

Editorial

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A European Journal of Futures Research

This new scientific journal aims at enriching the publication landscape for futures research by adding a “European” dimension to it: focussing on European manifestations of futures research, topics related to Europe’s present and future as well as discussions about the perspectives of European thinking and the integration of Europe.

While established scientific journals such as *Foresight*, *Futures*, *The International Journal of Foresight and Innovation Policy*, *The Journal of Futures Studies*, *Technological*

Forecasting and Social Change: An International Journal and *The International Journal of Forecasting* emphasise the international character of the medium in question, the *European Journal of Futures Research* concentrates on topics and problems that are of extreme significance for Europe.

The main focus therefore is on the geographical region of Europe, where local developments are obviously embedded in global contexts. This special focus enables an intensive, theoretical and methodical analysis of the European traditions of thought in futures research as well as the empirical precision of Europe-related problems. A variety of topics that are relevant for Europe can be discussed within the framework of the contents of the journal (Society, Politics, Economy, Science and Technology, X-cutting Issues, Methodology and Methods, Philosophy of Science).¹ Theoretical and methodological topics can be approached from particular “European” schools of thought or enriched with other, new ways of thinking.

In our opinion, it is necessary to promote a futures research specific to Europe as the European states today stand before common challenges, not least because of their shared and often conflicting past. The future in and of Europe will be determined by how these challenges can be overcome.

The *European Journal of Futures Research (EJFR)* provides a platform where the possible, desirable, plausible and probable futures of Europe can be thought of ahead of time and shaped simultaneously. This fundamental orientation of the journal should be reflected in the submitted articles. Thus, for publication in the *EJFR*, we prefer articles that

- Present local and national developments in a European context,
- Examine the various dimensions of Europe,
- Present European developments in the context of global developments,

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¹ Refer to “Focus themes of the *European Journal of Futures Research*” section for a list of potential topics that can be submitted to *EJFR*.

- (d) Deal with political topics related to Europe and the development of the European Union or
- (e) Present comparative studies about the European issues.

Let us take the example of “Politics”: After the destruction and annihilation caused by the Second World War, the process of unification of Europe was started as a project with the primary intention of bringing lasting peace and, consequently, welfare improvement. The achievements in this direction were acknowledged in 2012 with the Nobel Peace Prize for the European Union—at a time when the Union faced huge financial, debt and euro crises. This discrepancy in the current European situation raises questions about the problems in the process so far and in the present state of European integration, for example with reference to coordination between various economic, legal and political dimensions—as well as about the *future perspectives of Europe*. Among other things, the internal cohesion and diversity of Europe, the democratic state of European institutions, the territorial expansion of the European Union and the Eurozone, the relationship between politics and the financial markets, and the future role of Europe in the global context are at stake here.

Since the discussions and decisions within the European Union build the framework for national and local developments, which then affect the whole of Europe, it is also important to deal with them in the context of the journal. The continuing (diagnoses of) crises, which could have a negative impact on the accomplishment of the core targets of the community, also necessitate a closer look at the European Union.

To answer the question of how to shape European futures, we suggest taking a look at the multifaceted manifestations of the (European) futures research and the social and strategic planning traditions in more detail. What catches the eye is the close connection between the scientific analyses of future-related questions, policy planning and future-oriented management consulting. This throws up the question to what extent clear demarcations between these manifestations are necessary, a question which is discussed further down below.

European traditions of futures research

The development of futures research in Europe has not least been inspired by the work of American think tanks. In the 1940s, huge think tanks were established in the USA with the purpose of systematic and scientific handling of future-related issues. These research institutes, for example the *Stanford Research Institute* (SRI) that was founded in 1946 at the Stanford University or the *RAND-Corporation* (Research and Development (RAND)) that was set up in 1948, were equipped with excellent personnel and great

funding, and were closely knit with the military–industrial complex. These institutes developed new and/or revised research methods such as scenario planning or the Delphi method. In the initial years, the results of these future-oriented research processes (forecasting, foresight, etc.) of the think tanks were mostly considered as military or trade secrets and therefore published very rarely. Some much-noticed publications of the research results of these think tanks appeared only in the 1960s and 1970s. Some of these were also translated into other languages, for example O. Helmer’s work “Social technology” into German (“50 Jahre Zukunft: Bericht über eine Langfrist-Vorhersage für die Welt der nächsten 5 Jahrzehnte”) [1] or the study published by H. Kahn and A. Wiener “The Year 2000” (“Ihr werdet es erleben. Voraussagen der Wissenschaft bis zum Jahr 2000”) [2].

Many of the so-called mega trends that have been circulating in various future-oriented studies go back to these bestsellers by Helmer and Kahn/Wiener. These include, for example, post-industrial society, dominance of tertiary and quaternary professions (“service society”), and knowledge society (or “learning society”). Holger Rust [3] could even prove that the sources used by these pioneers of the American futures research date back to the 1930s [4–8]. It can be seen that the mega trends represented so dramatically as “new” outcomes of futures research in today’s popular science publications were already identified, analysed and published as plausible social development trends seven to eight decades ago—in a much less dramatic manner.

