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Mirror, mirror on the wall, who should I trust after all? Future in the age of conspiracy thinking

Ivana Milojević — 18 August 2020

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> " *Nothing ever comes off exactly as intended … and yet, the fallacy of overinflated agency has proven to be incredibly resilient.* "
>
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Most difficult decisions require making a choice between alternative futures. (Hicks and Holden, 1995:14)

In his recently published essay Sohail Inayatullah (**2020**) asks us to consider whether we are conspiring to destroy or to create better futures. He argues that many of us have recently became lost in a room of mirrors and that futures studies are somewhat complicit in this. Futurists have collectively played a role by challenging dominant systems of meaning and by asking for alternative perspectives to be heard – opening, perhaps, too many doors. Inayatullah then asks where the limits of what is allowable are and, most significantly, how we decide in the context of uncertainty where and how to anchor.

This question is highly relevant as we collectively struggle to come up with the best strategies and solutions to our current set of uncertainties, propelled but not entirely caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that the very distant ancestors of the modern futurists were not soothsayers but historians (Cornish, 1999), perhaps we should first consult history. Indeed, I was reminded of my own not-too-distant personal history and struggles to 'anchor' in a new environment.

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we needed cooking oil, I would go to the shops and buy oil. One type. The bottle had a picture of a sunflower on it. One company made it. Simple. In Australian supermarkets, however, there were rows of shelves filled with different types of oil. Monounsaturated. Polyunsaturated. Vegetable oil. Canola oil. Olive oil. Palm oil. Rice bran oil. Safflower oil. Sesame oil. Coconut oil. Rapeseed oil. And then, thankfully, sunflower oil. However, even this oil came in many sizes, it was produced by many companies and was variously priced. Each company claimed theirs was the best product and used marketing strategies to try to seduce the would-be buyer. I had no parameters available which would help me decide. So, how should I anchor?

The issue may seem trivial but I use it as a symbol of a larger-scale challenge in making decisions when circumstances change and there is an abundance of possibilities. What would have taken one second in the past, became a longer process where I had to consciously engage my thinking on an issue which used to be easily resolved by an automatic action. In a similar manner, most of the futures images informing our decisions in the present are "tacit, token and taken-for-granted" (Gough, 1990), that is, implicit and often subconscious. Such imaginings impact our decision making indirectly and are combined with a multitude of factors to help us choose a course of action or inaction. We continuously act on thoughts and images about the future, but we usually become aware of them only when automatic responses are challenged – either by external circumstances or deliberately designed processes such as those used in futures workshops. In the words of psychologist and economist Daniel Kahneman (2011) we then engage in 'slow thinking' at the expense of the 'fast' kind. In 1994, that was my anchor too. I put some time and energy into figuring out which 'oil' was the best choice amongst many. In retrospect, I realise I used four main resources:

1. instrumental rationality which sought the most cost-effective means of achieving my goal and compared the products according to two main variables (price and size of the oil bottle);

2. ethics which sought the product best aligned with my own personal values (i.e. environmental considerations, glass vs plastic bottle, locally sourced and produced products, use of pesticides);

3. advice-seeking which sought to tap into community wisdom (i.e. friends and family who went through a similar process or had knowledge I did not possess); and

4. an image of a desired future which sought to minimise the possibility of a future regret (i.e. making a wrong or non-optimal decision or, more broadly, being informed by a desired image of consumption of food items that are beneficial for one's body).

The choice of anchoring is critically important in decision making. We know from research that we commonly use various methods in addition to the four I utilized. These include previous habits, social custom, appeal to authority, impulse, intuition, esthetics, chance and so on (**Stone, 2012:248**). We also know from empirical research that our decisions highly depend on the initial information we hold or receive when intuitively assessing probabilities (Kahneman, 2011:119-128). Futures decisions are so dependent on previously established anchors that anchoring has been recognized as a powerful cognitive bias (**Lieder, 2018**). These cognitive biases which result from people's use of "fast but fallible cognitive strategies" (**Lieder, 2018**) powerfully frame decision making. Once the anchor is set, "other judgments are made by adjusting away from that anchor, and there is a bias toward interpreting other information around the anchor" (PON, 2019).

