

# "Imagine a Good Day" – Bertrand de Jouvenel's Idea of Possible Futures in the Context of Fictitious and Historical Narratives

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The future is a fan of possibilities, argued Bertrand de Jouvenel (1903–1987), a French political philosopher, taking ardently part in the lively conversations about future and its studying in the 1960's.<sup>1</sup> Since then, writings like *L'art de la conjecture* 1964 (transl. *The Art of Conjecture*, 1967) have been regarded as classic works in the so-called humanistic or hermeneutic futures studies. In addition to Jouvenel's ideas, his influence was considerable in the founding of the *Association Futuribles* in Paris in 1961 and, some years later, in establishing *The Club of Rome* and other global organisations that worried about the consequences of modernization.

After the Second World War, the first phase of futures studies in the United States was coloured by positivistic and even technocratic ideals that were rooted in the atmosphere of the Cold War. These studies implied an idea of future as a practically closed area, that could be known by means of scientific methods.<sup>2</sup> In the 1950s, however, Europeans, like Robert Jungk, Karl Popper and Gaston Berger, began to criticise the academic and popular views about progress and, quite early, Bertrand de Jouvenel joined these discussions in a moderate spirit.

From Jouvenel's point of view, the futures studies or "futurology" should by no means be an objective science but an art, a composition of imagination and subjective certainties.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, he underlined that an individual and a community – not to speak about the whole mankind – do not have only one future but indeterminately many possible, alternative ones. The French term *futuribles*, possible futures, he adopted from Luis de Molina, the 16th-century modal theologian.

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<sup>1</sup> Jouvenel 1964: 28.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Asplund 1979: 32–34; Paalumäki 1998: 36–39.

<sup>3</sup> The term Futurology was invented by Ossip K. Flechtheim who in 1943 suggested a science of future that would aim at the elimination of wars, poverty and hunger in the world and, finally, create a new human

Thus, the view of future as possibilities was not an original one but shared by several contemporary traditions of thought. Jouvenel, however, gave the idea new meanings that quite profoundly influenced the ontological and ethical groundings of the futures studies and, eventually, the common views about future. Interestingly, the possible futures have most often been identified as scenarios, narratives that begin in the present and end in an imaginary future moment.<sup>4</sup> Hence, in the following, I will look more closely at the ways the possible futures were presented in the perspective of other descriptions of temporal events.

Interestingly enough, it has been common to think that literature is concerned with human possibilities. When considering the difference between history and poetry, Aristotle argued that history describes what has happened but poetry what may happen. Thus, in his *Poetics*, Aristotle seems to think that poetry is more serious than history: it tends to express the universal whereas history deals with the particular. By the universal he meant "how a person of a certain type on occasion speaks or acts, according to the law of probability or necessity."<sup>5</sup> Especially, the issue of possibilities has been elemental in the interpretations of utopian literature. In 1950, the French critic Raymond Ruyer defined a utopian mode as "mental exercise on lateral possibilities".<sup>6</sup> Consequently, what arises is the question, how the traditions of fiction work in relation to the scholarly narratives of possible futures as described by Jouvenel.

In this article I shall deal with the relationship between "the real" and "the imagined" in the descriptions of future in the 1960's. This theme is essential in my doctoral thesis but, simultaneously, so complicated that here my intention is not to present any final picture of it but instead open some points for discussion. My presentation has two focal points, firstly, the meaning of the images of future and, secondly, the plausibility of the narratives in relation to the present, the existent.

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being, *homo humanus*. See Flechtheim 1972: 1151–1152. For Jouvenel's critique of the term, see Jouvenel 1964: 29–30.

<sup>4</sup> About scenarios as stories see Bell 1997:316.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle: *Poetics*, IX.

<sup>6</sup> Ruyer 1988 (1950): 9.

## A Future Imagined

In the ideas of future of de Jouvenel, the role of imagination can be summarised by referring both to its importance in the making of future realities and to the broadening of the views about the past or the present. In *The Art of Conjecture*, Bertrand de Jouvenel stresses greatly the significance of images in the active shaping of future. According to him, there are two kinds of images of mind, firstly, the representations: images of past or present things. They are composed of facts, *facta*, even though their truthfulness may vary.

Furthermore, there are pure fictions that represent no reality, past or present, but are created by imagination. Interestingly, some of these fictions play a capital role in our lives because they may motivate change. According to Jouvenel, fictitious images situated in the future, *futura*, may actually call out a future reality by acting as the basis of intentional projects.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, Jouvenel, sometimes considered as an idealist, can be associated with the tradition where creativeness and subjective ideas are greatly valued. In his opinion, the images of future are the essence of *ego*, the consciousness of one's ability to influence the environment. After all, he writes, only the images turn the *ego* into a creator of possible futures.<sup>8</sup> Thus, by underlining imagination, Jouvenel lays emphasis on the undetermined aspects of human action. Imagination is closely tied up with free will as well as responsibility for the possible consequences. Jouvenel's colleague Gaston Berger, the designer of the so-called prospective philosophy, spoke enthusiastically about man's ability to actively shape the world. Jouvenel shared with him the view that the more the images and goals are created by free imagination, the more the person is the true author of future history.

