

Future Log File 2014

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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)?

I am not sufficiently acquainted with the exact context of Keynes’s statement. If I am to relate it to my own context, he is right most of the time. It is hard to challenge familiar patterns, and even harder to change them. This is most notable when these patterns have previously contributed – or appear to have done so – towards reaching one’s goals. As to what extent this is brought about by incompetence, reluctance or premeditation, I dare not to speculate.

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

(Technical) optimization of man. Changes in our behaviour to communicate. The ability to become fabulously wealthy by amassing and trading resources – e.g. natural resources, data, or knowledge and innovation. The increasingly disproportionate distribution of capital and power and, as a result, influence.

Why exactly these?

Especially in the context of our aging societies, man’s technical optimization allows to counter the associated risks. Big data lets us draw conclusions that may be valuable in improving social relations or providing for society’s needs. Other developments however widen the gap of access to technological opportunities, and in what scope and with how much consent they are used.

Are you afraid of them or do you think positively?

The crucial question is whether or not society manages to use these new opportunities in a way that is humane and befits a culture of reason. Experience shows that opportunities brought about by technological progress will be used whenever they arise. But how far can – and should – we allow this to go? To answer this, we must also find answers as to what purpose the optimization of individuals and their productivity serves, whom this eventually benefits, and how the ensuing social and individual risks are treated. Even in highly developed economies the number of people who can no longer make a living on their own is growing steadily. Gigantic profit from financial speculation and dividends paid to a select few on one hand are confronted by low-wage workers and the so-called “one-euro jobs” on the other. People’s values are more and more frequently reduced to that of their “human resources” and their expected contribution to ever more extreme notions of profit. Individuals supply data to private companies – either willingly or unaware of the scale on which they do this – without any insight into how these are processed, used or shared. This opens up enormous opportunities for manipulation. Riskier still is the increasing trust we place in the – supposedly more “objective” – deductions about people and their behavior that are drawn from these data rather than individual

accounts of a situation. Changes in communication behaviour may contribute to this development. Mankind is alienating itself.

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

This is not so much a question of geography. Appealing though the idea of opening a map to find the next destination for one's journey to happiness is, this map would probably need to show the way to one's inner self, towards a lookout onto one's own relations. Then, if instead of passing the responsibility for one's own happiness to others one were to take action, one might be able to find the way.

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

"Faust" by Goethe and "La Peste" by Camus. In my opinion it is important, however, to read a wide range of different literature. Books encourage contemplation and thought. These are drowned in the daily flood of new information. Goethe paints the picture of a man who sells his soul to obtain what he has dreamt of, yet ends up unable to enjoy any of it. Camus gives an account of the importance of and commitment to humanity and thereby suggests a way for man to find himself (again).