

The Power of Anticipation

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ABSTRACT

No society or individual can develop without having an idea or an aspiration for tomorrow. Past and future are concepts which are linked and separate. It is known that high income groups exercise a right to aspire while poverty's environment limits these possibilities, and, in effect, impedes the development of this capacity. This loss of the future was one of the most striking consequences of the political and economic crisis in Argentina in December 2001-2002. As events can trigger imagination of the future, the centennial independence celebration in 2010 can ignite the power of anticipation.

The Power of Anticipation

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Introduction

In this talk I will introduce the concept of the power of anticipation and explain its historical roots and its relevance to addressing problems we face in the contemporary world. I am an Argentine architect and urban historian researching for the last decade how people thought about the future in Buenos Aires at the beginning of the 20th century.

Let me begin with a quotation from the well-known Argentine writer who you all must know, Jorge Luis Borges. In the *Brodie Report*, he wrote: “It is strange that people can endlessly look backwards but not forward... Philosophically, memory is not less extraordinary than the prediction of the future: tomorrow is closer to us than the crossing of the Red Sea by the Jews. Nevertheless, we remember it...”¹

I would like to explore this paradox by first considering some theoretical roots and observations on this problem, secondly by briefly illustrating what happened when the future disappeared in the collective mind of a society, and thirdly, how the future, a modern concept, can be used as a tool to improve the welfare of those most in need.

1. Notes about anticipations

I start with the observation that there is no society or individual who can develop themselves in a positive way without having an idea or an aspiration for tomorrow. Daily life, whether individual or social, is necessarily composed of memories of the past, needs of the present, and expectations for the future.

This observation, easily understood as common sense, was illustrated by Carl L. Becker in his study of the uses of posterity: “To be oriented we must be prepared for what is coming to us, and

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, “El informe Brodie”, *Obras Completas*, tomo II, Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1989, p.454

to be prepared for what is coming to us it is necessary not only to recall certain past events but to anticipate (note I do not say “predict”) the future.”²

Frequently, when the future closes as a possibility, history and memory also disappear. The present is then reduced to a thin membrane unable to provide by itself the needed inputs to face current challenges. On the contrary, according to Kevin Lynch, a well-elaborated mental image that contains past and future as an active part of the present improves the well being of individuals and the capacity of society to introduced needed changes. Past and future are concepts which are linked, for Lynch, because they have been both constructed in the present and are based on the same data and attitudes. The way people experience or think about the past determines the way they think about the future.³

However, Lynch also observes that looking at the past and towards the future are processes of a different nature: “Though the two have equal reality in the mind and a parallel structure, they are quite unlike each other in the data they employ.”⁴ Paul Ricoeur also explains this difference in the structure of thinking about the past and the future. He compares fictional narrative and historical narrative, and demonstrates how both narratives have a similar structure, but they refer to different worlds.⁵

In a historical perspective, when studying the relation between past and future in the configuration of historical time, Reinhart Koselleck asserts that there is an asymmetry between the space of experience and the horizon of expectations. This asymmetry was produced by the idea of progress developed in the 18th century: “The difference between experience and expectation

² Carl L. Becker “The uses of posterity” in *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973 (first edition 1932); Kevin Lynch *What Time is this Place?* Cambridge, Mass. and London, The MIT Press, 2001 (first edition 1972) p.91

³ “Where past experiences has been stable and orderly, giving rise to progressive changes with predictable results, a future concept of greater range and realism is encouraged. Where past has been chaotic or frozen, the individual will contract and disconnect his image of future time. But, in reverse, where the future seems inscrutable or dull, the past will also tend to seem inexplicable or empty. Both images proceed together: hope goes with nostalgia” Kevin Lynch, *What Time is this Place?* The MIT Press Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 2001 (First Edition 1972), p. 91

³ Kevin Lynch, op. cit. p.91

⁴ Kevin Lynch, idem

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Historia y Narratividad*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1999, pp.130-191

grows with modernity, or more precisely, modernity could only be conceived as a new period from when postponed expectations moved away from all prior experience”.⁶

In literature, an asymmetry of length in time when looking backwards or forwards— the past is long and the future is short - is present in the above quotation from Borges. This asymmetry also resonates in the comments of Virginia Woolf who notes: “...must the duty of the critic always be to the past, must his gaze always be fixed backwards? Could he not sometimes turn round and, shading his eyes in the manner of Robinson Crusoe on the desert island, look into the future and trace on its mist the faint lines of the land which someday perhaps we may reach? ...”⁷

