

Future Log File 2014

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Prof. Vaupel is one of the world's leading experts in demography. He is executive director of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research and head of the Laboratories of Survival and Longevity and of Evolutionary Demography. Since January 2013 he has also been heading the newly founded Max-Planck Odense Center on the Biodemography of Aging.

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)?

He is right that it is very difficult to predict the remarkable ways in which the future will differ from the present—and most people do not realize this. He is wrong about predicting the future. For the most part we cannot do so in enough detail to “act” on it in practice in specific ways. But we can extrapolate consistent trends, such as the rise in life expectancy since 1840, at a linear rate of 3 months per year in the countries doing best. Or the rise in computing power.

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

Gender equality.

The continuing increase in life expectancy; the concomitant increase in healthy life expectancy; much deeper understanding of the causes of ill health and how to prevent or treat it.

The continuing, radical increase in computing power.

The end of world population growth—and the start of population decline in many countries and then the world as a whole.

The rise of China and India.

Why exactly these?

The emerging equality of men and women will double the capacity of humans.

History is determined, both in the short and long term, by population dynamics.

The rise of computing power is transforming the world and will continue to do so in future decades.

The rise of China and India and other non-European countries will transform the world because the world is where the people are and where the people with resources are.

Are you afraid of them or do you think positively?

I think very positively about gender equality and about longer, healthier lifespans.

I think that population decline will cause great problems for individuals and for societies, but that population decline is not necessarily a negative development.

I am somewhat concerned about how vast increases in computing power will transform what it is to be a human.

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

Danes are the happiest people today according to various studies—and have been for decades. They are happy because they like, trust, and help each other: they are a big family. They are also happy because they have low expectations about the future. They are well educated, highly productive, realistic about their place in the world, and suffer remarkably little social or economic inequality. In 2040 they are likely to continue to be the people who consider themselves happiest.

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

Homer's Iliad and Odyssey; Lucretius' De Rerum Natura; Dante's Hell; Herodotus' Histories; the plays of Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles; the Icelandic sagas; the plays of Shakespeare; Goethe's Faust; the works of Plato; the Bible; Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn.

And what will be worthwhile is not just books but music, art and architecture—for example, Bach, Mozart, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, the Parthenon, Palladio.

All in all: What being a human means.