

# Forecasting and Planning in an Incoherent Context

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What follows concerning the predicament of forecasts and planning is subject to the same criticisms and constraints I apply to them and their context. My observations are also forecasts: stories based on arbitrary and fragmentary images of social “reality” and my words share the same dubious status as words *per se* that I shall describe later. But *all* of us are sinking in this ontological and epistemological swamp: To paraphrase the *Tao Te Ching*, those who know can not say; those who say do not know. So be it.

## Introduction

incoherent: lack of coherence; lacking cohesion; not sticking together, not logically integrated, consistent, and intelligible; disjointed; rambling; incongruous. *Webster's New World Dictionary, College Edition*

Certainly our society and plausibly our civilization can be characterized as being increasingly incoherent. Its aspirations and activities do not integrate with one another, do not cohere conceptually, operationally, linguistically, or psychodynamically. The contributing circumstances described here will continue to exacerbate the situation—themselves being disjointed, rambling, *vis-a-vis* each other, even though they share some characteristics that also contribute to the dislocations.

In this light consider the chief function of forecasts and planning: to enhance focus, direction,—coherence—for whatever ends. To accomplish this function requires a material and symbolic context that can be rendered coherent. But there is no prospect of removing the incoherences for the foreseeable future, given the nature of the sources and their reinforcement by the circumstances they engender. One cannot lead unless circumstances produce those who wish to be led; so, too, with the potential usefulness of forecasts and planning. Nevertheless, the unfastened circumstances that constitute our incoherent situation will, singly and in combination, result in more need and requests for these services. But because of the incoherences, the sought-after products and processes are unlikely to be either fruitful or enduring. The pressures for short-term responses to critical issues will also increase and, given the incoherences, dominate social action. Indeed, the presence of forecasts and planning efforts will further complicate the context, if they have much effect at all.

In order to “say” about these incoherences, I conjure three categories: epistemological, social, and psychodynamic. In order that forecasts and planning have the potential for enhancing coherence, it is necessary that these categories or contexts be compatible;

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that each can depend on the other for illumination, confirmation, and collaboration, that they are “talking about” recognizably related matters. Alternatively, it must be possible to ignore or repress the incompatibilities between them. I shall argue that neither requirement can be met: these contexts are explicitly and mutually incoherent, and in the case of the social category, internally fragmented as well.

### **Epistemological Incoherence**

I have explored this matter in more detail elsewhere with regard to futures studies and forecasting [1, 2] and with regard to planning [3]; here I will summarize. A society’s epistemology derives from and sustains its mythology, its social construction of reality [4]. Its mythology defines how the “world” works, and why it is as it is, and to what ends. The mythology that has shaped Western culture asserts that the world is controllable (including the human component) because it operates according to lawful processes, expressed as relations between cause and effect. While the prevailing myth has its detractors and would-be challengers, it still dominates; so much of what we are and do is embedded in its way of making sense of life. And it has worked very well for a portion of humankind, white males especially. In particular, we still presume, even if tacitly, a determinable, undergirding lawfulness of cause and effect in the human realm. This presumption is strong enough, at least in the minds of those who look to forecasts and attempt longer ranging planning, to shape their actions and expectations. But if human activity is describable as sequences of causes and effects in the way other processes seem to be, we are a very long way from any theory of social or individual change under turbulent conditions, as is demonstrated by our inability to forecast birth rates and by the disarray in economic theory [5, 6]<sup>1</sup>. I subscribe to Polanyi’s argument that creative human activities have an emergent quality: the “whole” is unpredictably “greater” than the sum of the parts [7]. This seems obvious in the conduct of art, science and politics and in interpersonal relations. One cannot predict a new theory or art form or new political and personal developments from what has gone before. Nor can one predict the consequences of predictions about the consequences [8]. After the new state of affairs has emerged, interpretations arise that purport to relate causes and effects so as to connect the new condition to what preceded it. But such interpretations do not arise before the new state of affairs emerges [9]. But even if it should prove possible to represent some aspects of aggregate human behavior through the new chaos theory, our ability to predict or control that behavior will be slight because of the very circumstances that characterize chaotic processes. Moreover, humans experiencing chaotic processes through the peephole of their consciousness and the depths of their unconsciousness cannot act toward those chaotic circumstances as they would if they were merely observing them from outside. They/we live *in* them and are not about to wait out the painful and problematic transformations.

