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Unconventional wisdom for the future

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Like a blank page, the future remains to be written. Any form of prediction rings hollow because the future is wide open. It is up to each of us to take charge of the future; in other words, to plan together for a desirable future. In the words of Louis Pasteur, 'determinism cannot withstand determination and chance favours only those who are well prepared.'

Nevertheless, the ringing in of the third millenium generated a flood of proclamations similar to the doomsday warnings of the year 1000. Thinking about the future has always been an opportunity to let loose and give free reign to dreams or nightmares. It usually boils down to enchanting fairytales or horrifying ghost stories about supposedly revolutionaiy, unprecedented technological advances.

1. The overestimation of technological change

Of course what is technologically possible is not necessarily profitable or socially desirable (beware potential 'Concorde airplanes' in cable networks). Witness the case of the home office or telecommuting. It is unlikely that working from your home will develop to the point where most office jobs disappear. Several factors fly in the face of this maximalist hypothesis. First, the actual layout of suburban housing (small lots, ill-adapted rooms, unstimulating environment) makes the average household an unrealistic setting for entire days of work and family living. Second, and perhaps more important, there is a very human need to communicate and enjoy social ties which cannot be created elsewhere. In fact, these ties are less and less satisfied elsewhere.

We also tend to overestimate the speed at which technological changes actually occur. Naively or egotistically, we tend to think that ours is an era of unprecedented change, after

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which nothing of similar importance will ever take place. Carried away by their enthusiasm, some commentators go so far as to say that it is the beginning of the end of the world, a perfect world or even the end of history! This bias is perfectly normal because each generation believes that it lives in exceptional times. In a sense, each generation is truly exceptional because it is the only one to live through those times!

However, we should stop trying to scare or impress ourselves by announcing that two-thirds of the products of tomorrow do not exist now or that tomorrow's skills are unknowable today! In many respects, the Europe of the year 2002 will resemble that of 1999. For example, children will continue sitting in classrooms with blackboards and chalk despite the portable computers in their schoolbags.

2. Internet: a computerized dumpster!

The high-tech mirage frequently floats to the foreground. First, there was the fifth generation of computers, and now the Internet. Like Bruno Lussato, we are tempted to see the Internet as a computerized dumpster or rubbish bin. Of course, a dumpster may contain hidden treasures—everything and anything—but that is no reason to spending time picking through garbage.

That said, a garbage pail is useful in the home, and e-mail represents fantastic progress. Indeed, some people boast that they spend hours everyday communicating with the rest of the world on the net. However, often these cyberhermits never even speak to their next-door neighbor. The massive popularity of surfing the web or navigating the net reveals tremendous solitude and the need for human contact. The main advantage of cybercafes is that they let the hackers and cyberhermits talk to one another and not only to a screen. Of course, many people achieve the same effect by taking their dog for a walk!

This is truly the great paradox of modern society: information technology makes everyone closer, connected to the entire world, but with no one nearby for a talk. As a result the wealthy are willing to pay a psychoanalyst simply to listen to them! In terms of human contact, telecommuting, or the home office, does not spell progress and will, therefore, remain marginal.

Tomorrow's generation will be just as active as today's. People will look to their work as a form of association or belonging. Their office may be a workplace but it is also a place for mutual recognition and social ties. Without social interaction, life loses its meaning and becomes a lonely place where cyberhermits stay online so long that they crave human contact.

Although we overestimate change, we underestimate inertia; in other words, that which does not change or changes very slowly. In reality, the world changes but the problems remain the same because they stem from human nature. Human nature appears to be the great invariable of history. The same drive for power or money, the same loves or hatreds drove the ancients as do the moderns. Politicians know that the proportion of traitors in their midst has not decreased since the time of Judas.

We have to study and know human nature in order to understand what is happening. We need a memory of the past to shed light upon the future. A line in Visconte's film *The Leopard* tells us that "everything has to change for everything to begin again." The world may change, but people maintain an eerie resemblance in their behavior. Placed in a comparable situation, they react in almost the same manner and, as a result, their behavior may be predicted.

3. The model of the Catholic Church

For further proof, we can always turn to one organizational model that has stood the test of time, the Catholic Church. They started with 12 and have kept going for 2000 years! No multinational can boast a track record like that!

It is worth noting that the Church's organization is actually quite modest. There are only three hierarchical levels: Pope, bishop and priest. We also see the strict application of the famous subsidiarity principle promoted by the European Commission in Brussels. There is broad-based activity ranging from orders that uphold a vow of silence to orders that walk among the poor of Calcutta. The Church has an international marketplace with some slumping segments like Europe and other expanding segments like Latin America. Nevertheless, the longevity of the Catholic Church may be explained by strong individual commitment to a collective project carried on by highly structured communities.

No matter what, the human factor lies at the heart of any difference. By looking for scapegoats in technology or globalization, we can not shirk our responsibilities. For many companies, territories or individuals experiencing difficulties, the problem stems from internal weaknesses or insufficiencies not from some external force.

