

Futurology or eschatology

A look at the decline of modern culture and the reasons for hope

by Egbert Schuurman

Our societies today are characterized by the many changes that have taken place since the Second World War. Moreover, they still undergo a process of daily change. They are marked by many new and unprecedented phenomena. We find ourselves in a dynamic situation, which often seems to imply a threatening future.

Futurologists in particular are concerned about the things to come. Many think that the future which now appears to be overwhelming us will be a good future only if we gain control over it, and they think this might be accomplished with the aid of science. They draw their inspiration mainly from modern technology and its scientific method. If, moreover, the scientific method of control is applied also to areas outside technology, such as economics and politics, then there will be progress in these areas too, they believe, as well as in modern technology.

To them technology is the engine of cultural progress, and increasing scientific knowledge is that engine's fuel. They have set their hopes especially on computer development, which is the area of practical technology most closely related to systems theory and cybernetics. The computer is a powerful instrument for the investigation, direction and control of the future. Current problems and dangers - even if they are inherent to technology - will be capable of being solved and overcome by means of the newest technological and scientific possibilities.

Modern planners - the futurologists of order -- especially are governed by this kind of evolutionary and technicistic thinking. They advocate the imperialism of technology and its scientific method.

Method of evolutionary futurology

This is evident from their procedure. The first stage of their procedure involves researching the past and the present. Possible lines of development, which are evaluated as being more or less probable, are extended from the past via the present

to the future. The next stage of the procedure or method leads to planning the future. Various subplans are combined into one big, overall plan. Such a plan may be simulated by means of a computer to find out whether present problems may be solved and imminent catastrophes prevented.

The third phase is concerned with making a choice from various alternative plans. The choice can be taken by the experts but also - and in the future this will be more the case by 'the people, given wider use of the possibilities of modern means of communication. In both cases, however, the method of constructing the plans is the same, for in the fourth stage it is the experts as scientists and technologists who will realize the future-plans.

Because the method of planning is a scientific one, the plans are deterministic in nature. That means that in the process of realization they will entail an element of compulsion. In other words, they will prescribe how people are to act. That means that they will deny man's freedom and responsibility in practice. The view of man implied in the plans is that of man as a thing, as an object capable of being controlled by means of the technological-scientific method. This kind of control of the future will culminate in a technocracy in which the elite of scientific experts, employed by the established cultural powers, will consider themselves capable of manipulating and controlling the future. It is important to note that for the most part the goals remain hidden and obscure.

In short, the consistent tendency of the evolutionary futurologists is to create an increasingly technological future in which man will become the prisoner of growing, self-aggrandizing powers, powers which will finally unite and become concentrated into an ultimate world-power. In such a technocratic society everyone and everything will be increasingly levelled down into a mere unit of the one gigantic, all-embracing totalitarian system. This kind of collectivism, which swallows everyone and everything, will culminate in a technological worldstate.

Opposition from revolutionaries

Among the opponents of a fixed technocratic future are existentialists, representatives of the counterculture, and the neo-marxistic revolutionary futurologists. The last group deserves our special attention, because they strive to

gain cultural influence. Besides, it is the revolutionary futurologists in particular who are opposed to a stifled and rigidly predetermined future controlled by the technocratic elite as evolutionary futurologists.

The revolutionaries are aware that in a technocratic future only the interests and the lives of the elite will be ultimately safeguarded. They think that all present injustice, suffering, evil and oppression, instead of being eliminated, will be intensified. They also think that the *ethical impossibility* of, for instance, a nuclear war, increasing environmental destruction, exhaustion of raw materials and energy will become a *logical possibility* within the ideological framework of the technocrats.

The technocrats do take measures against the threats, it is true, but ultimately they thereby only defer the problems - there will be an even stronger confrontation later on. According to the revolutionary futurologists this is because the evolutionary or technocratic futurologists allow history to be absorbed and dominated by scientific and technological progress, which causes a quantitative reinforcement of the established political and economic cultural powers including all their evils.

