

Book Review

Stephen M. Millett

Managing the Future: A Guide to Forecasting and Strategic Planning in the 21st Century
Axminster Devon, UK: Triarchy Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty.

The future isn't what it used to be in the days of speculative fiction in the manner of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells. It's not even like the worlds of the often pessimistic Harlan Ellison, or of preternatural optimists like Buckminster Fuller, Walt Disney and "Dr. Tomorrow." There's an added layer of darkness in the lens. We are more attuned to postmodern films and novels which detach us from historical narratives altogether and transform us into cyborgs of various sorts.

Comfortable Enlightenment-era assumptions about ending tyranny and ignorance, poverty and disease are not taken terribly seriously anymore. More likely, we identify postmodern apocalyptic horsemen when we choose to think about such matters at all.

Our world is becoming more and more complicated. And, although no one doubts the importance or the impact of technological innovations from supercollider-superconductors in the quest for the "God particle" to emerging nanotechnology, we are more familiar with the limited literacy that is forced upon us by hand-held electronic communications devices. Restricted to 140-character versions of reality, the global conversation on the Internet now affirms the triumph of banality while simultaneously invading what used to be called privacy and establishing surveillance systems for massive corporations—both public and private—which is not quite what Marshall McLuhan may have meant when he invited us to frolic in boundless global village. We are living the future day-by-day and most of us do not grasp even its most obvious features.

The verb "to manage" is also slippery. A quick perusal of my modest collection of print and pixelized dictionaries assures me that it has a good deal to do with exercising control. The implied degree and kind of control, however, varies.

At its most formidable, management involves domination:

- In labour relations "management rights" are typically those aspects of an organization that are wholly within the purview of the executives of an enterprise or their delegates and outside the influence of trade unions—never mind individual employees;
- Management may also involve the legalities of administration in, for instance, cases like estate supervision where, for a fee, a firm of lawyers and accountants may be empowered to take care of the assets of a deceased person, to assume the obligation to exercise fiduciary responsibilities, and to act in the best interest of the beneficiaries of a last will and testament and not itself;
- in medicine, physicians are said to manage a patient by providing diagnosis and treatment, even in the case of a terminal disease; and,

- in common language, we may find not success but merely survival to be the best possible outcome, as in “I managed to survive the sinking of the ship, despite having been alone at sea for many hours before rescue.”

With such an array of possibilities, what does it mean to *manage the future*? Do we expect a guidebook for forecasting and strategic planning to predict otherwise unanticipated events and circumstances. Should we think that we can be told how to dominate our environment years or decades hence? Or, is it enough to explain how to foretell and desperately avoid immediately impending disasters, or see opportunities that we can exploit to our advantage next week, month or year?

I have been reading books by alleged “futurists” for close to fifty years and, to speak plainly, most of them can generously be called scams and shams. That does not, of course, mean that they have not been influential. Some of the popular titles which admittedly rose slightly above the level of snake-oil are:

- *Future Shock* (1970) by Newt Gingrich’s favourite public intellectual, Alvin Toffler;
- *The Coming of Postindustrial Society* by Daniel Bell, who famously declared, in *The End of Ideology* (1960), that debates over political principles had come to an end and that the United States was, in Seymour Lipset’s phrase, “the good society in operation”—all this shortly before the execution of John Kennedy, the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-Vietnam War Movement, the Feminist Movement and the “Hippie” counter-culture demolished the American post-war cultural consensus;
- *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) by Francis Fukuyama who brought Daniel Bell’s story up to date, only to wake up to the fact that globalization did not ineluctably lead to the spread of liberal democracy and the growth of unprecedented prosperity for all. Somehow, Kalashnikov rifles, drone bombers, toxic assets on Wall Street and LIBOR shenanigans at Barclay’s bank intervened.

The global financial sector showed itself to be nothing if not “innovative,” though not in a good way. Mr. Fukuyama has since dropped the subject, and isn’t as welcome in American conservative think-tanks or Fox News as he once was. The list could go on and on.

