RĂZVAN SANDRU, FERNANDO WIRTZ, MĂDĂLINA DIACONU

Futurism and Futurity

Introduction

Translation: Răzvan Sandru

We are currently experiencing a comeback of the future. After a series of retrospective currents – ranging from the praise of tradition in hermeneutics and postmodernism's cheerfully nostalgic combinatorics with set pieces of the past through to the deconstruction of the Western cultural palimpsest – the idea of the future is present again in numerous fields. Yet setting our sights on the future is by no means new in our world: the eschatological expectations of Judeo-Christian thought with occasional outbreaks of millenarian fears and apocalyptic visions, the late medieval and modern political utopias, the Marxist social project, the Enlightenment myth of progress, etc. – all these have essentially shaped Western philosophy and culture and formed the narrative of a linearly progressing time. What is new, however, is the accumulation of crises that demonstrate the impossibility of continuing exactly as before, and how envisioned solutions to these crises are then coupled with previously unimagined technical possibilities, foremost those reshaping nature and our own bodies, an amalgam present for the first time in history on a global scale.

Often in the last century, the future has been portrayed in mainstream culture primarily as the process of technologization. According to this perspective, the progress of technology promises the possibility of full automation, which further entails a dichotomous concept of the future: it can be either utopian or dystopian. In a utopian future, advancing technologization is supposed to free humanity from the burdens of everyday life (work, illness, sadness, etc.). The vision of posthumanism is that the technically colonised human body in the future would transcend its natural limits and enjoy (almost) unlimited freedom.

In the dystopian alternative, the process of technologisation goes awry in that, for example, people become subjects of machines that have become autonomous and which they, as in Chaplin's classic Modern Times, only have to »service«[1]. Instead of the expected humanisation of work, individuals become increasingly asocial; their leisure time becomes a burden, like a gap in time from whose meaninglessness they are to be distracted by constant consumption.

Both utopia and dystopia are expressions of the idea of a teleology of history that is characteristic of the Western world: the world is designed to progress in its historical course towards an end point (good or bad). The Western understanding of the world has often been criticised as monolithic thinking[2] that rejects all alternative viewpoints as unreasonable and primitive, thereby excluding any debate about the future. However, the developments of recent decades, such as the imminent threat of climate change, the intensification of migration flows due to war and poverty, or most recently the COVID 19 pandemic, show that the ideal of progress articulated and pursued by the modern Occident is alone not capable of securing the perspective of a secure, fair and inclusive future[3]. In view of these complex challenges, new solutions are urgently needed, and they in turn need to involve as many transformative agents as possible worldwide. Recently there have also been increasing calls recently to counter the apocalyptic future scenarios rampant in popular culture with prudence and constructive alternatives. Taking all these factors into consideration, it becomes clear that the active engagement of intercultural philosophy is imperative.

This issue of polylog is dedicated to alternative representations of future societies from a de-marginalised perspective. Such a process of imagining or thinking is referred to here as futurism. For most readers, this term will probably evoke memories of Italian Futurism, the group of artists who, just prior to the First World War, expressed their enthusiasm about and faith in technology, only to subsequently become susceptible to fascism. The term »futurism« is interpreted differently in post-colonial contexts, however, commonly used to refer to certain aesthetic practices that aim to re-appropriate the discourses of science fiction and technology, while adopting the perspective of those who have historically been excluded from the narratives of civilisational progress[4]. How questionable modern notions of progress and development have become in the present was already addressed in an earlier issue of polylog on current critical theories of development in a global context[5]. The current issue partly takes up this theme, but shifts the focus to alternative understandings of temporality, historicity and especially the future.

MĂDĂLINA DIACONU is a lecturer at the University of Vienna and a member of the editorial board of polylog, Contemporary Aesthetics and Studia Phaenomenologica.

RĂZVAN ADRIAN SANDRU is a researcher at the Center for the Research of the Unknown, Champalimaud Foundation, Lisbon. He is also the main editor of the intercultural journal *Forum Nepantla* and works on the development of learning materials on Latin American philosophy within a project of the Eberle Foundation.

1 Anders: *Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, 96.

2 Badiou: *Ethik*, Nancy: *Being singular plural*.

3 de Sousa: *O futuro começa agora*.