From another discipline, Robert Heilbroner also comments on the need of people to look forward. At the beginning of his history of visions of the future, he emphasized that scenarios of the future are not significant because they were achieved or not, but rather because they provide “a plausible framework within which to face that most fearsome of psychological necessities — looking into the future [...] By enabling us to see our lives as part of a great collective journeying toward some destination, however indistinct, the works of the worldly philosophers offer some kind of consolation for the all too clearly foreseeable destination of each member of the collectivity, which is death.”⁸

Paul Ricoeur brings us closer to another dimension of the importance of thinking about the future: its use as a tool in making decisions in the present. Ricoeur identifies ideology and utopia as basic components of the social imagination, and analyzes the tension between them.⁹ We know that utopias can be imagined in another place or another time, but in this paper I focus on the utopias which involve the future, those developed since the end of the XVIII century.¹⁰ Following then with Ricoeur: he understands utopia as the inseparable part of collective imagination, linked

⁶ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futuro Pasado. Para una semántica de los tiempos históricos*, Paidós, Barcelona Buenos Aires México, 1993 (1st edition, German: 1979), p.351

⁷ Virginia Woolf, "The Narrow Bridge of Art," *New York Herald Tribune* August 14, 1927, reprinted by Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich (New York, 1958) as the first essay of the collection *Granite & Rainbow*.

⁸ Robert Heilbroner, *Visions of the Future. The distant past, yesterday, today and tomorrow*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995. pp.5-6.

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, "La ideología y la utopía: dos expresiones del imaginario social," in *Del texto a la acción*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Buenos Aires, 2002.

¹⁰ One of the two words from where 'utopia' comes are 'ou' and 'topos' that refer to the 'non-places', which is to say, that the utopia can be in some other space, or in another time in the future. Other interpretations derived from the words 'eu' and 'topos', designate a 'good place'. Based in this ambiguity -present also in the utopian thought since Thomas More wrote his celebrated work in 1515-1516-, it is possible to consider the utopia as one of the manifestations of the thought about the future.

and opposed to - but always interacting with - ideology. This is to say that every society needs both components in continuous interaction in order to function correctly and to develop. When one of these components – utopia or ideology - disappears from the social imaginary, either as cause or effect of historical circumstances, it produces a deep imbalance in society or in individuals.

Ricoeur highlights the essentially conflictive structure of this double imaginary, where each of these concepts has a positive and a negative aspect. This is to say that ideology as well as utopia has both constructive and destructive functions. But the negative side is what first appears on the surface in each case. For example: by *ideology*, we can understand a process of distortions and disguise through which certain situations are hidden. In this way ideology is associated with a social untruth or, even worse, with a protective illusion of a social status, with all the privileges and injustices that this implies. At the same time, utopia is accused of not being more than an escape from reality, "a sort of science fiction applied in politics". Utopian projects are discarded for their geometry and stiffness, and because they lack a logic of action. In this way, utopia would not be more than a way of "dreaming the action while avoiding reflecting on the conditions for the possibility of insertion in the current situation"¹¹.

However, Ricoeur also highlights the powerful, positive, and constructive function that both elements can play, proposing three levels of analysis where both utopia and ideology are expressed. On its first level of analysis -the most shallow and pejorative- ideology is understood as distortion or disguise. On a second level, Ricoeur identifies the function of ideology as legitimizing power, used more to justify than to falsify, and directly linked to the phenomenon of domination. "No society works without norms, rules, and a whole social symbolism that, in turn, requires a rhetoric of public discourse."¹² According to Ricoeur, this rhetoric of public discourse becomes ideology when it legitimates power. Finally, on the third and most fundamental level, ideology works as an element of integration of the community. It does so on a deeper level than legitimation (in relation to power) and, of course, the superficial level of disguise. Ideology, on its constructive and positive level, works then as a "bond with the collective memory" in order to

¹¹ Ricoeur, 2002. p350.

¹² Ricoeur, 2002. p 353.

transform the founding events into beliefs of a whole community. Any group "represents its existence through an idea, an idealized image of itself, and that image reinforces its identity".¹³

For Ricoeur, in the same way as ideology preserves reality, utopia questions it. In this way, utopia is the expression of all the potentialities of any group that are repressed by a ruling order. At its deepest level, utopia is opposed to the integrative function of ideology. On this third level, utopias have the power to push people to question reality, to go further than what is immediately visible or obscured by the ruling order. This is the opposite of the shallow caricatures of utopias as escapist fantasies.

