁵ the first systematic review of the ways in which the different sciences, disciplines, and communities of practice look to and use the future, in this work I will focus on the real work of the futurist, aiming to offer a picture of the main interactions between theoretical implications, methodological approach, and operational realization. Without aiming to create a true manual for future professionals, in the following chapters I will work to bring out some aspects of the operational practice of the futurist.

A fundamental contribution in this sense came from the students of my courses, the participants in the Master’s Degree in Social Foresight, and from the collaborators and colleagues who accompanied me in the adventure of -skopia, the startup at the University of Trento which has been offering professional anticipation services since the end of 2015. The very survival of the startup, as well as the slow but steady growth of its full-time employees, shows that there is an interest and a market for professional services on the future.

¹ Seligman, Railton, Baumeister, Sripada (2013).

² Gergen (2015).

³ Poli (2017b, 2019b).

⁴ Poli (2017a).

⁵ Poli (2019a).

Particular emphasis should be placed on the “professional” qualification of the futurist. There are a thousand reasons to deal with the future: many people, especially in times of crisis, present themselves as future experts and occupy the media by dispensing recipes. However, I hope to make it clear throughout the book that the work of the professional of the future, like that of any other expert, requires training, has its own principles and rules, and cannot be improvised. The establishment of AFI (Association of Italian Futurists)⁶ in December 2018, as well as the very existence of APF (Association of Professional Futurists),⁷ confirms that the term professionals on the future does not represent an oxymoron at all.

The book is divided into ten chapters. The first four describe *futures studies* from an initial approximation to then touch in succession the difference between megatrends and explorations, risk and uncertainty, and complicated and complex. Chapters 5 and 6 respectively describe the phases of a future exercise, some of the tools used by the futurist, the issue of the classification of methods, and the evaluation of a future exercise. Chapters 7 through 10 describe different areas of application, from military tactics to future laboratories in the classroom, and indicate additional skills and abilities that the futurist must possess. All of the chapters except the last one end with a box that aims to show each of the topics covered from a different angle – small reframing exercises that help to develop more inclusive perspectives.

The book ends with the Learn More section, containing bibliographical indications, journals, websites, and other sources that the reader may decide to use to develop her future skills.

Acknowledgements

This book was written among the hills of Zollara (a tiny hamlet behind Cattolica), the mountains of Trento, and the vineyards of Stellenbosch, in South Africa. I would like to thank Jan Hofmeyr, Director of the Center for Complex Systems in Transition, and Hendrik B. Geyer, director of STIAS (Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study), for making my third stay in their excellent facilities possible; STIAS offers an excellent envi-

⁶ <http://futuristitaliani.it>

⁷ <https://apf.org/>

ronment for concentrating on one's work, far from the usual requests from friends and colleagues.

Many friends and students contributed to improving the quality of the volume. A special thanks goes to Valentina Boschetto Doorly and Antonella Nazzi for the careful reading of the chapters of the book. As usual, all the remaining mistakes are mine.