4 Cf. Dillon: *Walking the Clouds*; Fricke: Indigenous Futurisms.

5 Gmainer-Pranzl & Schöneberg: *Kritische Entwicklungstheorie*.

In the Western world, subaltern cultures have been systematically excluded from the »future« and presented as technologically and socio-politically underdeveloped. Similarly, their philosophies usually appear as taxonomic oddities, classified as »wisdom«, »worldview«, »thought«, »folk culture« or »cosmogonies«, and often play a marginal role in the mainstream representation of future societies. This seems paradoxical, because it is precisely in the global South that political initiatives can be found that are attempting to combine ecological sustainability with political solidarity and responsible economic practices in creative and innovative ways. For this reason, we would like to address these problems from the broader perspective of these marginalised futurisms, but also undertake a critical assessment of futurism and other representations of the future.

It could even be said that the role of intercultural philosophy has been left out of philosophical discourses on the future. The future still seems to be a privilege of philosophy of technology, applied ethics or abstract metaphysics. Intercultural philosophy is often seen as an overtly humanistic stance that tries to recover the »wisdoms« mentioned above. Thus, the concept of »culture« itself appears as something that has little to do with the post-cultural future proposed by the vision of globalisation in the 1990s. Despite the transculturality and hyper-diversity of mega cities, »cultures« continue to play a central role. Moreover, it can be said that globalisation, far from homogenising cultures under a single hegemonic culture, has to a large extent produced the globalisation and internationalisation of specific cultural products (e. g. Korean TV series, Japanese anime, Latin American music, etc.). However, it is also true that despite this cultural exchange, globalisation and other political processes have once again highlighted the temporal differences between hyper-connected cities and marginalised rural areas that still live without access to the internet or even more basic technologies. Therefore, the problem of intercultural futurism requires that the future be thought of not in terms of singularity, but as many possible futures, as »futurities«. This is where intercultural philosophy has a key contribution to make, not only in articulating different temporalities (synchronic and anachronic), but also in imagining possible »futurities«. This need not mean that each culture must develop its own parallel and isolated history – rather that intercultural dialogue or polylogue (and philosophy itself) must take into account the intersecting of different temporalities and logics.

To this end, this polylog issue presents a collection of articles that aims to contribute to reshaping how we think about the future. The articles selected here are based on papers presented at the 5th Vienna Forum of Intercultural Philosophising, a cooperation between the Vienna Society for Intercultural Philosophy and the Society for Intercultural Philosophy (based in Germany), which took place in 2021 under the title »Demarginalising Futures: rethinking embodiment, community and culture«. This selection responds to two main sets of questions: 1) How is the

Fernando Wirtz studied philosophy at the University of Buenos Aires and completed his doctorate at the University of Tübingen with a thesis on the philosophy of mythology of Schelling (Mohr Siebeck, 2022). He is currently Assistant Professor at Kyoto University. He is also a board member of the Society for Intercultural Philosophy (GiP).

future generally thought about and what are the determining factors involved in this process? 2) What concrete possible alternatives to the Western-influenced futurism criticised here are taking shape today?

The topical issue on futurism is oriented towards these two questions. The first three contributions address general characteristics of thinking about the future and show where decolonial interventions are possible. The first contribution is by Abbed Kanoor, who offers an introduction to thinking about the future from the perspective of the past. He introduces readers to the reconfiguration of futures in continuity, but also in contrast to the concept of »tradition«. Central to his thesis is that cultures are not ready-made products but owe their existence to processes that constitute meaning. These describe the historicity of cultures, which are constituted in dialogue with local and global contexts. According to Kanoor, the historicity of culture is embodied in the concept of tradition. Using this concept, culture can be understood as a phenomenon that has both a characteristic interiority and is situated in a broader historical context. This also opens up the possibility of looking at the future from the perspective of autonomous cultural voices without neglecting their interconnectedness.

Federica González Luna's investigation of the affective processes that influence and determine what to expect from a future based on present conditions pushes the motif of futurism further. Drawing on Fanon's analysis of black subjectivity, Sartre's notion of the »false situation« and Girard's theory of mimetic desire, her contribution shows how power relations condition and often even »colonise« representations of the future. In this sense, her main thesis is that individual and collective desire is co-constituted by tacit factors that are usually normed by dominant narratives. According to her, this leads to a colonisation of desire and thus, ipso facto, of the future itself as the object of desire. Once the mechanisms of these colonising processes are identified and exposed, it is also possible to show how they can be decolonised.

Christoph Brunner and Sophie Peterson's account of the future as a conceptual reconfiguration rounds off the first section. As Brunner and Peterson note, time and its progression are usually imagined as linear and teleological; accordingly, the present and people's ways of being are determined by an imminent and collective end, which further uniformises the possibilities of being of all subjects to the norms of a progressive society. Speculative and queer thought nevertheless offer alternative narratives through which linear time can be interrupted and individuals can inscribe themselves in the horizon of the future. This contribution thus also furnishes the basic prerequisites for the second section of the thematic issue, which explores possible alternatives to Western-influenced thinking about the future.