It is clear that instead of a cultural evolution they advocate a cultural revolution. To them revolution, marked by protest, conflict, struggle and action, is the locomotive of history. Revolution is to be fostered by utopian fantasy which, curiously enough, employs science again in order to bring about revolution. Revolutionary futurologists, with their neo-marxist background, realize that history and its future will be frustrated if the so-called technological-scientific development comes to predominate. They realize that man will become a prisoner and that his labor will be increasingly reduced to merely productive labor, the burdens of which are to be compensated for by consumption. For this reason, revolutionary futurologists are diametrically opposed to planning-ideologists. They emphasize historical discontinuity: the element of surprise, of novelty, which they perceive to be a liberating possibility of averting the imminent catastrophe and bringing redemption. The present political and economical powers are to be broken down in order to create room for the imagination, for the fantasy, so that utopia can be realized.

Method of revolutionary futurology

It is understandable that the method of the revolutionary futurologists is the opposite of the method of the technocrats. The revolutionaries aim at a radical negation of the past and the present. They oppose the establishment, which they provoke into a conflict culminating in a revolution. For not until there is a revolution, or so they think, will new perspectives for the future be opened and the kingdom of liberty possibly be able to gain ground. "Possibly," for to them the matter remains uncertain. They are not particularly optimistic about the future. The development in marxist countries especially has taught neo-marxist revolutionaries that the revolution is not scientifically predictable and that it does not necessarily establish freedom.

Whoever may think that it does, is not fully aware of the fact that the revolution may derail and result in an extensive technocratic dictatorship instead of in the intended goal. Consequently, they are much more radical in their idea of evolution than orthodox marxists are. The latter did and still do think that a single revolution will initiate the ideal state. In this respect they have been greatly mistaken. The revolution, therefore, according to modern revolutionary futurologists, should not be singular but permanent. Only if society is permanently in revolution can the threats of scientific and technological progress averted and turned into progress for freedom and peace.

Science and technology are not intended to be employed by the establishment, for in that case they foster oppression, exploitation and imminent catastrophes. Rather, science and technology are intended to serve revolutionary creativity and creative revolution to the end that man may be truly himself and realize himself. The way of permanent revolution is the way of redemption. Karl Marx blocked that road. That was his great mistake. For at the end of Marx's revolution, new oppressive powers arise under the leadership of an elite, with the freedom obtained turning once more into slavery. Only if revolutionary destruction is permanent will freedom, in the sense of creativity in chaos, stand a chance.

I have already suggested that contemporary revolutionaries are all but optimistic. For the establishment will do anything to curb evolutionary forces. Besides, the common people do not recognize the need for a revolution anyway, let alone a

permanent revolution. They sleep the sleep of the innocent. It is for this reason that the revolutionaries have to push themselves forward as champions, and this, curiously enough, is how they become a revolutionary elite - the very thing (an elite in whatever form) that they did and still do oppose.

The common origin of both futurologies

While the evolutionary and revolutionary futurologists are in certain respects almost antithetically opposed, they are at bottom in fundamental agreement. In order to clarify this matter, we have to turn to the spiritual history of the western world. Both categories of thinkers concur in starting from one and the same philosophy of man; they start from self-sufficient, free man, who is autonomous man without the living God. This man claims to be lord and master of himself, of the world around him, and also of the future.

The firmness, security and confidence of the evolutionary thinkers is based on science. Their freedom is bound up with their absolutized reason, which leads them to absolutize the results of science as well. The sciences in particular are to them allimportant. Their worldview becomes the scientific worldview. Everything fits into the chain of cause and effect. Even free, autonomous man himself fits into this predetermined chain. And that is the end of his freedom. But then man's freedom offers resistance; it rebels against this determination.

As man gets more and more entangled in the web of technological-scientific culture, but yet refuses to be defeated, he makes greater efforts to safeguard his own freedom by protesting against the technocratic futurological approach to both thought and culture. In the revolution he seeks to throw off the heavy burdens of the scientific powers and to break the galling bonds of gigantic, modern technology.

The conflict between evolutionary and revolutionary futurologists, however, is fundamentally a conflict between humanists who are basically agreed, namely on the point of accepting man without God. They are both governed by a closed worldview. They recognize neither the given meaning of reality as created and redeemed reality, nor any God-given commandments and norms which people ought to obey, for they share man's pretension that he is the measure of everything.

At the same time this basic agreement causes the emergence of a culture which is western culture - resembling a house that is divided against itself.

The task of the Christian

Before we go on to contemplate the possible outcome of this tension in our culture in the light of God's Revelation, we have to make a few preliminary remarks about the task of Christians who like to work in the line of the Reformation.