Interestingly, and he was not the only one, Jouvenel seems to have worried about the matter that, in contemporary society, there was a lack of images because of the new kind of fatalism caused by technology:

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<sup>7</sup> Jouvenel 1964: 14. About possible futures as 'stretched' possibilities see Vauhkonen 2000: 114.

<sup>8</sup> Jouvenel 1964: 43–46.

It is not clear to me that because we can now build supersonic transport planes we should, therefore, hasten to build them – many other things are more pressing for human convenience. [...] The lack of any clear images of the style of life we are building is a cause of anxiety. This anxiety is revealed in the most characteristic literature of our time – science fiction. This displays what might be called a new Fatalism, a feeling that our ways of life are being determined entirely by technological advances, through no choice of ours. Such a feeling is widespread, and fed by many incautious expressions.<sup>9</sup>

In essence, Jouvenel seems to have had nothing against science fiction, on the contrary. In his *Memoirs* he notes that H.G. Wells's stories can be read as descriptions of possible futures.<sup>10</sup> What is important here, in my opinion, is the obvious desire to bring some of the classic means and purposes of fictional stories to the use of the scholarly study of future. Those are, firstly, the wider and holistic understanding of human life in its environments and the many possibilities that depend on creativity and, in the ideal case, on democratic choice. Jouvenel expressed a need to think about a future man's life in its entirety instead of cutting up the problem of existence into discrete problems. The task should be, not to prophesy, but to imagine what makes a good day:

Thus we come to see that what we need is to address ourselves to the ordinary day of the ordinary man. Take this man when he wakes up; follow him through to the time of sleep. Plot, as it were, the sequence of his pleasurable and unpleasurable impressions, and now imagine what "a good day" should be. Picturing this "good day" is the first step into a modern utopia; then you will have to seek the conditions, which can bring about this good day.<sup>11</sup>

The idea to picture the ordinary life in its entirety obviously values the social welfare and comes even close to the welfare state ideology, issues that Jouvenel had been contemplating already in the early 1950's.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it makes an interesting mate to the contemporary historiography in France, the *Annales* school which also, in its strive for total history, emphasised ordinary life. The difference is, of course, that the futures studies lay more emphasis on subjectivity but, still, it could be worthwhile to compare the ideas of historians and futurologists.

In this connection, however, I would like to pay more attention to the relationship between fiction and futures thinking and, thus, come to my second point. Stories of possible futures can be equated to historical, literary or cinematic fiction in respect that they may act as critique of present state of

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<sup>9</sup> Jouvenel 1966: 226.

<sup>10</sup> Jouvenel 1979: 97.

<sup>11</sup> Jouvenel 1966: 229.

<sup>12</sup> See the article from 1952, Jouvenel 1999.

affairs and motivate change. Often this simply happens by showing the probable unpleasant outcome of the present intentions or, respectively, the alternative ideal picture.

According to Jouvenel, the visioning of the ideal has been the classic method of the utopian writers that have lured the readers with a "dream of life at its best", advocating in this way the underlying institutions.<sup>13</sup> In addition to utopias, the alternative histories have been used as counterfactuals in the fiction that speculates, for example, with the different outcomes of the World War II.<sup>14</sup> The idea is quite the same in the stories where individuals are deliberating the different options in life. That is the case in the film of Frank Capra, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). The main character, the icon of the ordinary American, played by James Stewart, considers a suicide and is shown by an elderly angel what the life in his neighbourhoods would be without him. The picture of this possible future makes him change his mind and the predicted alternative doesn't come true, after all.

To summarise this, the intention of these narratives and images of future is not to forecast but to emancipate from the past or the present. Jouvenel, as several of his contemporaries, argued that the final purpose of futures studies is to make the most wanted alternative to come real. Futures studies were, thus, presented also as an openly political tool for decision-making and, as such, intended against the technocratic and totalitarian temptations of that time. These features also aroused criticism from several directions.

### **The Plausibility of the Stories**

Significantly, the narrative of the possible future is not the mere form but the essence of the understanding of the future. In this respect, the narratives of future share the same features as historical narratives. According to Paul Ricoeur, the narrativity of history is, as such, no sign of fictionality but an essential way of understanding and explaining the past.<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur, thus, identifies narrative with time and understanding. This can be seen even more clearly in the case of possible futures. The narrative of the possible future, the portrayal of stages from the present to the future,

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<sup>13</sup> Jouvenel 1966: 221.

