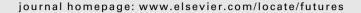Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Futures

Alliterative logic: A theory for postnormal times

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This commentary responds to some of the issues raised in Zia Sardar's paper "Welcome to Postnormal Times" noting and attempting to explain points of difference and similarity. From Sardar's invocation of the 3C's of complexity, chaos and contradiction emerges the idea that our postnormal times might be likened to the strange times following the Great Plague that gave rise to the Alliterative Revival. Speculating further, it is questioned whether, in such strange times, utopian futures studies substitute for prayer.

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1. On epistemology

Following on some preliminary discussion of his essay "Welcome to Postnormal Times", Professor Sardar kindly asked me to comment further, from an "epistemological perspective" [1]. In truth, having been "scientist" all my life, I have only the vaguest idea what is meant by epistemology. As is nowadays my practice in such moments, I turn to the web. Wikipedia begins, "Epistemology – theory of knowledge is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and scope (limitations) of knowledge." After that it got more difficult, but still probably worth reading.

My vastly approximated interpretation of Sardar's message is that life is getting more complicated and unfair and we (i.e. societies at large) need to change our ways, perceptions that I and probably most other futurists agree with. He uses a variety of current and historic examples to argue that with increased globalization we have entered postnormal times characterized by 3C's: complexity, chaos and contradiction that threaten our civilization. To transition beyond this crisis he concludes that we must recognize the limitations of our present understanding and adopt an ethical compass based on the imaginations of all cultures seeking their mutual benefit. I shall simply take a few points qualified of agreement with his construction as a foil. That said the following quasi-epistemological questions come to mind:

- Does the evidence support the argument and is it sufficient?
- Does the argument lead to the outcome?
- Can we share the conclusion but not the argument?
- How complex is complexity?
- Is alliteration logic?
- Is post-normal simply strange?
- Is futures PRAAER?

My answers speculate that the 3C's – and research into the 3C's – are part of a pre-theory of transitional times, including its contemporary post-normal expression that could help us to address present-day dilemmas. But, ultimately my concern is less with the scope and limitations of knowledge than the way we may use and abuse it.

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2. Contradictions

My first observation is that Sardar and I approach life from diametrically opposite directions. Given this, I am surprised he has kept me on the Futures Board so long! If I am not wrong, he is a devout person, deeply committed to social change, with a gift for words and sophisticated argument. The nicest thing anyone ever said about me was that I was a "technocratic existentialist", or maybe the reverse. (Thank you, whoever you were, but I had to look that up too). With this essentially fairly pragmatic, albeit ambiguous, classification, and the hope that scholarship contributes something useful, somehow intertwined with an overwhelming scepticism, my fallback position is that anything that cannot be translated into equations and demonstrated by numbers is not a theory. This is probably not very defensible epistemologically, or at least a bit narrow-minded. Our difference in perspective probably explains why my answer to the first two questions is "no." Nonetheless the answer to the third is "yes": at least we seem to arrive at more-or-less shared conclusions. While, this is somewhat an over-simplification, it suffices for present purposes.

The easiest way to explain the seemingly conflicting answers to the first three questions is via the naïve construction that I carry in my mind of knowledge, forecasting, and futures: essentially we a confronted with a 2000 piece jig saw puzzle from which we only have 100 pieces and we have to work out what the scene represents. Obviously we can multiply the jigsaw pieces by billions or trillions, and the picture is a multi-dimensional movie, which leads to the complexity issue later. Different people have different jigsaw pieces, and also different preconceptions of what the overall image might be. In Sardar's case (for the moment taking only his essay as my database) these are culled from particular life experiences, a wide range of media, passionate discussions, scholarly articles, and alternative viewpoints. For the sake of argument, from a technocratic perspective let's say these are essentially insightful anecdotes, only loosely connected, but compensated for by persuasive rhetoric.

With a technocratic approach, the pieces are clear and strongly connected, via statistics and equations, except, of course, they are not. This more focussed approach looks under the lamp post, at what can be, or is, measured, in an ever more-detailed tiny corner of the jig saw. Within this fragment, the pieces are linked together via cross-section and time-series data so the gaps appear to be filled in, but are more often data based on preconceived assumptions about the links. At least in part, data substitutes for knowing and "knowing" for data. From the perspective of an existentialist technocrat, it would be nice to think that within the fragment the image is less unambiguous, but even if that were the case, the big picture is under-addressed or is obscured by magnification of the part. Nonetheless, even geeks live life and have their own sense of the whole that provides fodder for their formulae [2].

This suggests one answer to the apparent contradiction in the third question of sharing conclusions but not necessarily buying all the argument. Given a random selection of jig saw pieces and life experiences, it is inevitable (but with low probability) that some of us will arrive at the same conclusion from different data, even if were not already pre-channelled in our perceptions of the "evidence" by overlapping ambiguous operational clichés (sometimes called theories or worldviews). Thus, by accident, and more, Sardar and I share a somewhat sufficiently similar perspective on the overall puzzle, about what's right and wrong with it, and what might be done about it – sufficient, I hope for me to remain on the Futures board.

Futurists have sought to reconcile such dilemmas via a range of familiar and novel methods and approaches. In earlier years, I presumed that some parts of the whole problem could be modelled as metaphors, and those that could not were better left to the political process (drawing ire and damnation from more hard-line technocrats) [3]. Now, I am not even sure of that prescription, but the problem here is the political process and its applications of knowledge, which is perhaps another place where Sardar and I come together, despite different approaches, experiences, and philosophies.

We use our grand (imaginary) image to interpret our own personal jigsaw piece – the supreme Rorschach test, but also the reverse. For example: as a research student I studied "spin waves" – basically free electrons bashing into, and flipping, other un-free electrons into hysterical collective excitations. I found no difficulty using this conceptual model to interpret the behaviour patterns of my flat-mates, and the world in general. At the same time my image of a potentially rational ultimately explicable universe governed how I interpreted my tiny puzzle-piece. I assume that most people engage in this two-way imagining. When, during vacations, I worked on a farm, I was struck by the cowman's bovine-centred universe. For him, cows were people and people were cows. In retrospect my physics model was a less useful as a social metaphor than his time-tested understanding. Even had this not been the case, and even if I then felt mine to be superior, because we both now temporarily shared the experience of herding and milking his cow-metaphor provided a common "vernacular" framework for discussion. I will return to this point later.

3. Chaos or complexity?

In his essay Sardar characterizes our world by the 3C's of Chaos, Complexity, and Contradictions. These are popularized words with both ambiguous and formalized meanings. To some degree they have become rallying symbols, sufficiently ambiguous to attract the necessary audience [4]. Alternatively, this describes a systematic process such as Marxist contradictions or Hardin's Tragedy of the Commons [5]. Sometimes such ideas are formalized, or used in social simulations such as the n-person Prisoner's Dilemma, or Olson's Logic of Collective Action, or Schelling's model of segregation [6,7]. Complexity and Chaos too have dual meanings but are often confused, as I believe is the case in Sardar's essay. While our jigsaw puzzle is both complex and complicated (so many elements and links that it is difficult to sort them out, draw connections, or know what to do about it), it is not necessarily chaotic, in the sense that it cannot ultimately be understood, at least sufficiently for practical prescription, although much literature takes it to be.