Gerard Delanty: *Senses of the Future: Conflicting Ideas of the Future in the World Today*. Berlin – Boston: Walter de Gruyter 2024, 213 p., ISBN 978-3-11-124050-3

Immanuel Kant, in his Critique of Pure Reason, defined the task of philosophy with three questions: "What can I know?", "What can I do?", and "What can I expect?". The last of these questions is recalled by Gerard Delanty in *Senses of the Future*, the subject of this review. Delanty's concern in is not precisely with what we can expect or what future awaits us, but how we can and should consider and discuss these questions. It is not, then, about futurology or prediction, but mapping out the areas of thought and ideas we have developed in our search for answers to the question of the future; what is available in this regard, and what we can rely on.

Gerard Delanty (born 1960) is Professor of Sociology, Social and Political Thought at the University of Sussex. He is also editor of the *European Journal of Social Theory*. His bibliography includes more than three dozen books, of which the 2003 *Handbook of Historical Sociology* (with Engin F. Isin /eds./, London: Sage) is probably the best known to fans of historical sociology. The book under review is loosely based on some of Delanty's earlier studies on critical theory or cosmopolitanism. Some chapters contain ideas formulated in 2022 during his lectures at Alberto Hurtado University in Santiago de Chile and at East China Normal University in Shanghai.

Delanty asserts that the future is a way in which we experience our world. Humans, he says, are future-oriented beings, so this is something constitutive of humanity. He also points out that the concept of the future is multilevel and there are many different reflections on it; it is thus neither purely subjective nor objective. The intellectual tools that humanity has utilised in this regard include prophecy, prediction, hope, faith, utopia, dystopia, the idea of progress, political programs, catastrophism, posthumanism, and many others. For Delanty, the future thus grasped is a field of possibility but also of tension, in which desires, imagination, social interests and conflicts are exposed.

The future has become a category of historical experience varying over time and assuming various forms and depths. It is not an empty space, but determined to one degree or another by past and present. The horizon of the future, existing in every present, is constantly moving forward as the present and future gradually become the past. But when a present ends, not everything associated with it goes into the past; much remains.

Much imagining of the future, according to Delanty, has been associated with expectations concerning events in the near future or within a generation, implying a conception not too different from the present. The more distant future, on the other hand, appears open, unknown and indeterminate. It can never be fully predicted because subject to research and dispute where our knowledge and reasoning are limited; it blends determinism and necessity with contingency and free will. The future thus becomes a domain of competing visions. Imaginings of the future can offer something better than the present, but also a source of anxiety, fear and despair.

The way Delanty deals with the question of the future is somewhat influenced by his long-standing interest in critical theory. He notes that despite our unknown future, we have knowledge that no previous epoch had. At the same time, he admits that this does not necessarily contribute to our emancipation, primarily producing a sense of uncertainty. Delanty challenges the simplistic optimism of technocratic approaches and attempts to control the future, but equally critiques dystopian thinking and the tendency to exaggerate potential tragedies and existential threats. He sees his goal not in telling what the future holds, but finding a meaningful way to discuss it, working with often very different ideas without going to extremes; and finally: how to conduct the struggle for the future that is currently taking place. For Delanty, the principles that must be respected in this process include truth, justice, freedom and authenticity.

Delanty pays special attention to the issue of disasters and crises. Disasters in his view are events which reveal much about the nature of life in individual societies. They demonstrate that history has been linked to the experience

of suffering, and that human societies are fragile and prone to disintegration. However, history also shows that crises can be turning points from the past which lead to the emergence of something new. Crisis events may (or may not) inspire new thinking or even fundamental social transformation. Delanty uses the term 'permacrisis' to characterise the current situation, living in a long period of instability and uncertainty in which many crisis processes are unfolding in parallel (relating to climate, energy, economy, politics, war threats, technological risks, etc.), which are intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

Thinking about the future entails many areas of scientific interest and a multitude of professional disciplines. It is linked to philosophy, social sciences, astronomy, physics, biology, environmental sciences and geology. Our attitude towards the future is changing due to the increase in social complexity, the development of biotechnology, digital technologies and artificial intelligence. In relation to this, there is speculation that we are entering a new, posthuman age. Living in a planetary environment, thinking about the future also has an important planetary dimension.

Delanty, as an author on historical-sociological themes, is aware that thinking about the future has undergone development throughout human history. Reflecting on this, he notes how views of the past and the future have influenced each other. He seeks to problematise the notion of a unidirectional relationship between past, present and future, since in his view there is a bidirectional relationship where the past shapes the image of the future, while our orientation towards the future shapes our image of the past. Delanty states that historiography is based on explanations containing knowledge of future outcomes unknown to the contemporaries of the events described. And vice versa: those who have sought to glimpse the future often looked to history for stimulus and inspiration. The future could thus be seen as a return of lost times, a replication or revival of something from the past.