<sup>14</sup> On counterfactual thinking in historiography and the futures studies, see Männikkö 1993: 264.

<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur 2000: 307.

has no counterpart in reality; they are no "representations" in the way, say, historical narratives are. Thus, the *futuribles* are, in my opinion, narratives.

There are of course plenty of studies written by futures experts concerning the scenario building.<sup>16</sup> My intention is not to go further in to the question of scenarios, but, instead, to consider the narratives of possible futures in the perspective of history and the fictitious stories of the future.

Accordingly, as in the quotation above, after imagining "the good day", the conditions of its fulfilment have to be put forth as well. This is, naturally, where the question of plausibility comes in. It can be argued that there seems to be both more freedom and more limitations in the composing of possible futures compared with the drawing up of historical narratives. Bertrand de Jouvenel wrote that human beings are free to imagine anything that does not exist and to situate their images in the future time. According to him, it is, surely, possible to do the same with the past, but there is always someone asking whether it is really true or not.<sup>17</sup>

Even the authors of historical fiction have to embrace some epochal features to meet the readers' expectations of a believable story. But, traditionally, the creators of fantasy, utopia or science fiction have been free of such restrictions. They do not have to submit their story to any preconditions of the historical world but they can create a world of their own. Interestingly enough, this genre has often been characterised as speculation concerning the limits between the possible and the impossible.

The narratives concerning possible futures can be situated somewhere in between the categories above. As argued by Jouvenel, following the Augustinian tradition, the human beings cannot comprehend what will happen, i.e. the future history, but only things that could happen. Moreover, the possible futures have to be descendants of the present just like the present is an actualised possible descendant of a past situation. Jouvenel argued that the future has to be "imaginable and plausible" to enter the class of "futuribles".<sup>18</sup> The stories of possible futures clearly include a genealogical relationship between the states of affairs. This feature is also typical of historical narration where genetic perspectives have traditionally been valued.

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Bell 1997: 316–317 and the bibliographical index of the book.

<sup>17</sup> Jouvenel 1964: 14–15.

<sup>18</sup> Jouvenel 1964: 32.

What is more limited, in the narratives of possible futures, is the relationship to the present reality. History can tell about closed developments and ended civilisations: they may not have any connection to the present reality except our curiosity and the need to remember. Also a historical novel or a film may represent things that have nothing to do with the present. In contrast, according to Bertrand de Jouvenel, the present has to be included somehow into the history of the possible future. This discerns the possible futures also from the intentionally fictitious stories of future that may, in fact, not situate in the historical time at all.

However, Hannu Salmi has remarked that the science fiction writer can, as a matter of fact, seek the understanding of the future in the past. In his article about the television series Star Trek he notes that the space ship Enterprise, adventuring in the 2260's, encounters frequently planets where the natives appear to live in the past of the Earth. What are interesting here are the different levels of the past. The history described in the series is either the past that was recognised as history by the spectators of the 1960's, for example the eighteenth century, or the past that was still future for the TV audience but represented "history" for Captain Kirk and other space travellers. Inevitably, the decades of Star Trek lore and numerous sequels in this space fiction have resulted in the intertwining of the real and the imaginary (future) history.<sup>19</sup> How the past and the future, in the end, are conceived, depends on the reception. Much is left open for the reader (or spectator) to give the narratives of future the final meaning.

## **Epilogue**

This article could be summarised by arguing that, in the 1960's, the modern dichotomy between reality and fiction was questioned by Bertrand de Jouvenel and the other so-called hermeneutic scholars in the way that can be seen to have bridged the gap between the futures studies and the fictitious stories of the future. It was not only about defining anew the boundaries between different genres and different situations of communication but also reconstructing the culture of futures after the Second World War. This would be interesting to compare with the changes in the culture of history (*Geschichtskultur* to use the German concept) at the same time. It can be argued that, during

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<sup>19</sup> Salmi 1999: <http://www.film-o-holic.com/widerscreen/1999/4/index.htm>

the years of fast modernisation when the disengagement from the past was quite obvious, there was a sense of decline in the alternatives of the future, even from the global point of view.

Consequently, Jouvenel's ideas can be seen as critique to deterministic and fatalistic tendencies of the time. Instead of aiming to control the world by means of knowledge and technology, Jouvenel stressed the critical understanding of the past and present and emphasised the insight into the future. Like utopias since the sixteenth century, the stories of possible futures were intended to influence the real events. However, whereas the possible futures always imply a genealogical connection to the present, the fictitious histories sometimes even stop to wonder at the impossible.

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