In the somewhat shaky world of late capitalism and public service adjustment, we can be forgiven for treating future plans with caution. That, however, does not mean that we should throw up our hands and react defensively and uncritically to change, that we should merely “go with the flow.” There might be something to be said for Taoist wisdom on the matter. As Gregory Bateson said of the attempt to exercise power and control, trying to get control is impossible, because you never do—the desire to control is the pathology! But, even if we discard the illusion of total power and control, we nonetheless must remain as aware of our surroundings and as lucid in our description of them as possible. However difficult the present and available intimations of the future, we do well to keep our eyes open and our senses alert so that we can react nimbly to events and to trends. We may not be able to alter much, but we may be able to keep our balance.

Stephen M. Millett’s book, *Managing the Future*, fits nicely within the limits of modesty that seem appropriate in light of the exaggerated claims of previous writers dealing with similar

topics. It is also a healthy step up from the trite remarks and superficial treatments that too often come to explain and assess the latest “paradigm shift” to work its way through an administrative system.

I was especially pleased to learn on page 2 of this book that the author, a self-described “futurist” with a Ph.D. in history “hates” the words “futurism” and “futuology,” preferring to think of himself as an “applied historian,” using the methods of academic historians to problems arising for private corporations as well as government agencies and non-profits. He makes it plain that he doesn’t do “science fiction” or “wishful thinking.” At the same time, he promises on page 3 to “provide philosophical explanations and theories to support the work of futurists.” It’s about time (so to speak), and he is quite right to acknowledge that “most futurists have a weak grounding in philosophy.” Whether this is because many of them come from a background in business, science or technology, or as a result of the fact that they (or, more, likely their potential employers) think that philosophy is all about passive speculation whereas their work amounts to active prediction is a matter I will leave for others to consider.

Millett sets out five principles, to which he devotes a chapter each. They are:

1. The future will be some unknown combination of continuity and change;
2. The future can be anticipated with varying degrees of uncertainty depending upon conditions;
3. Futuring and visioning are different but complementary perspectives of the future;
4. The best forecasts and plans are methodically generated and provide well considered expectations of the future;
5. There is no such thing as an immutable forecast or plan for an immutable future. Forecasts and plans must be continuously monitored, evaluated, and revised according to new data and conditions to improve real-time frameworks for making long-term decisions and strategies.

At first glance, there is nothing remarkable about these tenets, except perhaps the mention of the distinction between “futuring” (tracking “external” factors such as economics, technologies, socio-demographics, politics and national history and culture) and “visioning” (internal factors such as a corporate mission or set of goals including but not limited to corporate reputation, fulfilling a market or social need, enhancing customer or client satisfaction, increasing market share, sales growth, profit growth and improved returns on investment and assets). Again, there is nothing especially notable in these items that are mainly meant for private sector organizations but, with a little messaging and tweaking, are applicable to the public and non-profit sector as well.

What differentiates Millett’s book from others is that his principles are the beginning of his journey and not its summative slogans. More interesting still is that, despite his references to philosophy, no one need fear that his reflections will bog them down in an arcane discussion of Aristotelian logic or Augustinian confession. He brings philosophy to bear when it is needed to inform and sustain efforts to anticipate coming patterns and events. He explains some of the more important elements of futuring, especially from the philosophy of science. In a few nicely written paragraphs, he takes us from Sir Isaac Newton through Sir Karl Popper and echoes David

Hume in the realization that “science never proves anything,” but that it does offer increasingly refined approximations of the truth. With this in mind, we can dismiss both strict causal analysis and certain forms of naïve determinism and yet still use empirical methodology to good effect. So, Millett presents his philosophical background for applying with a tolerable uncertainty the common principles of science to “the vastly complicated realm of human behavior in economics, politics, love and war.” (Did I mention that Millett’s career began as a U. S. Air Force officer teaching in the School of Engineering at the Air Force Institute of Technology and followed that up with a 27-year stint with the Battelle Memorial Institute in Columbus, Ohio—the world’s largest private, non-profit technology research and management institution? Sometimes it shows.)

In any case, Popper pops up again and again, as do Charles Darwin, Stephen Jay Gould, Andrew Carnegie, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph A. Schumpeter. The Great Recession of 2008 is noticed 26 times, though John Maynard Keynes is referenced only twice—fewer times than Karl Marx, though the latter is introduced mainly to say that he was wrong. In the process, however, Millett does a commendable job of grounding thinking about the future in legitimate, evidence-based argument. Considering the amount of mindless prognosticating by experts, ideologues and professional pundits, this is in itself refreshing.