At the intermediate level, utopia is radically opposed to the legitimizing function of ideology. And, on its most superficial level, utopia skips any practical or political reflection, it is an escapist and frenetic fantasy of what is all-or-nothing and immediately obtained. In this superficial level Ricoeur remind us that utopia can push us "to a jump forward senselessly toward another place, with all the risks of a mad and even bloody discourse."¹⁴

By definition utopias are as numerous, multiple, and diverse as the efforts of imagination to think of another way of life. But beyond the variety of forms adopted by utopias, Ricoeur points out that in fact the function of utopia is more important than its content. Then, the common basis of the most diverse forms of utopia is not the content, but its subversive function in relation to the current social order. It is subversive because it opens another mode of thought and action.

Ricoeur shows, therefore, that at its deepest level, utopia allows the expression of social and individual potentialities. This positive and constructive aspect of utopia is a powerful tool that societies can use to change themselves. In this manner, utopia has a strong liberating function that helps to understand the prospects for an alternative society.

A generation ago, Raymond Williams expressed a convergent view with those ideas above. He denounced the loss of thinking about the future in western society and emphasized the urgent need to reassert it. Williams quite clearly expressed that thinking about the future is a first

¹³ Ricoeur, 2002. p 356.

¹⁴ Ricoeur, 2002. p. 359.

step in constructing it. He stressed the agency, the active and stimulating role of thinking and planning ahead.¹⁵

Bringing this thinking to the present day, I would like to show how contemporary social thinkers can apply these ideas to urgent social problems. For example, Arjun Appadurai has articulated those ideas and connected them to immediate realities. He argues that there is an urgent need to enable low income people to exercise what he calls “the right to aspire.” This capacity to aspire, this exercise of desire and imagination of the future, is a vital element of culture and a key for development of poor countries.¹⁶

It is known that high income groups naturally exercise this right to aspire – nobody doubts that they have a future – because they have many opportunities to negotiate their desires with the values of the society and with their material conditions. On the contrary, the environment of poverty limits these possibilities, restricting the exercise of this right and, in effect, impeding the development of this capacity to aspire. Everyone knows that poor people do not have the luxury of having a project for the future. This loss of the future was one of the most striking consequences of the political and economic crisis in Argentina in December 2001-2002.

2. Brief illustration of a disappearing future

As is well-known, Argentina suffered the serious consequences of following a neo-liberal model advocated by the Washington Consensus. One day it was the star pupil; the next day its people were in the streets without their savings, without jobs, and without a president. More than half of the population fell below the poverty line; unemployment reached over 30 percent; and, the government was forced to devalue the peso, which meant that many people lost two thirds of their wealth and income. Not surprisingly the worst hit were the poor. However, the most articulate of those affected were the middle class, holding literally thousands of street demonstrations –

¹⁵ Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1983.

¹⁶ Appadurai, Arjun, “The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition”, *Culture and Public Action*, Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton (editors), Stanford University Press, 2004. Looking for a new understanding of the importance of culture in relation to development and poverty reduction, Appadurai states that both the ideas about the future and those about the past are incorporated and nurtured in our culture. He highlights the importance of strengthening of the capacity to aspire, understood as a cultural capacity, especially among the poor who would be in better conditions to find the required resources to challenge and change the conditions of poverty. This way of thinking contradicts many ideas that oppose culture and economy. But it offers new basis for policy makers in responding to two basic questions: 1. Why culture is a capacity that is worth to construct and strengthen; and 2. Which are the concrete ways in which it can be strengthened?

cacerolazos – in 2002. One of the most striking aspects of this crisis was people's despair when they realized that their future had disappeared or had been captured: "We lost our future! They have taken it from us!" people exclaimed.

This sudden absence of a future was articulated in innumerable comments in the streets: "Do you stay or do you leave? Where? How? To do what?" "To leave" as a motto, and the anxiety that filled the lines of people waiting to put their request of visas in front of the embassies, was simply one more expression of the loss of the idea of a possible future in the country for a big part of the middle class. No hope was left, they were at the gates of hell.¹⁷

The young people were those who had more to lose. This was not news for the poor people who had always lived on a day to day basis and have always had their future confiscated. The rich can play the luxury game of the "no future" punk, but for the Argentine middle class, who had believed, prior to the crisis, that they were part of the first world, this total confiscation of a future was an almost mortal blow.¹⁸

This was an unbearable discovery for a society that in the last one hundred years has lived convinced of a future with unlimited progress. Argentines had believed they had an automatically renovated insurance based in the productivity of the land and the education of its inhabitants. There was no doubt that this loss of future was one of the more harrowing consequences of the crisis.