The epistemological crises run deeper still. The ideas and evidence from the deconstructionists in literary theory [10], the constructionists in social psychology [11], and the cognitive linguists [12] argue that any edifice of ideas constructed and expressed in words is ungrounded in “objective reality.” It is grounded only in communal agreement on other categories and words; indeed the very category of “objective reality” is but a

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<sup>1</sup>For example, much of our description and theory about human behavior, and thereby our forecasts and planning and policy, depend upon, and are justified by, findings from interview surveys. Yet, it has been shown recently that neither open-ended interviews (where the respondents rank their responses to categories that they differentiate) nor closed-ended interviews (where the respondent ranks categories specified by the interviewer) produce data that can be used to infer “either absolute levels or even relative orderings of public choices” (i.e., priorities, preferences, concerns, etc.) with regard to the categories queried about [30].

verbal construct, a metaphor generated from other metaphors and leading only to other metaphors [13]. It seems that, no matter how we try to do otherwise, when we write or talk, we are writing or talking about words which, in turn, are anchored only in other words rather than in “objective reality.” Not only is the map not the territory, but “map” and “territory” are not “real” either.

Knowledge can now be seen as something that the organism builds up in the attempt to order the as such amorphous flow of experience by establishing repeatable experiences and relatively stable relations between them. The possibilities of constructing such an order are determined and perpetually constrained by the preceding steps in the construction. This means that the “real” world manifests itself exclusively there where our constructions break down. But since we can describe and explain these breakdowns only in the very concepts we have used to build the failing structures, this process can never yield a picture of a world which we could hold responsible for their failure [14].

What is important here is not only these ideas per se but also that recognition of them and appreciation of their enormous implications for the legitimacy of the processes of governance will spread to a widening audience of thinkers, the very people who brood about the utility and validity and hence the ethics of forecasting and planning [15]. If sophisticated thinking is to continue to have a place in social policy formulation, strategic planning and evaluation, then sooner or later these ideas are going to begin to challenge the whole process and purpose of these activities. The clash between traditional thinking about social reality and the meaning of words and the new thinking about these matters will further compound the incoherences. (Here, I acknowledge again that my words are not exempt. Nor are those of any other “sayer.” Such is the nature of the incoherences confronting us: if we take seriously the words of those who are saying about the nature of saying, the more we say, the more questionable becomes what we say. If I haven’t misinterpreted him, Churchman [32] anticipated this years ago when he argued that it was reason that was the great challenge to reason.)

### **Some Sources of Social Incoherence**

The story of the eroding but still dominant myth that undergirds our social construction of reality and its associated epistemological footlessness can be told as a conjuration of growing social discontinuities. These do not point in any one direction; they contradict, conflict with and slew past each other, and they amplify each other. They call for, encourage, obstruct, and undermine the feasibility of forecasting and planning.

Ozone depletion, greenhouse effects, terrorism, fresh water shortages, mal-education, substance abuse, AIDS, joint-regulation of urban transportation and urban growth, crime, the multiple consequences of diverging age distributions, and an absence of third world employment opportunities are some examples of a multiplying collection of circumstances, all of which require enormous expenditures of thought, effort, and money to even begin to ameliorate. What is clear is that, within our prevailing perspective, all entail vastly expanded material and operational infrastructures for coordination, regulation, collaboration and social invention. The longer remedial actions are delayed, the more costly the solutions, if indeed there are such, the farther off in the future the rewards for current sacrifices, and the more interconnected the outcomes. Since the gains and losses deriving therefrom have chiefly to do with the creation, distribution and protection of public goods, the political risks will be very great especially since the outcome of any major effort will be problematic, subject to unknown systemic and chaotic processes and idiosyncratic events.

Yet, we lack concepts of governance, political incentives and a system of values for undertaking much more than a bits-and-pieces approach [16, 17].

"The human mind," Jay Forrester says, "is unable to understand human social systems." This is true. Our innate conceptions were selected to cope with the modest causal environment of our animal ancestors. But they are inadequate for dealing with the responsibilities our current technocracy presumes in this world. Our one-dimensional causal thinking is unqualified to find a solution. Society therefore constructs social truths and causes that alternatively cancel each other out, and the decision is still in the hands of that blind power which, let us admit it, fills us all with fear [18]

Not only do we lack concepts of governance appropriate for guiding an increasingly interconnected world, but more to the point, we lack concepts appropriate for governance during the period of incoherence, with its attendant turbulence and disruption, during the transition from now to whatever and whenever more coherent forms might emerge. Nevertheless, this turbulent period is precisely when, in the disjointed and ad hoc ways characteristic of this society, various organizations will turn to help from forecasts and planning (or to that form of forecasting and planning called "crisis management") in the hope that somehow, with such help, they will regain control of what they misperceive as *their* environment of rights and opportunities. Unraveling these efforts, of course, will be the familiar political pressures that result in too many incoherent attempts at quick fixes.