Each chapter on each principle affords ample examples and appropriate cautionary tales. It quickly becomes clear that Millett is not marketing a five-easy-steps-to-future-confidence or a hitchhiker’s-guide-to-tomorrowland. He does not trade in fantasies. Still, he has respect for the imaginative. In an almost cybernetic account of various scenarios, he finds insight where he can. He gives a nod of approval, for example, to Fernand Braudel’s impressive work, *The Structures of Everyday Life* (1981), an encyclopedic three volume description and explanation of the rise of capitalism which provocatively hints at forms of pattern recognition that are congenial to Millett’s own work. As well, he pauses long enough in his historical account to include Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929) in a footnote. These and other wise men are invoked to supplement Millett’s own suggestions about what to study and how to study it if we are going to learn from history and not condemn ourselves to repeat its worst mistakes. Contrary to behavioural economists and rational choice theorists, Braudel and Millett agree that “... society’s reactions to the events of the day, to the pressures upon it, to the decisions it must face, are less a matter of logic or even self-interest than the response to an unexpressed and often inexpressible compulsion from the collective unconscious.”

Millett is wise to equivocate over whether Braudel was simply referencing “world views” or delving into the murkier depths of Jungian psychology. In either case, it made for a fascinating page or two.

Likewise, in his discussion of “scenarios,” Millett finds inspiration in interesting places. He attributes to Herman Kahn, widely regarded as the model for the character “Dr. Strangelove” in the wonderful 1964 comedic film about nuclear Armageddon. Taking us through the application of the term scenario from Italian theatre to military planning to corporate planning at the General Electric corporation (employer of Ronald W. Reagan in his pre-political years), Millett explains how Kahn had a transformative effect on GE, Shell and many other successful enterprises. The insights provided into scenario projects alone are almost worth the price of the book.

More systematic is an excellent chapter on “managing visioning.” Retrieving lessons from US business history including the origin of Proctor & Gamble which was begun by an English candle maker and an Irish soap maker (both in need of pig fat in their respective ventures) in Cincinnati, Ohio, Millett tells a charming tale of corporate “branding” practices raised almost to an art. Case studies featuring Andrew Carnegie and Bill Gates fill out the segment and lead to consideration of the internal workings of firms and agencies interested in anticipating the future and making the best of whatever opportunities may arise (or pitfall depress). Here an important endorsement of internal participation in organizations and a challenge to the authoritarian top-down model of enterprise is given proper attention.

These are just some of the highlights in a very engaging book. Millett is necessarily optimistic about the future. Futurists who play the part of Cassandra can’t expect to find many bidders for their services. But he is more sensible than most. He worries that actionable intelligence was either absent or ignored prior to the events of September 11, 2001. He notes that most Americans were taken by surprise by the Great Recession that began in 2008. Indeed, generally speaking, the opening of the twenty-first century was not for the weak of heart.

Of course, not *everyone* was caught flat-footed by the Wall Street catastrophe. Warnings had been issued by some economists, but Alan Greenspan was only the most obvious one who “never saw it coming.” Certainly Larry Summers and Timothy Geithner, who were a big part of Bill Clinton’s team when he got rid of the *Glass-Steagall Act*, gave a big boost to investment deregulation and helped set the stage for the collapse and were invited by Barack Obama to fix it, were not anticipating the mess. Plainly, some of the most respected forecasters and futurists have some explaining to do!

As for the future of futurism, we can’t know for sure. What awaits us just around the corner or maybe down the street is necessarily uncertain. Some of it, however, *is* foreseeable and, in this connection, I am disappointed that, although energy is mentioned 28 times in 271 pages, words like “ecology” and “sustainability” do not make it to the Index. What Millett does say, however, is worthwhile—including a closing chapter on “Managing Expectations.” He advises future futurists to assure potential employers of their value to the hiring organization, but they should manage others’ expectations by not promising too much, and they should manage their own expectations by not demanding too much. Nothing could be more obvious.

About the Author:

Howard A. Doughty is a professor at Seneca College in Toronto, Ontario. He can be reached at: howard_doughty@post.com.