How we consider the future is, according to Delanty, not least related to how societies understand themselves, how they interpret themselves, the cultural models they develop and what they attribute meaning to. In pre-modern societies, the author notes, people lived a kind of eternal present where the future was reflected on only to a limited extent, as something different from the present. It was based on what preceded it and predetermined by the past. Forecasting was done by those who fulfilled the roles of prophets and oracles. If the future became the subject of human inquiry, such concepts as providence, prophecy, divination, and destiny served that purpose.

Emphasis on the future, according to Delanty, is a product of modernity and bears the stamp of the Enlightenment. Two narratives that came to play a key role in the rise of modernity, replacing pre-modern eschatological conceptions, were utopian thinking and the idea of progress. This signalled a break with the past. Prophecy was replaced by science, and belief that the future could be controlled by human will based on scientific knowledge. Although yet to come, it was thought that the future was achievable through political action. In the 19th century, many political ideologies began to lay claim to the future, most notably socialism, communism, and nationalism. Alongside this growing optimism, however, the late 19th and early 20th centuries also saw a conservative critique, coupled with a vision of the end of civilisation.

Although the early 20th century was associated with a prevailing historical optimism, a series of events and phenomena of global proportions significantly shook the belief in progress. In sociology, the late 20th century witnessed the emergence of risk society theory and the concept of globalisation, combining reflections on the future with the dangers posed by contemporary risks. Another feature of our times is that democratic political systems have tended to reduce the future to relatively short electoral cycles in practice. Postmodern philosophy in particular has played a significant role since the 1980s, leading to the erasure of the idea of the future. Postmodernism, according to Delanty, has identified thinking about the future with utopianism, and shifted the thinking of many intellectuals from the future to the past, to questions of memory, to nationalism and the theme of identities. Thus presentism has come to dominate.

Delanty argues however that there are counter-currents in the social sciences today, and a revival of interest in the theme of the future. However, this has changed significantly compared to the previous two centuries. Previous ideas about the future are seen as part of the past, not as relevant today. While in the 20th century the common idea of the future was that it was under the control of the present, now the future is being considered as something unknown, beyond our control. Doubts are emerging about the sustainability of what we are trying to achieve. While the future is open and not clearly determined, it is not completely so. This unknown future is a source of anxiety and fear, but also of hope because it "signals possibilities" – it shows that the present is imbued with certain potentials.

In conclusion, Gerard Delanty's book is intended neither to lead to unwarranted optimism nor to paralyzing pessimism. It intends not to present unambiguous truths or simple lessons, showing that even in an age of artificial intelligence the road to knowledge of reality is difficult and tortuous. Reading Delanty's work can become a school of thought for us of the perspectives that must be taken to understand contemporary problems in all their complexity and depth, while also telling us much about ourselves.

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Wolfgang Schwentker: *Geschichte Japans*. München: C. H. Beck 2022, 1050 p., ISBN 978-3-406-75159-2

Wolfgang Schwentker's 1000-pages long *History of Japan*, published by C.H. Beck in 2022, is by any standards a major work, and an English translation is much to be desired. This is, to the best of my knowledge, the most ambitious and exhaustive one-man account of Japanese history from prehistoric to present times in a Western language.

Some specific strengths of the book should be underlined. It integrates the results of archaeological research with those of historiography based on written sources; this enables a narrative that links prehistoric and archaic developments to the better-known trajectory that began with the great sixth- to eight-century transformation. Another major merit is the multifocal approach that combines cultural and political themes with socio-economic ones, most impressively in the chapters on the medieval period with its striking record of proliferating violence, cultural flourishing and economic progress. Particular emphasis is placed on the most interesting change to received views on Japanese history during the last decades, the reassessment of the Tokugawa period (1600–1868, or – in Schwentker's shorter chronology – 1615–1840); here it seems best to quote Schwentker's own summary of the situation at the end of this crucial but long misunderstood developmental phase: "When, after Perry's first visits, numerous merchants and diplomats from the United States and Europe arrived in Japan, they did not encounter a 'sleeping beauty', but a markedly dynamic and differentiated society in the process of questioning the dominant political order from within" (p. 520). The idea of Tokugawa Japan as a case of stagnation reinforced by closure has been abandoned. That said, historians still face the task of explaining the long-term stability of key political institutions and judging the effects of measures taken to limit contact with the outside world, even if the notion of a "closed country" is dismissed as a misleading construct.

Finally, Schwentker's perspective on Japanese history is based on two interpretive keys, one of which is clearly defined at the beginning of the book, whereas the other emerges more implicitly from the narrative developed in successive chapters. The more explicit "leitmotiv" is "the tension-filled relationship between 'the inner' (*uchi*) and 'the outer' (*soto*)" (p. 21). This formulation refers to the Japanese conceptualization of a recurrent historical pattern; the point is, in other words, that the interaction of borrowings from other cultures and the affirmation of native (in more modern terms national) identity has been of particular importance for the Japanese trajectory. Some variations within this pattern are immediately obvious. The two orientations can coexist and intertwine while