Running counter to the requirements for coordination and collaboration will continue to be the demands at all levels—from the person to the nation-state—for autonomy, sovereignty, decentralization, competitive edge, rights, liberation, and freedom-from and freedom-to. These aspirations and demands are, of course, encouraged and legitimated by belief in, or recourse to, those attributes of the still dominant Western myth that separate cause and effect, subject and object, we and they, and which make the world out to be either/or rather than both/and when it comes to values and beliefs. As participants in this social construction of reality, these demands are reinforced and endorsed by the media's adversarial approach to news, as well as by the norms of the judicial/legal system.

No doubt proponents of many causes or groups will seek help via forecasts and planning to further their own ends. But if the creators of such services have the intelligence and integrity to recognize the limitations as well as the value of such separatist intentions in an increasingly interdependent world, the client is not likely to be very pleased with the confrontations to concept and purpose such services should provide.

An increasingly interconnected world—and whether or not this is a useful way to perceive it, we are stuck with that perception, given our epistemology and language structure—will require resetting system and subsystem boundaries to whatever is appropriate for the welfare, and the coherence, of the emerging interdependencies. But resetting boundaries means shifts in the allocation of power and status, shifts sure to be resisted and challenged, adding to the turmoil and the incoherence.

Underlying these difficulties is the deeper incoherence—what values should determine the appropriate location of system boundaries? Currently there is no coherent set of shared values within the Western world, much less worldwide. In particular there is no operating system of shared values that presumes a both/and, interactive, interdependent human condition. Instead, survival of the fittest contends with being thy sibling's keeper. As MacIntyre [19] has demonstrated, all we possess are remnants of previously demolished value systems. Nothing holds these remnants together so we are left with personal preferences applied to inconsistent collections of irreconcilable bits and pieces from the past. While ecological and psychodynamic understanding [20, 21] point in constructive directions, there is nothing remotely available on which to base a value system that must adjudicate among and reconcile a human environment that is partly chaotic, partly sys-

temic, and partly punctuated in its processes and purposes and mostly unconscious in its motivations and reactions [22].

This is no mere moralist's headache. It is the values held by a person, organization and society that determine what information is important, what interpretations are useful, and what actions acceptable. Indeed, values determine what defines a "problem" or "opportunity" or "challenge" and the ways of responding to them. They are a fundamental way in which the social construction of reality is operationalized and reinforced. Even when not explicit or acknowledged, they select perspectives and proposals, and as Vickers showed [23], the facts bolstering both. (I trust it is evident that legal decisions or legislation do not obviate the question of what values should prevail. Abiding by judicial decisions or specific laws are themselves value-based choices often in contention. And precedent and legal constructions of reality are having a demonstrably difficult time authoritatively dealing with the issues arising out of the incoherences described here.)

Consider, too, that more complexity plus more (inevitably) incomplete information about the human condition encourages selecting from these multiple, confusing and uncertain signals those most compatible with one's preferred ways of perceiving and evaluating the world. The number of blind persons and the number of elephants subject to interpretation increase; grounds for choice and action multiply, legitimated by whatever values from our splintered collection that are forwarded as "reasonable" and "rational." Conventional technical/logical rationality or, as Linstone [24] labels it, the "technical perspective" is only one value priority. Alternative rationalities also claiming priority prevail as well, such as protecting organizational turf, political expediency, employment protection, or power acquisition. Other examples include the familiar safety of habit, or religious belief, or ideological commitment, or culturally given norms of "acceptability." All such value priorities shift and cut across organizations and individuals and, most assuredly, those persons who play leadership roles.

Living with the incoherences constructively and humanely and attempting to transcend them will require extraordinarily mature leaders/guides and followers/citizens. However, many parents at all socioeconomic levels—it is not only a matter of economic deprivation—contribute to the incoherence. They make poor or negative contributions to the shaping of a next generation able to grow into emotionally mature, cognitively competent, and socially responsible adults, essential for maintaining a complex and humane world [25]. Parents do poorly because they lack the requisite values, attitudes and skills. Instead they pass on to the next generation the consequences of their own neuroses and counter-productive values and life styles.