The future of an individual or an organization depends largely on its internal strengths and weaknesses. Modern management has rediscovered the importance of ancient Greek philosophy, notably Socrates' advice: "Know thyself." Before asking where we want to go, what may happen and what we can do, we need to know who we are and know it well. As the 18th century French writer Vauven argues put it: "knowing our strengths increases them; knowing our weaknesses reduces them." The key to success or the cause of failure comes first and foremost from within.

In fact, there can be no technical or economic solution to problems of a different nature. Rather, like the Band-Aid approach, this type of problem-solving resembles a desperate parent giving candy to a child seeking affection. Tomorrow's issues are in fact related to social breakdowns or faultlines and the spiritual vacuum of a society in which economics does not give life meaning.

4. Growth and the search for meaning

In many respects, quantity has led to a decrease in quality. The example of human relations stands out. Although we have more means of communication, loneliness and alienation

plague the Western world. Growth that is richer in quality could also mean greater well-being overall. After all, who ever said that consuming more and more material goods would make anyone happier?

Growth is rather like drinking wine. Rather than drink more table wine, progress would be drinking the same amount, or even less wine, but of a finer vintage. A civic-minded enterprise, 'the good corporate citizen,' cannot be content with creating material wealth. The corporation must also contribute to people's personal development. There can be no 'excellence' in a corporation where there is no environment of excellence. Salaried workers need a quality environment, especially in terms of architecture, to be productive. They need a sense of satisfaction. In our urban world, people have to develop personally at work. Work, happiness and human growth are part of the same bigger picture.

People seek out social ties and some meaning or direction in their lives. The despair that many express today is real in that they suffer from loneliness. This solitude is especially painful for the unemployed who remain outside the social network that a job provides.

Tomorrow's big market is actually loneliness and meeting the need for human contact. In that case, hooking everyone up to the information highway is obviously a dead-end solution!

We need to reverse the usual order and start over with an individual trying to give his/her life meaning. I once overheard a father tell his son: "If you do not live the way you think, you will think the way you live." It is really up to us to decide whether we want Roman decadence in the form of bread and circuses (substitute TV for lions) or the Athens of citizens (substitute new technology for slaves).

The best of times or the worst of times lie before us. However, the dead should no longer rule the living and we should not transmit to future generations a negative heritage. We must always remember that we did not inherit the earth from our ancestors but rather borrowed it from our descendants. Historian Pierre Chaunu has conclusively shown how the population of the Roman Empire (Second Century AD summit to its Fall in the Fifth Century) fell by 50% from 60 to 30 million. The demographic decline thus preceded the economic and political decline.

AU economists recognize the link between growth and job creation. Those who study the levers needed to stimulate growth usually evoke a lack of either demand or innovation. Rare are those who make the connection between economic growth, job creation and demographics. Economists 'refuse to see' as Alfred Sauvy once said and thus do not try to confirm it.

Yet, postwar prosperity and the babyboom went hand in hand. Yes, economic growth in the United States may stem from innovation, but healthy demographics have certainly played a major part, too. In the past 20 years, the fertility rate in the USA has been two children per woman versus 1.5 children in Europe. The American population, swelled by major influxes of immigrants, continues to grow while the European population stagnates.

In 2025, the Europe of Fifteen will have as many inhabitants as in 1999 (380 million). It will be surpassed by the population of the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, whose numbers will have more than doubled. Among the developed countries, Russia, Former Soviet Bloc countries and Japan will suffer demographic decreases greater than those in Europe. Europe and Japan resemble orchards in which the trees have reached maturity after 40 years of bountiful harvests. Unfortunately, no one thought to replant.

The demographic implosion in Europe will be spectacular. In 1975, the French population included 1.7 million more youths under the *âge* of 20 than it does today. Over the past 20 years, the fertility rate in Northern Italy and Catalonia has plummeted to less than one child per woman (2.1 per woman would be needed to reproduce the generation)!

Yet, compelling correlations reveal that the industrialized countries which have created the most jobs and have reduced unemployment the most are also the countries in which the population has increased the most. How can anyone believe that everything will be all right after the year 2000 because of the decrease in Europe's active population? On the contrary, the démographie implosion and the combined granny-boom and baby bust will heighten social and economic tensions. Among the many examples that spring to mind: Who will finance old age benefits when the age pyramid flips like a toy top? How can we integrate future immigrants when there are fewer and fewer children actually born in the country in the schools?

Imagine what ecologists would say if the fertility rate of whales had dropped by half to end up at the very threshold for population maintenance. The hue and cry would deafen the media and international opinion would certainly be affected. Yet, this is exactly what is happening to the Catalans and Lombards whose cultural variety is worth conserving. Overall the human race is not threatened, but cultural diversity which contributes to the richness of our human heritage is indeed in danger.

Given the stakes, the principle of precaution, often used in ecological debates, should also be applied to demographics. The link between demography and economic growth should be treated in the same manner as other human activities like global warming. There should be research into the hypotheses of causality. In the meantime, conservation measures that favor the birthrate should be taken. Protecting our planetary heritage is admirable but we should not forget the heirs. However who is looking at the human capital, or the demographics, in this manner? Almost no one. It sounds politically incorrect in today's world to defend children and whales in the same breath.