Happily the situation has improved, the economy reactivated and has grown, but the memory of 2001-2002 remains starkly on everyone's mind. And more seriously, as occurs in crises all around the world, the poor have not recovered as quickly as the rich and the middle class.

¹⁷ "Per me si va ne la città dolente/ per me si va ne l'eterno dolore,/ per me si va tra la perduta gente (...) lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate" (Dante, canto III del inferno).

¹⁸ About the confiscation of the future there can be found many reflections in the articles by Susana Torrado and Martín Caparrós published in *Qué País*, as well as in the book by Silvia Bleichmar.

3. Agency of Anticipations

In contrast to this recent history, Argentina at the beginning of the 20th century was quite different. In 1910, one hundred years after Independence from Spain, Buenos Aires was one of the three richest cities in the world after London and Paris. The country was shipping huge quantities of grain and livestock to Europe, and importing manufactured goods. Its economic wealth and opportunities attracted millions of European migrants, mostly from Spain and Italy, with a new migrant arriving in the port of Buenos Aires every two minutes in 1910.

Within this context of seemingly unlimited progress, the imagination of the future was pervading almost every aspect of daily life. The power of anticipation was working in full and it was palpable in Buenos Aires. In my own historical research, I have discovered the strength of urban anticipations in the city of Buenos Aires. More specifically, it is clear how powerful are the multiple forms of expressions - in images, symbols, discourses, and plans - of anticipation for the future as they shaped daily life in this particular historical period.

This academic research was given even more meaning by my experience as director of a large historical exhibition “Buenos Aires 1910: Memoria del Porvenir” (Memories of the World to Come), an exhibition of 800 objects and images showing daily life in Buenos Aires from 1904 to 1914. The exhibition presented the contradictions and complexities of an expanding city in full growth. In 1910, Buenos Aires was celebrating the centenary of the May Revolution, and was home to 1.5 million inhabitants – half of whom were immigrants from overseas. The city was physically growing at an accelerating pace.

We presented the exhibition in Buenos Aires, Washington D.C., and New York, during 1999 and 2000. In Buenos Aires, a commercial shopping center was selected for the exhibition, and 100,000 people attended during its two months stay. But, before and after, hundreds of thousands of people knew of the exhibition from 53 newspaper and magazine articles, 25 television programs, and 11 radio shows that covered the event. For a few months, the history and the memory of the centennial city was circulating through the mass media.

One of the first surprises we experienced during the preparation of the exhibition - well at the onset of the endeavor, when we had just begun circulating to people outside of our academic circles some of the ideas and images that we had generated – was that drawings concerning the

future of the city had a strong attraction. Many images drawn and published in 1910 showed how the city and its people would be in the year 1950, 1999, 2010, and even 3000. These were the first to capture the public's imagination in 1999. There were journalists that without a second of doubt picked up on those images of the future, cutting across multiple collections of historical documents. People were enjoying to play with the mirrors in time, but also were stimulated to think in their own future.

We know that some events trigger this imagination of the future such as turn of centuries or millennia, as it was seen some years ago around the western world. Anniversaries and commemorations also stimulate this imagination, as seen for instance in Buenos Aires in 1910 when the commemoration of the centenary of the independence was in fact a celebration of the future of the country and the city.

Now the country and the Latin American region are on the eve of bicentennial celebrations of their independence from Spain: Bolivia and Ecuador in 2009, Mexico, Argentina and Chile in 2011, Venezuela probably in 2011, Colombia in 2019 and Brazil in 2022. These dates define more than a decade of commemorations in the region, but these opportunities can be used or just let them go.

Perhaps one of the challenges of building inclusive commemorations of the bicentennials in the region could be the integration the three dimensions of time: looking backwards to the past, the needs of the present, and the expectations for the future. In this context, the definition of the right to imagine and the development of the capacities to aspire could be considered as another or the emergent right in the region at the beginning of the third millennium.

It seems clear that we need to “de-privatize the world-to-come” making sure that thinking ahead is not just a luxury for the rich and educated, but the right to anticipate the future is a human right, and it is more important for the poor to be able to exercise this right.