The second section aims to build a bridge between the general reflections on the future presented in the first three articles and concrete, contextual decolonial representations

of the future. First, Matthias Fritsch's contribution presents such an image of the future from the perspective of climate justice with reference to indigenous ways of thinking. Fritsch criticises the current climate change discourse as a predominantly Western one that imagines the end of the world as an event yet to come. However, according to Fritsch, this notion of a future apocalypse is a luxury from the perspective of indigenous peoples, as they have already experienced such cataclysms through colonisation and the dispossession of their habitats. Consequently, a fair shaping of the future must not allow past violence to be forgotten in order to work exclusively for a supposedly universal future that is the same for all. As alternatives to the linear time of history, the time concepts of indigenous cultures should be taken into account, such as the »spiral time« of the Māori scientist Makere Stewart-Harawira, wherein the past co-constitutes the present and the future. Translated into the ecological register, this intergenerational perspective means that the current state of the environment is a gift (good or bad) from past generations, which those currently alive must pass on to their descendants in as good a condition as possible. An unequal past – of the colonised and the colonisers – obliges an equally unequal responsibility for the future, which Fritsch expresses through the concept of asymmetrical reciprocity.

A change of scene from nature to urban pop culture and from First Nations to the competition between the West and Asia for technological leadership is illustrated by Johanna Wenzel's contribution, which critically examines Sinofuturism as a conceptual confusion. Unlike Afrofuturism, which since the 1990s has stood for a technology-savvy and visionary subculture of Black artists and has been used as a means of political self-determination and resistance, Sinofuturism has so far remained a portrayal of Chinese society from the outside, seeing China as a stage for disturbing technoid dystopias. Basically, however, according to Wenzel, Sinofuturism represents an exaggerated version of Western accelerationism, whereby the Occident can reassure itself of its identity ex negativo. Behind the view of the Chinese present as an anticipation of its own future, the author suspects a »failure of contemporaneity«, to draw on Johannes Fabian's phrase, which simultaneously devalues the Other and neutralises it (as a variation, taken to the extreme, of the self). Sinofuturism is thus a coping strategy for the Western fear of the future. As an idea of exaggeration, however, Sinofuturism can also constitute a critical aesthetic strategy capable of deconstructing the linearity of Western temporality, revealing the paradoxes of a society obsessed with progress, and creating alternative images of the future.

The thematic focus concludes with a contribution by Tanay Ghandi on the idea of a precarious future as the basis of a democratic order in the sense of so-called »postfoundational« political philosophy. Ghandi's approach rejects the modern thesis of an autonomous subject of reason that can subjugate nature – and accordingly also the current normative idea of a controlled, plannable future. Inte-

restingly, the Indian-born author invokes both current Western philosophies of contingency (e. g. Connolly) and Indian Bhilala cosmology to create a picture of a world that appears extremely unstable due to complex interactions on different temporal registers between human and non-human actors with varying degrees of agency and self-organisation. Its basic characteristics are uncontrollable contingency, overwhelming complexity and »horizontal« plurality without foundational relations. Instead of developing feelings of powerlessness from this, Gandhi asserts that we should accept and even affirm the uncertainty of the future. Only an ethos that cultivates sensitivity to radical plurality and a sense of what is coming at us »on quiet feet«, so to speak, can accommodate the desire for democracy despite the challenges of a confusing complexity.

Finally, it should be noted that the positions represented here come from authors who are not only biographically at home in several cultures, but also belong to different generations. It was important to us to let young authors have their say – because the future ultimately belongs to them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anders, Günther: *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen II. Über die Zerstörung des Lebens im Zeitalter der dritten industriellen Revolution.* München: C. H. Beck, 1980.

Badiou, Alain, Brankel, Jürgen: *Ethik: Versuch über das Bewusstsein des Bösen.* Wien: Turia + Kant, 2015.

Nancy, Jean-Luc: *Being singular plural.* Stanford University Press, 2009.

De Sousa Santos, Boaventura: O futuro começa agora: Da pandemia à utopia. In: *Edições* 70. N.º 27 – dezembro 2021.

Dillon, Grace L.: *Walking the clouds: An anthology of indigenous science fiction*. University of Arizona Press, 2012.

Fricke, Suzanne Newman: Introduction: Indigenous Futurisms in the hyperpresent now. In: *World Art* 9(2), 107–121, 2019. doi: 10.1080/21500894.2019.1627674.

Gmainer-Pranzl, Franz, Schöneberg, Julia (Hg.): *Kritische Entwicklungstheorie und interkulturelle Philosophie im Dialog. polylog 44*, 2020.