

Edited by Hans Christian Garmann Johnsen, Halvor Holtskog and Richard Ennals (2018). *Coping with the future: rethinking assumptions for society, business and work*. Routledge 2018, pp. 286, ISBN 978-1138559318

Reviewed by *Egoitz Pomares*

*The big wheel keeps on turning
On a simple line day by day
The earth spins on its axis
One man struggle while another relaxes*

Hymn of the big wheel (Massive Attack, 1991).

Based on the close relationship between the nature of work and the productive structure of society, the University of Adger organised in Norway, together with NTNU Gjøvik, the European Workplace Innovation Network (EUWIN) and the International Journal of Action Research (IJAR) a conference based on dialogue with a clear theme: to combine atomised discourses about the future from the perspective of digitisation and the sustainability of work, organisations, social models and the emergence of a new social contract. The seminar held between October 8th and 10th was titled *Coping with the Future*. In this scenario that summoned researchers, students, practitioners and people from the business world the book that carries the same title was presented.

Coping with the future is a book that starts from the academic tradition and is aimed at a wider community of professionals with a concern for the transformation of society, business and work. With a certain foundation and orientation based on philosophy, the book can be considered an epistemological manual, as a guide, which offers a solid overview of the current way of thinking based on historical trajectories. The book delves into the reflection of strategies that, based on sustainability, contribute to the exploration of uncertainty and disruption. The central discussion of the volume focuses on the exploration of the potential contribution of the social sciences from a systemic perspective in search of reasonable present itineraries looking to the future. Thus, it deepens into the options and possibilities of formulas to work in the present and prepare for the future. For this purpose the editors and 25 contributors pose a *big picture* turning it into a *wallet size*. These photographs, called by the authors “*Kodak moments*”, refer to situations and positions that, taken for granted, change from night to morning. Based on these snapshots, the book explores the challenges of structural changes in the economy and global order. Mainly based on a Nordic perspective, models of cohesion and social development are reviewed and proposed, taking into account the technological revolution and innovation of our society. It is precisely the dialogue-based tradition of these countries that determines the present itineraries that will affect the work, organisations and the society of the future.

The book is organised in three sections. The first part of the book “*Future political, social and institutional landscape*” delves into the pressure on the structures and institutions that exert the disruptive changes generating an understanding of the past, the responsible

action of the present, and the preparation for the future from the perspective of social sciences. The scenario in this first section is established in a macro analysis of the future of the political, social and institutional environment. This means a deepening of economic policy and its involvement in work and organisations. Starting from the hybridisation of the dialectical traditions, the authors relate different models of political organisation that include *libertarian democracy*, *constitutional democracy*, *communitarian democracy* and *deliberative democracy*, in an argument between the universal and the local that entails the need to establish understandings between the policies at national and sub-national level. As a consequence of globalisation, this requires resilient institutions, based on stability and flexibility, to support innovation that promotes learning about social, institutional, technological and economic factors at local levels. The interdependence of these factors leads to the development of knowledge that should influence economic development policies and the challenges for the future, as allowed by the preservation of basic values and ideals.

The second part “*Knowing the future*” reviews the concept of knowledge, the way in which it is built, and what we can know about a future that presents as always uncertain. The development of knowledge from a pluralist perspective, based on imagination, establishes the main line of thought of the chapter introducing models of rationality in the taking of positive decisions for the future, which implies the development of sustainable strategies and methodologies to deal with unpredictability. For this, the role of the social sciences as a knowledge system, understood as a process of social construction, contributes to the creation of a repertoire about the past, the present and the future of social and economic development. This implies a better understanding of the degree of knowledge institutionalisation and within public and social spheres.

The third part “*Future technology, organisation and work*” incorporates reflections on the three great pillars of transformation; technology as a socially embedded phenomenon, pluralism and sustainable organisations, and new models of leadership. All of these aspects will have an impact on the redefinition of the link between working life and society, and the concept of work in a more globalised world, which appears to be digitally transformed and based on new forms of organisation.

Although the range of questions that compose the book have a Nordic origin, the experiences and reflections that complete the authors’ results are refreshing. These contribute to topical issues about current challenges concerning European (such as Brexit) and global policy (as reflected in US policy today). The three parts build a Gestalt. A *Massive Attack* on how to understand the past, work in the present and prepare for the future that local, regional, national and EU policy makers face by means of effective intervention strategies to uncertainty and change. This contributes in the same way to researchers, leaders and people involved in social change, helping them to reflect critically on current practices and the exploration of new perspectives. The authors demonstrate an overall perspective, based on philosophy that is oriented to the analysis. This effort requires the attention of the reader. Understood as a criticism, the reading stimulates to the extent that some of the contents, i.e. the transformation of society, work and business, causes a tension and a state of constant reflection going back and forth. It is worth mentioning that the book is accompanied by illustrations in an ironic sense, and that throughout the reading diverse references to cases of study can be found. Each of them is strongly linked with the themes and contents developed in each of the sections.

Starting from the above there is a question of interest that deserves to be explained. The beginnings of what is now known as *Quality of Working Life movement* that started in Norway around the democratisation of work by the Tavistock Institute in 1960 and the sub-title of the book “*Rethinking assumptions for society, business and work*” have a common denominator that unites the past, the present and the future; the term assumption. The concept describes the underlying assumptions on which the behaviour of a group is based. The concept became popular with the work of W.R. Bion, one of the founders of the Tavistock Institute in 1947 and who later chaired the Planning Committee that reorganised the (new) Institute for Human Relations. Bion's work in-group dynamics was compiled in 1961 in the book *Experiences in groups* as an exploration of the processes initiated by the complex experience of being and participating in a group. Bion specifically identified three basic assumptions: *dependency*, *fight-flight* and *pairing*. When a group adopts any of these basic assumptions, it interferes with the task that the group tries to perform (work). The author believed that the interpretation of the basic assumptions of group dynamics would give rise to a potential perspective with respect to effective cooperative group work. In the current scenario, cooperative work comprises a pillar that, based on dialogue, potentially allows us to determine the route to navigate when uncertainty and disruption determine the state of our society.

As the authors of the reviewed book point out (pp. 202) organisations, as groups, play an important role in modern society, assuming an undervalued role. The organisations of the future cannot be in conflict with society. This means that the future requires an understanding of public and private organisations, consistent with systemic sustainability (pp. 213).

Overall the book can contribute and be very useful for those researchers, policy makers, business professional and practitioners willing to understand the times we are living through, and offers an open-minded attitude to current and future societal challenges. Readers with interest in philosophy, political science, sociology, economics and technology will find theoretical foundations, but also well contextualised examples, allowing an epistemological navigation in a structured route. Its reading could help in exploring, in a reflective and deeply ingrained manner, about the past, present and future. Submerged in this stage readers will find familiar routes that offer new landscapes, allowing to rethink *normal* and *alternative* models.

References

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About the author

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In addition to his academic role Egoitz participates in and contributes to the European Workplace Innovation Network, a learning network that promotes EU-wide knowledge sharing on workplace innovation. The network is open to organisations, social partners, policymakers and researchers.

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