

# Charming the Future

People love to predict the future. A special scientific discipline called futurology was even founded last century, meant to approach the task scientifically and thus to differ from fortune telling, religion, literature, and even philosophy. This science enjoyed rising popularity and success only as long as its forecasts escaped any verification. A small number of "tests" against reality were enough to discredit not only futurology's achievements but also the discipline itself. Here let's briefly look at few indicative examples of 20th-century thought about the future.

In 1949 the US expert Edward A. Ackerman announced that Japan could only recover the kind of standard of living it had enjoyed in 1930–34 if it obtained foreign financial assistance, and that remaining self-sufficient would doom the country to internal crisis and a living standard close to the subsistence level. Yet over the 30 years in Ackerman's forecast, Japan in fact rose to become the world's third, and later second, most powerful economy. Previously, on the eve of WWI, no one in Europe wanted or sought such a conflict, and later, once fighting broke out, it was widely predicted that the war would be brief and victorious.

We Poles have also conformed to this general track-record in past decades. In the wake of WWII, the Polish émigré community in London predicted that a third world conflict would soon break out, pitting the Allies against the USSR, and they saw this as the sole chance for the quick revival of an independent Poland. The London émigrés were sorely mistaken, and differed on this point from most Poles in Poland as well as from Jerzy Giedroyc's intellectual circle affiliated with the journal *Kultura*. These differing predictions prompted different reactions to the current situation and different choices of strategies, stretching far into the future. Grave mistakes were made later in recent Polish history, as well. Just as the permanence of the USSR was assumed on the international arena, so the permanence of the Communist order was being predicted in our country. In neither case did this mean calmness or stability – to the contrary, stability was constantly being upset, posing the risk of radical destabilization. And in neither case did such predictions stem from public satisfaction or widespread approval – to the contrary, people expected things to remain as they were, even though they themselves desired change. The prediction that Communist-era Poland would last indefinitely was particularly strong among those involved in government or the broader establishment, yet it

was also believed, less intensely, by a clear majority of the population. Here, too, the majority would prove mistaken. Why do such things happen? Why do people constantly want to predict the future, and why, as a general rule, do they make such fundamental mistakes that undermine their entire effort? These are two separate yet intertwined questions – as there could be no mistakes if no attempts were made.

Let's start by considering the first question. Predictions which pertain to people, both as individuals and collectively, are completely different from predictions that address physical or chemical processes in the natural world (including those which treat mankind as an element of nature). In the first case there is a special link between subject and object: the inquirer becomes his own target of inquiry, and

conscious of that fact. Ipso facto, the prediction process itself has an impact on the result. A prediction can alter reality even when it is in the stage of conception, and even more so once it becomes convincingly expressed and publicized. Predicting that a certain bank is about to go under could in fact accelerate or even wholly cause its bankruptcy, since if confidence in the institution is undermined clients will rush to withdraw their assets. A forecast of higher inflation could indeed cause the inflation rate to increase: salary demands will rise and many people will start to buy up goods while prices are still low. Yet a forecast can also have the reverse

consequence: predicting a higher unemployment rate, for instance, could in fact avert such an increase by encouraging officials to take countermeasures.

Predictions might be self-fulfilling or self-negating, but they usually do affect reality in one way or another. In hindsight it is hard to tell when or why they were accurate. Would events have taken a different turn if a certain prediction had not been expressed and publicized? Or perhaps everything would have followed the same course anyway? Moreover, the epistemological status of predictions is unclear: How should the classic definition of truth be applied to them? How can we determine whether a certain assertion is consistent with reality, if the reality it refers to is still in the future? Later, in turn, the assertion itself becomes part of that reality.



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