

Future Log File 2014

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Professor Hjelmquist was Secretary General of the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare until the end of 2013. Currently, he holds a chair in psychology at the University of Gothenburg. His research interests focus on language and communication, mainly developmental aspects. The research has a comparative perspective, always involving typical and atypical children. The focus is now on early development of social cognition among hearing and deaf children, and dyslexia among school aged children.

Keynes once said: "... the idea of the future being different from the present is so repugnant to our conventional modes of thought and behaviour that we, most of us, offer a great resistance to acting on it in practice." Is he right? Why (not)?

Keynes was definitely right. He evidently had understood the psychology of his fellow beings, whether by intuition or experience, equally impressive. By now there is a convincing bulk of research in the behavioural sciences testifying to the resistance to change as a basic reaction among people in general. The best summary available is to be found in Daniel Kahneman's book "Thinking fast and slow", 2011. The root of this conservative tendency is the context dependence of humans and the resistance to negative evidence and instead looking for everything confirming an already existing conviction. This holds for the short- and long-term perspective. Imagining alternative futures is therefore very difficult. However, the convincing evidence of resistance to change and thereby alternative futures, goes hand with the unique gift of people to imagine alternatives to what is at hand and think about different possibilities for actions, and predictions of a variety of outcomes. This is thus a paradox. It is also a paradox in the sense that in many societies the conditions for the life of people are changing constantly and rapidly, despite the psychological resistance to change! Historically, the expansion of *Homo sapiens* to almost all types of environmental circumstances on the globe by extreme adaptability and cultural learning demonstrates that people can handle changes and alternative futures. Human beings are thus reluctant to change and imagining alternative futures, but are very good at handling changing conditions when they are compelling enough and thereby creating alternative futures to what would have been preferred, viz. no change.

What do you think are the most relevant developments which will change our world in the next two, three decades?

The most relevant developments are related to social and environmental changes, globally, regionally and at the national level. Increasing inequalities in terms of health, mental capital and material resources within otherwise wealthy and democratic nations such as those in Europe and North America, is a challenge. It is even more demanding in regions and nations without democratic systems. Environmental changes as consequences of use and misuse of natural resources are other crucial factors. At the same time, longevity is increasing in many countries and the global population is increasing.

Why exactly these?

Taking these developments from threats to possibilities and assets will require high functioning political systems. This is really problematic since the best political system, democracy, is not to be found often enough. Efficient systems for dividing power at the same time as keeping countries/nations together will be necessary, but maybe not sufficient, for a prosperous future.

Are you afraid of them or do you think positively?

I am definitely in the positive mood! The level of insight, knowledge and analytical understanding of the problems inherent in the developments of highest relevance has never been greater than now. Research and education has contributed enormously in this respect. More precisely, two factors are needed for justifying this optimism: Political systems that can channel and balance the different interests at stake, and, at the individual level, behavior and attitudes that go against the very strong tendency to prefer *status quo*.

Where will the happiest people live on the globe in the year 2040? Why there?

The happiest people will probably be found in Denmark. This answer of mine testifies to the general psychological principle of just predicting that what is the case will continue to be the case. Of course, I am convinced that there are good reasons for this belief. Denmark has been at the top of happiness ranking since decades, together with other Nordic and northern Europe countries. In explanation of this pattern, features of the social systems and values have been presented. It is likely that these values and systems will sustain.

Which book do you think will still be worth reading then? What could future generations still learn from it?

I suggest the Iliad and the Odyssey, that is, if not one book, one piece of connected narratives and stories. It illustrates the drives, motives, feelings; happiness and grief, of human beings in ways that will continue to be relevant. Especially the hybris motive, unfortunately, but in all likelihood, will be instructive also for future generations.