

Telos PRIMOPLANO

Jamais Cascio, futurologist. In 2009 Cascio was amongst the Top 100 Global Thinkers on the magazine *Foreign Policy* as *guru of all things on the horizon*; he works and writes about the merger between emerging technologies, environmental dilemmas, and cultural transformation, and then designs and creates plausible future scenarios. For over a decade Cascio worked on scenario development and in 2010 became a Research Fellow at the Institute for the Future. In 2007, his study calculating the overall carbon footprint of a single cheeseburger went viral and was published by hundreds of newspapers, magazines, radio stations, websites, and was even exhibited as the Food station of the Bishop Museum in Honolulu. The cheeseburger became an icon of the surprising carbon footprint of our everyday life. Cascio is the Director for Impact Analysis at the Center for Responsible Nanotechnology in Tucson and Research Fellow at the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies founded by Nick Bostrom. He lives, near San Francisco, California, with his wife, two cats, four Macs and the inevitable hybrid car.

Editorial

"Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing ever happened", Sir Winston Churchill.

Strange as it may seem, it was only in the nineteenth century that, thanks to technological progress, people began to think that the future could have been different to what it is today. The *scientific* forecast of the future, called *futurology*, began to emerge shortly after World War II. It became a discipline that was meant to *speculate what different sort of things could happen in the future...* the things that the French historian Bertrand de Jouvenel called *futuribles*. This doctrine is completely unknown in Italy, but in the United States plenty of geniuses are studying it in dozens of schools - sometimes letting their imagination run free, sometimes treading carefully.

Jamais Cascio is one of those who tread carefully and adopt a practical mindset.

When we heard him talking about long term, we presumed he worked on fifty-year scenarios, but we were wrong! His work has a ten-year perspective, a timeframe theoretically acceptable to businesses and institutions. Nowadays, many *conjuncturalists*, especially in the field of economics, tend to have a rather narrow horizon. In practice, a conjuncturalist tries to formulate as accurate an idea as possible of the current economic situation, comparing it with the recent past and projecting a trend for the short-term future. Perhaps we need a more structured and far-sighted vision. The futurology of scientists like Cascio could be the answer. Emphasising the links between various factors, and creating complex and sophisticated scenarios so that Governments and institutions can plan their strategies could be one way to forge the future and couple it with new terminology that provides the right answers to the future needs of contemporary society. With this in mind, futurology might be a fascinating discipline and successfully contribute to how we think, live, and plan. A tip for any *future futurist*? Read, read, and read. Even seemingly insignificant sidebars can actually reveal very profound changes.

Mariella Palazzolo

Jamais Cascio. A new awareness: imagining and creating all possible futures.

Telos: If we mention the word *futurology*, 99% of the Italian public would understand that we are talking about astrology, completely unaware of the new scientific and philosophical dimension of the word. Could you please give us a flavour on the methodologies and tools of this new interdisciplinary science?

Jamais Cascio: Futurologists seek to illuminate the key forces and issues that will shape the coming years. We don't make predictions - we know that this is impossible - but we do look for surprising implications of present-day trends. The goal of futurology is to help people and organisations make better, wiser decisions about tomorrow. One important tool for this is *scenario planning*, by which we examine various potential outcomes of important issues, and create multiple divergent stories about what might happen as a result of these outcomes colliding. These *possible futures* then serve as a way of testing present-day choices and strategies: key decisions can be examined in the context of each of the multiple scenarios, looking for weaknesses and unexpected opportunities. Doing this well requires constant research into emerging technologies, and into political, environmental, economic, and social trends. I spend most of my day reading. In practice, the work of a futurologist is similar to that of a historian or social scientist, only looking forward rather than looking back.

As old time readers of Bauman, we have shared his views on the liquid society. Therefore predictability not to mention certainty on choices appear to be quite a mission impossible. Could you please share with us an experience that might cast light on this issue?

As I said, prediction is impossible, as well as certainty about the future, yet we take decisions today that will unfold in the uncertain tomorrow. But even if certainty is impossible, informed anticipation is not. Good planners will be able to hold different potential outcomes in their heads, watching for early indications of which results seems most likely. One company I've worked with watches for early indications of how its customers view material goods, and saw signs that



Futurology offers three fundamental perspectives to organisations: it helps make decisions; it raises awareness of potential emerging threats and opportunities so that an organisation can make ahead-of-time internal changes; and it presents a credible vision of what might be possible if an organisation is willing to act.

sustainability and health issues were slowly becoming linked in the public mind. They looked at scenarios where this would have an impact: cultural change, new Government regulations, or new market competition, and decided that it would develop a strategy intended to do well in all three of these scenarios. This company is now working to set industry-wide standards, preempting any possible Government regulation, using that effort as part of its *branding*, and also proving to be far ahead of its rivals.

How can this new science be integrated or serve organisations, in the broadest sense of the term, in their policy choices?

Integration of *foresight thinking* is much more about changing culture than changing practices. The organisation needs to understand that focusing on immediate returns can often hurt long-term outcomes. The apparent stability of its strategic environment masks the constant evolution of the elements of that environment: suppliers, rivals, resources. Changes will accumulate until either a *tipping point* is reached, or multiple changes start to affect each other leading to massive disruptions of the strategic environment. Most organisations focus on the stable environment, looking for ways to maximise efficiency or power rather than creating a strategic environment. This can work well when conditions are calm: an efficiency-driven organisation can reap great profits. But an institution that focuses on the stable present will often fail completely when conditions change. This will not happen to an organisation which tries to follow the underlying evolutions, in order to anticipate when a tipping point might happen, and act to take advantage of it.

More and more competitiveness. This appears to be a certainty for the future. May futurology support the enlightened and innovative companies to emerge? And how?

There will always be a tension between focusing on the demands of the present and building capacity to meet the demands of tomorrow. Futurologists rarely produce immediately-profitable results; our work is all about allowing an institution's ability to evolve and anticipate changes. Long-term competitiveness is our task, and today it is becoming increasingly important. Futurology offers three fundamental perspectives for a forward-looking organisation: it helps to test decisions, it raises awareness of possible emerging threats and opportunities, so that an organisation can make internal changes ahead-of-time to avoid or take advantage and it can present a plausible vision of what might be possible if an organization wants to act.

All three of these perspectives can be of enormous value.

Is there a project, among yours, that you cherish and would like to share with us?

In 2008, the organisation I work with most often, the *Institute for the Future*, in California, undertook a project that brought together many of the most important themes. *Superstruct* was a six-week collaborative futures game, run over the Internet, with the participation of nearly 7,000 people from around the world. Along with my colleagues, we created a set of forecasts on big issues, from food to energy to conflict with a 10 year perspective (2019). We gave the participants a set of tools to create their own personal vision of what the world would look like. Players worked together to construct new organisations and institutions that they imagined would be necessary to survive and thrive in the world they'd envisioned. *Superstruct* was a perfect illustration of the third perspective I just mentioned, so that the WHO decided to consider and analyse the different proposals that came out from the project.

Foresight thinking gives you a chance to sense the wall before you hit and, hopefully, change direction.