This brings me to the four key arguments I make in this essay:

1. How we anchor is fundamental;

2. Anchors change, or need to, depending on new circumstances;

3. It is preferable to choose new anchors in an informed, deliberate manner, as they impact decision-making in the future in an automatic manner; and

and preferred futures rather than being in alignment with the past (previous anchors).

Futures fallacies as an impediment to new, better anchors

In this process, it is critically important to be aware of certain biases which impede our ability to make decisions in alignment with our preferable, long-term futures. I have previously termed these biases Futures Fallacies (**Milojević, 2020**) and argued that, whilst common, they are manifestations of the detrimental thinking pattern about the future. This is because they: (1) stand in direct contradiction to truly desired longer-term futures and, (2) represent thoughts and behaviours contrary to our best existing evidence, facts, and logic, or relevance to emerging futures. Finally, as they are reactive, disempowering and counter-productive, they create barriers to positive individual and social change. Out of the ten identified futures fallacies in that piece, here I focus on one – the fallacy of over-inflated agency – as this is the fallacy that is directly related to questions posed in Inayatullah's article on conspiracy theories. This futures fallacy is also, more broadly, of relevance to the issue of informed decision-making and constructive anchoring.

> The future is determined partly by history social structures and reality,
>
> and partly by chance, innovation and human choice/agency

The fallacy of overinflated agency

How does the future happen? A thorough overview of the works of futures researchers and theorists reveals the shared view that the future is determined partly by history, social structures and reality, and partly by chance, innovation and human choice/agency (Milojević, 2005:17). That is, there is a myriad of causes and conditions, including random events, especially in the social arena, that come together to create a particular outcome. The anchors here are 'possibility' and 'multiplicity'. The implication is that we can act now in a way which will determine future outcomes. Another implication is that we can study and research the dynamics of change so as to better understand it and then make more informed decisions.

Alternatively, and this is a belief held by many in the conspiracy world, our collective present and global future are created by an individual (i.e. George Soros, the Pope, Bill Gates) or a rather small group of people (i.e. the Illuminati, Masons, UN). If a group, they usually meet in secret in order to pursue some malevolent goal (Bale, 2007). "They" are commonly known to share a common ideology (i.e. globalists, 'big Pharma') and/or national/religious/racial identity (for example, Jews). The anchor here is 'anti-elitism'. The implication is that we are powerless. Another anchor is 'secrecy' – lack of transparency by the group or 'what they do not want you to know'.

Depending on which anchor is put in place, future decision making will follow its internal logic. For example, research shows that belief in one conspiracy theory makes belief in another different conspiracy theory more likely, including simultaneously believing mutually incompatible ones (e.g. a famous person was killed and faked their own murder) (**Van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018: 898**). Likewise, belief in one possibility creates space for people to consider other possibilities. The whole of history, as Frederik Polak (1972) and Elise Boulding have argued, can perhaps be read as "a succession of acts of the imagination, subsequently inspiring social action in the direction of the imagined" (Boulding, 1988:116). But the key here is also a belief in agency, multiplicity and in the importance of choosing our imagined futures wisely.

Still, how do we ascertain which possibility is worthy of our time and attention, or how do we choose between the various narratives that surround us? And, perhaps most crucially, who do we trust to influence our future?

There is no doubt, of course, that human agency directed towards inducing the future is widespread, including engagement in "conspiratorial politics", that is, "real-world covert and clandestine activities" (Bale, 2007). For example, in 2001, a group of men conspired (in secret) to carry out a terrorist attack on US soil. The shock triggered, the ripple effects

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of the [US] population believes that the official account of 9/11 is a cover-up or that the US establishment was [somehow] involved in the attacks" (Byford, 2011: 6). Another study found that around 20% of US residents endorse the idea that climate change "is a hoax perpetrated by corrupt scientists who wish to spend more taxpayer money on climate research" (Lewandowski et al., 2013). While the US is one of the most thoroughly researched societies, it is not unique in its embrace of conspiracy theories. The belief that the future is created by a hidden force or a group of humans conspiring behind closed doors is widespread through time and space. Therefore, it is critically important to distinguish between "essentially elaborate fables even though they may well be based on kernels of truth" and the activities of actual clandestine and covert political groups, a common feature of (modern) politics, argues Jeffrey Bale (2007:48). The table below summarises Bale's conclusion as to what distinguishes these two phenomena.