First of all, we have to acknowledge that God has created man in his image and that Jesus Christ has restored that image. Secondly, the meaning of history is not a paradise on earth, but the Kingdom of God as the fulfilment and re-creation of all things. Thirdly, that means that our struggle for the future must focus on rejecting any claim of our being able to bring about our own redemption or realize our own future with the aid of science and technology. Meanwhile, our attention is commanded by the question whether or not we, too, as Christians, do not have a mandate to be concerned with the future in a scientific way. We can only answer this question positively. Our society has become so complex and so dynamic that we cannot possibly make future-moulding decisions without scientific analysis and scientific knowledge. However, this scientific knowledge should not be prescriptive; that is, it should not have the same function that norms do for human acting. Scientific knowledge should stimulate both individual and group responsibility instead of undermining it. In other words, science has a service function to accomplish: God's law is to be obeyed and man's divine calling fulfilled.

It is not science and technology that are to be blamed for the wrong developments in our societies. Man himself is the origin of our cultural tension, its attendant problems, and the cultural crisis.

The futility of disobedience

Western man's spirit suffers from the fact that through divine Revelation he has become acquainted with the ideas of perfection and completion. When he no longer accepts them from the hands of a loving God, he must be presumptuous and produce perfection and completion by himself. Through the christian religion western man has become acquainted with the idea of freedom and with God's

promises. When man does not use this freedom and does whatever he likes with what has been allotted him, then he wants to realize God's promises of a new earth by himself. When man dissociates his freedom, his responsibility and his calling from the obedience to Jesus Christ and his commandments, then he does not slide back into the old paganism, but becomes the secularized, postchristian, neo-pagan man, the man without religious confidence in God. He goes his own way in the expectation of finding the way to life, but God gives him over to his own way as a way of death.

In this light it is to be understood that where history is basically closed off and a history controlled by man is advocated, the increase of modern technology and the employment of its possibilities is unprecedented. Man will do what he can - that is the principle of Babel-culture. In possession of the earth and all its treasures. modern secularized man is a tyrannical dictator who exhausts both the earth and himself. His cultural development becomes more and more demonic.

Especially when the resistance of many Christians declines or when they surrender to secularization and come to a positive appreciation of it - especially then does the disrupted process become stronger and stronger. For a long time this disruption was hidden by faith in material progress. Now, in our time, this objective and its inherent norms are being questioned increasingly. The paradise on earth seems to be a myth; the reverse becomes reality.

Instead of optimism towards the future, a profound pessimism is rampant. The answers to this kind of pessimism are not uniform. The house of the closed worldview is divided against itself.

A merely despotic and therefore normless technocratic dictatorship, directed by man only, is poised in reaction against an equally normless revolutionary freedom, in which any success obtained exists only to be annihilated again anyway. The obverse side of the nihilism of the mechanical order of the technocrats is the nihilism of the revolutionary chaos. The technocrats concentrate all power in a technically streamlined society in order to prevent imminent catastrophes. Equally tragically, the revolutionaries are heading for cultural suicide and mere anarchy.

Hope in spite of decline

This nihilistic tension in western culture, if man should not be radically converted to God and his service, will most likely expand and intensify and lead us on down the road of cultural decay. A culture without God carries the seal of death. It is a culture of disintegration and of collapse. The high-pitched expectations of secularized man culminate in meaninglessness, in a prospect without hope. Yet, a culture turning its back upon God is not abandoned by Him. He makes his power felt in judgments and catastrophes.

Our culture under the guidance of humanistic futurology comes to a dead end. It is pervaded with death, with the consequence that death as a judgment sent from God is a mark of that culture. Yet this tragic culture situation is a sign of the expectation of resurrection professed in christian eschatology; it is a sign of the return of Jesus Christ to establish the Kingdom of God. Christian eschatology is opposed to humanistic futurology; it cuts at the same time across the dilemma of pessimism and optimism, for in the divine Revelation of the Word it is said that God in Jesus Christ is the Lord of world history, that He is in control of it. He involves both believers and unbelievers as the citizens and non-citizens of the Kingdom of God on the way of that Kingdom, which has come and is coming. In this belief, in this hope and expectation, the Christian is summoned to seek the Kingdom, also in his scientific work and his technological occupations.

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