For the most part, schools also make their contribution to incoherence. They do not educate for a citizenry competent to live with and seek ways through these incoherences. Those who act to affect the conduct of society, either through the ballot or in the streets, are mostly unable and unwilling to think with the subtlety, skill, and persistence required for critical rather than ritual participation in the conduct of governance that seeks to overcome the conditions described here [26]. At least what is required is the ability to read, write, and discourse easily and naturally, in terms of dialectical processes, systems behavior, both/and as well as either/or logics, and circular rather than linear cause-effect relationships. What is also required is at least an understanding and feeling for the basics of psychodynamics as they affect one's own behavior and that of others in the public arena. But, of course, no such educational goals or child-raising norms exist in society at large, if for no other reason than the traditional myths that guide Western societies (and most others) do not require such competencies of their members. They really have not been necessary until recent times.

In this light, in the years ahead, the conduct of governance will be increasingly bedeviled at all levels by a growing gap between what is needed and the available emotional and cognitive capabilities of leaders and led.<sup>2</sup> (That one of the functions of groups, organizations, staffs, etc. is to counteract or compensate for individual incompetencies should be of little comfort in these days of revelations of persisting misuse of personal power and the vulnerability of multi-person governance groups to the same incompetencies. After all, most of their members are the products of the traditional child-rearing and educational circumstances described here.)

### Some Sources of Psychodynamic Incoherence

Those who live within a social construction of reality (a myth that defines the world as controllable and therefore defines the competent person as one who can control causes to produce specific effects) will go to great lengths to avoid recognizing how profoundly unconscious biological and psychological forces and cultural definitions of reality implacably shape how we think, feel and act [27]. That we are driven by unconscious, and thus uncontrolled needs, aspirations, terrors and furies has been demonstrated in many formal studies and richly explored in the West by such luminous minds as Freud, Nietzsche and Jung. (Here I am referring to unconscious, imperious, often obsessive needs such as those for power, affection, recognition, order or disorder, spiritual union, and needs to dominate or submit, to destroy or to create, to nurture or to be nurtured.) How these are expressed through individual behavior varies, of course, from socially constructive and interpersonally sensitive to pathologically evil. In part, this depends on what a given culture permits by way of “acting out” (e.g., Nero) and with what constraints or rewards the organizations within the culture surround their members (e.g., those who drive themselves to “burn out”). Today, these norms of acceptability and constraint are all in flux, a major contributor to incoherence at all levels.

Elsewhere [28] I have elaborated on the pernicious consequences of the unconscious processes of denial and projection, when these are the means by which persons who see themselves as highly competent unconsciously protect their deeply held image of themselves when faced with the enormous ambiguities, uncertainties and complexities of this world. Ideas, events or experiences that undermine that image undermine a person’s very existence; it is a deep threat to one’s very being. A typical way psychodynamic processes operate to cope with such a threat is by denying its existence. Denial may be accomplished by trivializing the threat so its enormity is not accepted consciously, so that the threat is not consciously noticed or acknowledged. The threat is repressed and transferred to the unconscious where it persists in disguised forms, e.g., displaced (i.e., projected) onto other less threatening “objects” such as the enemy, or taxes, or liberals or conservatives,

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<sup>2</sup>This is not to say that some conventional indicators of “success” will not continue to have their ups and downs. GNP will grow, technology will create new products, more people will get university degrees, gourmet food and quality television will continue to entice their consumers, and specialized markets for egregious consumptions proliferate. But the fundamental incoherences will persist and grow under and between these categories of success.

New York City is an appropriate symptom of the accumulating disjointedness. Consider Trump Tower and homeless people, mindless consumption of glitter and hunger, a grossly deteriorating infrastructure and ever more high-rise construction, magnificent museums and problematic garbage disposal, exclusive private schools and more than 40% truancy from public high schools, endemic crime and resounding pronouncements on ethics in the *New York Times*, etc. Consider, too, that there is no political will to do much about it. The predicaments collide, pile up and gridlock in ever more complex disarray—the ever mounting human and dollar costs required to begin to confront them pushed out of mind, out of action, and out of meaning [31].

or God's will, or the media. Thereby the person who denies is able to ignore schemes which require, in order to evaluate and act upon them, facing directly the denied threats. Moreover, by denying the overwhelming seriousness of the issues, the person who denies can reject the proposal on the grounds that it is politically infeasible or someone else's problem. Business as usual, then, is sometimes maintained by the psychodynamic processes of denial or projection.