Conspiratory politics	Conspiracy theories
Concrete and evidence based	Bizarre, unfounded and grandiose claims
Actors real humans with different values, beliefs and political goals	Actors inhuman, superhuman and or /anti-human beings who are Evil Incarnate
Focus on a specific, from their point of view, desired future	Focus on Manichaean (dualistic, battle between good and evil) and apocalyptic futures
Negative outcomes "collateral damage" of specific desired futures	Negative outcomes based on a desire to corrupt whole societies and destroy entire civilizations and cultures
Some outcomes unforeseen	Every outcome a result of conscious planning and direct intervention
Internal division among the conspirators exists across multiple lines (beliefs, strategy, preferred future)	Group monolithic and unerring in the pursuit of its goals; extraordinary (super-human) degree of internal solidarity exists
Restricted in (specific) time and (local) space	Omnipresent – global in its spatial dimension and continuous in its temporal dimension
Limited in scope and outcomes; various levels of effectiveness	Virtually omnipotent
Uses specific strategies	Uses every subversive technique known to humankind
Some activities visible	"Furtive fallacy" – everything that is truly significant happens behind the scenes
A regular feature of politics whose importance varies in different social and historical contexts	The motive force of all historical change and development
Some historical change accidental and of limited historical significance	Everything happens as a result of secret plotting in accordance with some sinister grandiose design
Concrete future outcomes a result of competing images/interest and enacting of power by various individuals/groups	A conspiratory group successfully alters the course of history; they alone are capable of controlling our destiny
New evidence discovered adjusts what is known	New evidence further confirms and strengthens the initial conspiracy

In summary, no group or individual has the capability to fully control our future, no matter how secretive or powerful they are. A conspiracy never, or hardly ever, turns out in the way that is intended, argued Karl Popper in his 1972 influential essay, because "nothing ever comes off exactly as intended" (Popper, 1972: 13). And yet, the fallacy of overinflated agency has proven to be incredibly resilient, possibly because it fulfils certain important "social function and psychological needs" (Bale, 2007: 50). Paradoxically, while relegating agency to others, people simultaneously reaffirm their own potential ability to control the course of future, i.e. via exposing and acting against those (imagined) omnipotent actors.

What is disheartening is not only the resilience of this fallacy but also the finding that throughout history people engage in this fallacy with higher intensity during "impactful societal crisis situations, such as during fires, floods, earthquakes, rapid social change, violence, and wars" (**McCauley & Jacques, 1979**, cited in Van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018: 898). As we

type of thinking about the future are also likely to create detrimental outcomes for most people. The main detrimental outcomes may include the scapegoating of (political, ideological, ethnic, religious) minorities and the loss of opportunities to constructively address current crises. Moreover, when this fallacy is coupled with social structures themselves shaping people's feelings of vulnerability (i.e. no safety net, no transparency in how they operate, perceived injustice), it further deepens people's feelings of powerlessness and makes people more likely to choose particular political solutions that offer certainty in simplistic terms (i.e. populism, political extremism, religious and political fundamentalism). Other negative outcomes that this fallacy engenders include alienation from mainstream politics (such as a decrease in voter turnout during elections), a decrease in support for important policies, choices with bad personal outcomes for people's health, relationships and safety, and even an increase in radicalization and the emergence or strengthening of violent tendencies amongst some extremist fringe groups (Van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018).

Fortunately, researchers have also proposed two antidotes for this fallacy: 1. The promotion of analytic thinking and providing rational arguments against specific conspiracy-based views and 2. Interventions aimed at quelling negative emotions such as fear by instilling "feelings of security among the public", by opening avenues for people to experience a higher sense of control whilst simultaneously providing them with a sense of hope and empowerment (Van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018: 905). For example, providing universal basic income and other strong welfare support programs. It is this latter antidote, especially related to engendering a sense of hope and empowerment, that futures studies and futurists have consistently been providing. And this is where new and better anchors can be found.

Conclusion

Decision making is indeed difficult when we are faced with a multitude of very fast changes, when the 'oils' available keep on changing each time we go to the grocery store. And yet, by acknowledging some common patterns of detrimental thinking about the future we can recognize and move away from them. Recognizing the futures fallacy of overinflated agency can help us move away from such thinking. The next step is then, of course, to carefully, deliberately and slowly choose new and better anchors. Those will be ones which, as argued here, are in alignment with the best available present knowledge base as well as better futures for all.

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