



Reciprocal influences in future thinking between Europe and the USA

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ABSTRACT

La prospective is generally considered to have grown after WWII in developed countries with two main centers, France and the United States of America. In France, the development of *prospective* does constitute an important point in contemporary history. Stemming from an idea from philosopher Gaston Berger near the end of the 1950s, a spirit arose accompanied by a practice spread in the central administration (government) and in major French corporations. The objective of this article is not to claim any French originality in thinking about the future. Instead, the following pages show how an original approach blending reflection on the future and present action took shape and the relationship that developed involving current practices on the other side of the Atlantic, mainly the USA, with the help of a few intermediaries.

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1. The French version: Prospective

Prospective came about in the mid-fifties when Gaston Berger made it a formal movement based on a review of the decision-making process¹. As of 1955, Berger would begin arguing in favor of a formal consideration of the future in decision-making. In fact he outlined a new method that combined knowledge and power, endpoints and means, by giving people the possibility to transform their vision of the future into action, their dreams into projects. After Berger's death in 1960, his philosophy was preserved by a hardcore group well positioned in France's socio-economic and political infrastructure. His followers would work to spread the basic principles and apply them to prepare some main choices for the future.

1.1. The idea of a science of the 'Man of the Future'

The 1950s remained tainted by the barbaric acts committed during World War II. While relations became more international and more complex, France entered a period of unheard-of growth. Berger's techniques shook up many approaches and, for many intellectuals of that time, scientific discoveries created just as many, if not more, problems than they solved. In these circumstances, time passing faster became part of experience, the normal law of change in the world. In this respect, "the Future is ahead of [its] ideas" [1]². [Note 1,2]. The situations in which Man finds himself thus seem to always be new. The consequences of decisions will be seen in a completely different world from the one in which those decisions were made.

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¹ Gaston Berger (1896–1960) was a French philosopher who worked as a CEO, then philosopher professor and lastly top-level civil servant. A disciple of the philosophy of action of Maurice Blondel, Berger helped introduce Husserl in France. He also played an important role in Franco–American cultural relations. At the request of the minister of foreign affairs, Gaston Berger gave lectures in many American universities (Columbia, Princeton, Harvard, Buffalo, UCLA, etc.). There he presented the main trends in contemporary French philosophy. In the early 1950s, he would become the secretary-general of the Franco–American Fulbright commission. He died suddenly as a result of a car accident in November 1960. Among the four children left to mourn was a son who would become the internationally renowned choreographer, Maurice Béjart.

² The bibliographic references refer to the original French texts. If there is an English translation, it is mentioned either in the text or bibliography.

For Berger, the classic methods no longer hold in this context. Essentially based on experience; that is to say the past, these methods allow neither governing, nor managing, nor administrating. Gaston Berger, the philosopher, questioned neither the meaning nor value of history but rather its use in preparing to make decisions. Actually, history and *prospective* have a lot in common for they look at potential facts: the past is gone, the future is not yet. [2] The past must serve to root out the unchangeable, heavy trends, which are useful in building hypotheses or operational rules, in other words, useful for action but not models whose simple application would substitute for analysis and focused thinking. These retrospective attitudes are no longer adapted. It is not possible to live off one's experiences (*aquis*). Anticipating using the past as a basis, even in its most scientific form (extrapolation) means determining what will happen if the studied event remains frozen in time thus timeless.

Gaston Berger's criticism targets public decision-making directly. As a high-ranking civil servant within the French education ministry, Berger observed that the means to be used are too often sought before the goals are set. Of course reality certainly dictates the opposite: establish the goals and then decide on the appropriate means. Berger found that in practice the distinction between goals and means was not easy to make. Want, can and know remain in a chiaroscuro state that stalls decisions. Without a doubt, the ends give way to the means that the decision-maker has available at any given time and which represent the least painful solution. Man may thus give up a better condition, considered utopian, because the means required have not yet been discovered [3].

As a philosopher, Berger believed that the science of the 'Man of the Future', or a 'futurist anthropology', would serve to help human aspirations come to the fore by studying the different situations in which humankind might find itself in the future. This 'mission' would be entrusted to specialists who come from various fields and can show how things tend to evolve. It would be a matter of bringing together those who can determine what is desirable with those who can determine what is possible. The idea of picturing possible worlds in broad strokes would not only enlighten judgment but also inform it early enough so that a decision would be efficient. We can see that from the outset, Gaston Berger gave *prospective* a normative objective.

1.2. *The prospective spirit*

From 1958 on, Gaston Berger would formalize some of the major principles of his approach. Work by members of the international center that he founded in 1957 would provide and become the core. Starting from the principle that a theory has less power than an example, and that the formalization of a method is the fruit of reflection on practices, Berger and the co-founders of the Centre would constantly generate and carry out studies on concrete topics, e.g., the consequences of new technologies (atomic energy for peaceful use, cybernetics, astronomy, aeronautics). There were geopolitical issues, too, e.g., the West and the rest of the world, the relationship between progress and society. Members travelled abroad to conferences considered important to suggest how to think about the future using this new stance that was the *prospective* attitude. The reports or papers delivered would involve many people from various fields, e.g., researchers, university students, high-ranking civil servants, and leading corporate executives. Teams were formed that brought together complementary specialists.

The position towards the future preached by Berger [1] relies upon six basic virtues. The first, being calm, which is necessary for one to step back and maintain self-control. Imagination, the second, opens the door to innovation and lends the innovator a different, original, way of looking at things. The third is a team spirit. Team spirit is indispensable if action is to be efficient just like enthusiasm, which propels that same action and makes people capable of creating. Courage is also essential in order to get off the beaten track, innovate, be entrepreneurial and accept the inherent risks. Lastly, some sensitivity; i.e., to be aware of mankind's future, a society must put man first. To do so, culture must play a key role. Culture allows us to grasp the thinking of the Other. It also provides the possibility for us to understand before judging. Through its different forms, culture shows how people can take charge of their own fate.

Beyond the qualities required to face this new world that is the future, Berger develops the basis of a *prospective* attitude. This attitude would make it possible to grasp the future, thus opening up all possibilities and enabling us to prepare various courses of action.

At a time when causes generate effects at constantly greater speeds, it is no longer possible to stop to consider the immediate effects of action already begun. Berger's *prospective* (forerunner to foresight) sought to study the distant future. This distant horizon is not an obstacle because it does not try to predict or look at events as much as at situations. The *prospective* approach does not need to date its results and may thus reach a high level of certainty. In fact it is easier to point out a general trend than the date and intensity of a given event. This approach does not oppose short-term prediction which is indispensable, as the two approaches complement each other. Actually, pinpointing situations far off in time means going beyond overly specialized approaches and bringing together competent people so that from the clash of personal views there arises a shared vision based on complementarities. Actually, *prospective* must avoid using analytical procedures based on habit or routine in order to provide in-depth analysis that will enable one to understand human motivation and behavior. The principle: see far, see wide and analyze deeply makes Gaston Berger's *prospective* a synthesizing activity with the means to be all encompassing. In fact, interdependence is one of the most restricting things that *prospective* has to integrate. One must envisage the consequences of acts and see how those consequences relate to what is happening in other fields. Sometimes these fragmentary truths are just as dangerous as errors [2].

Gaston Berger adds two more necessary features to the *prospective* attitude. The first is risk-taking. For him, risk-taking is a major component which is possible because it leads to the long-term horizon of foresight (*prospective*) thus authorizing some boldness. This runs contrary to short-term forecasting which leads to immediate decisions which imply an irreversible commitment hence tremendous caution. It is always possible to modify any foreseen actions to adapt to new circumstances.

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