

Clarifications: Visions in Foresight

Visioning as a way of defining and a promise of achieving desirable futures has become a popular topic in recent years. The mainstream discourse on innovation claims that it is more likely to discover innovative pathways towards an objective if you can see it or imagine it. And the consequence is that visioning exercises multiply, as they are currently associated with developing a sense of purpose, with driving the creative energy, with providing groups of innovators with goals to focus and direction, with inspiration and momentum. Further more, visioning seems to be about favoring an image of the future to guide decision making, over thorough analysis of what has been done in the past.

Visioning professionals describe it as a "process of creating a series of images or visions of the future that are real and compelling enough to motivate and guide people toward focusing their efforts on achieving certain goals" . Beyond their preposterous claim that they can generate a transformative process during which the inner potential of ordinary people will develop them into visionaries, proponents of visioning endeavors also assert that focusing on the end-goal, even as the pathway is blurred, will offer long-term directions for action. It's about drawing a clear image, with emotive touches, but also about being in touch with what people want. Encouraging openness breaks out of boundary thinking to offer unique and creative solutions. Visioning provides continuity and avoids the stuttering effect of strategic planning, while keeping key actors committed and stakeholders alert.

There is certain tension in this discourse, but also interplay between 'visioning' and 'focusing'. Visioning is about being able to visualize in a much focused way what a perfect future would look like. But there is a limit to focusing, and upon trespassing this limit one would only diminish the overall harmony of the 'big picture'. It is this intrinsic contradiction that will concern us most, and will become the overriding theme of our essay. How are we to create coherent visions, visions that inspire and make sense to large groups of potential innovators, without becoming too focused, without shredding the very thread that gives cohesion to the visioning effort?

Imagined representations or shared pictures of the (usually, desirable) future , as expressive as they might be, are underlined by collections of structured concepts, values and norms, guiding behavior and answer to stimuli. As such, their role becomes highly normative and even disciplinary when the above mentioned limit of focusing is crossed. The episteme of a so-called Knowledge Society calls for a reorganization of knowledge to accommodate post-natural and post-scientific forms of prospective knowledge, but one should not overlook the fact that new knowledge is often intertwined with new forms of exercising power.

A discourse on visioning is a necessary conversation about the relation between narratives of present and the picture of an idealized future. It is therefore a narrative about change, and change can be controlled, enhanced or inhibited. But without the possibility of change, a vision depicting the distant future becomes void of meaning. Obviously, there is distinction between change and vision, just as there is distinction between change and cause. Uncaused change is conceptually possible. Reciprocal, a cause may result in no change, if the object would otherwise be undergoing a change which the sustaining cause prevents. The operation of a cause is neither necessary nor sufficient for change to happen. Therefore, it is not trivial to talk about visioning as causing specific and sporadic forms of change, and to try to explicit such mechanisms, while still expecting change to happen in the absence of the visioning effort.

Certain voices offer us intriguing metaphors to evince the visions' power of agency. One way of describing it is the magnet that through its attractive force pulls the present towards an envisioned future. Another metaphor is the compass, with the ship navigating the complicated waters of transformative change. A vision can be seen as a crowbar, converging energies to break open a cryptic future. Or even as a platform that opens the space of dialogue for all actors. These metaphors may be helpful in different contexts, but they seem rather contingent .

Others believe that visions are social representations, and that they carry a core set of invariable elements, common to diverse representations. The nature of such elements is essentially qualitative, offering meaning to peripheral elements when anchored in one specific environment, and thus fulfilling a generative function that places them at the root of the visioning effort. They also have an organizing function, determining relations that

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link together all the other elements of a vision. The vision evolves in time, but it won't change organization unless its core elements are altered.

An analysis of the visioning discourse reveals the dialogical relation between speeches on the mechanics and, respectively, on the structure of a vision. This relation is dynamic, and engaged in processes of endless re-descriptions. New metaphors are to be added every time the visioning script is re-read, themselves anticipating new readings, as well as new situations.