



NORTH-HOLLAND

Beyond Uncertainty: Facing the Inconceivable

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Both epistemologically and ontologically, we are increasingly facing the inconceivable, which is radically different from “uncertainty.” Epistemologically, every outlook is based on some combination of extrapolation, theories, and tacit knowledge, all of which are predicated on a recognizable continuity between the past and the future. However, the combined effects of radical changes on deep drivers of history undermine our ability to recognize patterns shared by the past and future, thus reducing outlook possibilities and leaving us facing what seems to be inconceivable.

This epistemological argument is open to critique by those who believe that they can identify “long waves of history” and therefore predict the future, at least in outline. However, the ontological argument stands up against such claims, strengthening the case for inconceivability.

The ontological view is well presented by Karl Popper’s argument that logically present knowledge cannot know the contents of radically new knowledge. As our epoch is characterized by rapid transformations in knowledge with radical social implications, this suffices to support the claim that we are facing ontological “inconceivability.” It is enough to mention pre-setting gender at conception, human cloning, and even more extreme genetic interventions to demonstrate this point: Such emerging technologies cause a rupture in history resulting in an inconceivable world.

However, it is not only the certainty of such scientific revolutions that leads to inconceivability. All deep drivers of history are undergoing radical transformation, including population quantities and compositions, power structures, cultures and value systems, probably climate, and more. Ergo, within the twenty-first century many features of reality will take forms inconceivable at present.

This is also true in retrospect. It is enough to mention the disintegration of the Soviet Union; the development of globalization effects that we do not understand, despite their visibility; and the economic shocks in South East Asia to illustrate that the inconceivable is with us.

My overall estimation is that we are within a mutative set of processes that produce overall phase jumps into what is inconceivable. This has happened in the past, too, with

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the introduction of fire, the transition to agriculture, the emergence of new forms of beliefs and consciousness, and more. However, change was slower and did not touch the human gene. Therefore, my further estimation is that we are moving into the most radical phase jump ever undergone by humanity.

True, the present phase jump processes take time, as well. Also, the deepest driver of history, namely, the core characteristics of human beings as a species are currently stable. However, change is accelerating and deepening. Moreover, with respect to the basic features of human beings, not only do we not know what is hard-wired and what is culturally changeable and changing, but humanity is sure to intervene with its bio-neurological structures and processes. Thus, ongoing and emerging processes are bringing about the most radical rupture in continuity—comparable in inconceivability, for instance, to the much less likely appearance of intelligent beings from outer space.

However, may not imagination help? After all, we know about thinkers in the past who imagined quite well certain features of the future that were inconceivable in their time. Also, many claim nowadays to be able to consider what I call “inconceivable,” for instance, first contacts with visitors from outer space.

However, those who claim to consider the inconceivable do not impress me. They do little harm and may even do some good by alerting us to the likelihood of ruptures in history. However, their substantive views on how the world will look like after genetic re-engineering of human beings, after visitors from outer space, after a large-scale biological world war, have no basis—neither epistemological nor ontological. Moreover, the hypothetical possibility that in the future some presently imagined New World will be regarded as rather prophetic does not help us in deciding now which imagined “Wild Future” is worthy to be taken somewhat seriously.

However, it is very unlikely that any present phantasm will be admired in the future as having foreseen what is to come. Imagined futures discussed at futures conferences and in futures literature are not even “wild.” They are usually very tame in assuming, at least tacitly, that the mutated future will fit the main present categories and values. Real imagination that could at least illustrate “inconceivability” without predicting it is very scarce indeed.

Putting inconceivability into the center of considering the future, preparing for it, and trying to influence it has a number of implications. To indicate just four of them:

- Slogans such as “sustainable development” should be recognized as fundamentally flawed in their presumption of the possibility and desirability of long-term continuity of the main features of human existence. Instead, efforts should be directed at welcoming and utilizing radical change to increase evolutionary potential without enslavement to present concepts of “resources,” etc. Certainly, large-scale catastrophes endangering the very survival of humanity and producing massive suffering should be avoided, but this is very different from most notions of “sustainability.”
- The certainty of much social traumatization requires major efforts to reduce the costs and dangers, for example, helping societies to establish safety nets and containing violent reactions.
- Governments must build up capacities to strengthen social resources for coping with phase jumps and to impose some controls on their directions and effects. This is not a matter that can be left to markets and civil society. Rather, governments, including global governance, must be radically strengthened in authority and

upgraded in cognitive capacities to achieve even minimal goals of avoiding catastrophes and reducing large-scale social costs.

- The epistemic communities of policy planners, forecasters, etc. must be much more sensitive to inconceivability, putting emphasis on option creativity, elastic alternatives, and coping with crises while being very skeptical about narrow forecasts. Presuming to foresee the longer-term future should be avoided, open-ended contingent outlooks should be the rule, and “thinking on the year 3000” should be recognized as the stupid hubris that it is.

But more is needed. The emergence of probability brought about a revolution in thinking and decision making, and indeed in all the reading of reality. No less of a revolution in cognitive concepts and models of thinking is needed in trying to cope with increasing inconceivability. This is the main challenge facing us as policy thinkers and professionals.

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