In this way, when these processes are operative—and by no means are they always—responses in a leader or citizen mismatch the social issues or the epistemological dilemma. The response is disjointed and inappropriate in relation to the issue, and it lacks coherence across issues. Of course, this incoherence can be amplified when denial or projection make use of the already ill-fitting epistemology to justify a reaction that arises from repressed needs, fears or hopes. (If I were to give examples, such as President Reagan's obsession with SDI, or the fact that forecasts often fail to influence decision makers, the reader could claim, and might well be right, that my choice of examples and my implied criticism reflect my unconscious needs to make sense of the world in ways that result in my seeing mismatches where there are none. This is precisely the kind of incoherency we are now subject to in light of our knowledge about the stories we tell about the stories we tell!)

The main point is that forecasts or planning efforts that presume that responses to them will be, or can be, exclusively conscious and "rational" will always be slewed by their intended audience. They mismatch; there is a disconnect. A major consideration is left out of the dialogue: the meaning of the effort is different from what is said, or what is said about what is done, and the forecast or plan lacks congruence with the unconscious world of the recipients.

In summary, we face unavoidable, unprecedented demands for integration, coordination and regulation of society, and unavoidable demands for and expectations of security and fulfillment through autonomy at all levels of society. But the social complexity that elicits these demands is not comprehensible or containable through the conventional application of the dominant mythology or its epistemology that constructs our social reality. Also inadequate are our disjointed legitimating values that predate a world of interlocked processes. Nor is there leadership and citizenship that is aware of, and skilled in, coping with the powerful unconsciously driven responses elicited by the threats to self-images of competence that these demands convey. Consequently, we lack the norms and processes for governance appropriate for meeting either of these demands, much less for synthesizing them. Nor is there available an appropriate mythology which would quickly and easily be widely subscribed to. This in part because our modes of child-raising and education reinforce the dominant myth and are reinforced by it. Add to all this that our chief mode of influencing (aside from coercion) is through language and language is now understood as ungroundable in "objective reality."

Among the fragmented responses these accumulating discontinuities will elicit are those that deny, or seek to deny, all this by recourse to forecasts and planning for the purpose of regaining control or at least providing a coherent context as prelude to regaining control. But these aspirations are very likely to be frustrated in the large even when there are temporary, local successes. Their destiny will much more often be attenuation and dissolution in the cross currents and counterforces that are deaf to, uncomprehending of, or unable to discriminate among the cacophony of messages glutting their parochial perceptual and operational boundaries.

In this situation, is there a utilitarian role or an ethical role, beyond ritual roles and futile outcomes, for forecasting and planning?

### Forecasting and Planning in the Midst of Incoherency

Given mounting evidence of societal disarray and lack of success in significantly reducing incoherency, it occasionally may become more acceptable, even good politics, to concede this in public and make a pronouncement such as the following, "We really don't know where we are on this matter or what will work for sure. We must discover and rediscover what questions are useful to ask and what approaches we might experiment with. Therefore, we must become a learning organization (institution, etc.). Rather than deny or project our troubles on the wrong 'causes' or hide our uncertainties, we must use them vigorously as the means for designing error-detecting and error-correcting societal processes." This kind of pronouncement becomes possible because not all those whose self-image is threatened become subject to the psychodynamics of denial or projection. And not all who do succumb are threatened into that state by the same enormities.

Within this perspective, as I have developed it at length elsewhere [29], planning becomes the pedagogy for social learning. Forecasts are integral to this purpose, as an especially rich source of specifiable uncertainties. Among these uncertainties are assumptions about the dynamics of social change, the validity of data, and the consequences of ambiguities in the choice of categories for conceptualizing and of words for conveying the story told. In this perspective, both long range planning and crisis management are means for learning what can be planned and coped with in crises under what circumstances.

The learning curve here for planning-as-learning will be a very shallow slope with many valleys. It can hardly be otherwise given its dependence, at least to begin with, on myth, epistemology and language that will often detour the enterprise. Many traumatic events as well as powerfully salutary ones will intervene, disrupting the slope of the learning curve. It is from these events, in unpredictable ways, that new social constructions of reality will emerge as humans attempt to make sense of what has happened to them. There is no knowing what these new myth(s) might be, emerging, as they seem to, from the unconscious and finding their basic appeal there. What will require fresh interpretation will depend on what events disrupt the social reality constructed by the current myth. It is from such incoherent sources that a new coherence might arise.

Meantime, the perspective offered here—planning as the pedagogy for social learning—has the potential for helping planners, their clients, the recipients of the consequences of plans-in-action, and the creators of forecasts to be self-conscious enough and humble enough to recognize that all are explorers in a strange place that bears a dismaying resemblance to the Tower of Babel.

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