Journalist Robert Jungk brought the news of existence of the big and influential American think tanks for future-related issues to the German-speaking regions. After his return from an educational tour to the USA, he published a noteworthy book in 1952: “Die Zukunft hat schon begonnen. Amerikas Allmacht und Ohnmacht” (“The future has already begun: America’s omnipotence and impotence”) [9]. Jungk himself was much less interested in the development of futures research than he was in the democratisation of future-related preparation and planning, for which he published a variety of popular science books and articles. He also conceived the moderation procedure of the “future workshop” (together with N. Müllert) and founded the *Institut für Zukunftsfragen* in Vienna. Modelled on this Austrian institute, he formed the German *Gesellschaft für Zukunftsfragen* (Duisburg) in 1967. With scientists Karl Steinbuch, Helmut Klages and Ossip K. Flechtheim as its members, this institute was more scientifically oriented and worked towards developing a social and ecological futures research [10]. This tradition in German futures research is being preserved by some research institutes even today. The main terms used in this manifestation of futures research are “sustained development” and “future-oriented development”, which are synonymous to each other. “Futures

research” in this context is often used in close connection with “shaping the future”.²

There is obviously no inherent contradiction between social and ecological involvement and serious research. However, the line between the research component and the practice component must never become blurred. In futures research that is politically engaged, this demarcation is not always made with the necessary scrupulousness. Analogously, this is also applicable to many management consultants, who offer their services in the names of futures research [15].

Futures research in France was developed not so much in view of sustainability as with a distinct intention of shaping the future [16]. The specific approaches, known as *Prospective*, of futures research in France go back to the philosopher Gaston Berger and the sociologist B. de Jouvenel. Economist and statistician M. Godet [17, 18] attempted to give a stronger quantitative impulse to the concepts of Berger [19] and de Jouvenel [20], which were concerned more with qualitative research methods and creative processes of discourse. Economist J. Fourastie [7, 8, 21] developed a social and economical variant of future-oriented research, which reached far beyond the boundaries of France. In the Netherlands, Fred Polak [22] represented a similar development-oriented and discursive approach as Bertrand de Jouvenel in France in the 1960s. This approach gave a lot of importance to intuitive and creative methods with regard to future-related research.

On a global scale, the movement for futures studies is an important source of inspiration for futures research and future-oriented planning [23]. Johan Galtung and the *International Peace Research Institute* played a major role in an early phase. The movement was institutionalised as the *World Futures Studies Federation* in connection with a conference in Oslo in 1967. In the 1970s and 1980s, it were particularly those engaged in the *World Order Model Project* who drew a lot of attention. It involved the production of studies about “alternative worlds”, where the aim was to transcend the uniformity that characterised the way traditional political circles approached reality, particularly the future.

Futures research and future-oriented policy planning

Future orientation as an element of social and strategic planning has varied greatly over the years. Without going into a detailed discussion of the many origins of planning, we may establish that, as an institutional practice, examples of urban planning can be found from the seventeenth century

onwards. The general breakthrough came during the eighteenth century [24]. However, the experience of World War II has been utterly decisive for the art of “planning” to be carried out in the Western world. It is indicative that the term “futurology” [25, 26] and the idea of a predictive science emerged for the first time in 1943 [27].

There is a long literary and political tradition for envisaging “Utopias” or alternative worlds. The communist Soviet Union, fascist Italy and Nazi Germany had already carried out large-scale central planning between the wars [28]. Planning in Western countries was, however, different and more limited. It played a major role in military strategy, such as the planning, implementation and justification of the Maginot Line in France. The military planning of the allies during World War II was similar to that of earlier wars. What differed was that, after the end of the war, the experience of specific military planning and of wartime civilian conditions was extended into peacetime. Central governments had clearly become aware of the potential of planning and of the efficiency gains that could be derived from continuing with it.

Some of the reasons behind this we find in the increasingly clamorous political demands for the adoption of Keynesian policies, which would involve surrounding industry with political buffers in an attempt to avoid the unfortunate consequences of an economy that is not directly managed. These demands, which were made by social democrats and social liberals, were reinforced by the German and Italian experience, which showed that it was really possible to control unemployment by managing the economy while at the same time increasing productivity. Within social democratic circles in the 1930s, it was the economists who had positioned themselves as the central planners. However, the urge to plan was universal. In France, where planners could take advantage of a platform consisting of a dirigiste, state-oriented tradition, a planning community dominated by economists with scientific aspirations developed as early as the 1950s. In order to be able to operate social democratic policy, planning was understood as a system of strategic decisions and institutional frameworks for establishing future courses of action.

In the last decades, however, the importance of moving beyond these kinds of policy planning concepts has become evident [29]. This is due to the understanding that European and global futures are not only complex but also uncertain. This requires looking for new ways of doing things, not only regarding the economy but also the development of policies and legal frameworks. Instruments for policy development have to reflect uncertainties and address possible solutions in a way that foster more robust decision making despite lacking reliable predictions.

In Europe, as well as globally, policy planning and traditional planning techniques tend to be unilinear and economic and are not able to reflect the contemporary experience of the

² For an overview of the wide spectrum of German-speaking futures research, see the publishing series “Zukunft und Forschung” (Future and Research) by Springer [11–13]. See also the publication by Steinmüller et al. for a European perspective on futures research [14].

world as complex and uncertain. Governments, strategic policy actors and academics have traditionally been sceptical when it comes to systematically developing predictions into fully fledged tools for future planning such as scenario building. The philosophy of future-oriented exercises based on forecasts and prognoses offers a number of reasons why such caution should be warranted. Still, apart from practical reasons, e.g. the need to meet the expectations emanating from a budgeting system that measures “utility” in terms of the contributions of scientific knowledge and traditional foresight to concrete problem solving as experienced by planners, there are sound and immediate reasons why prudence should be kept in abeyance. Substantially, it should be possible to circumvent some of the problems involved by relaxing our understanding of time as one-dimensional and linear. If one proceeds down this lane, futures research in all its dimensions may be a better candidate for creating grand visions for multicultural, pluralistic and complex societies like the European ones than forecasts and prognoses [30].

During the past 50 years, both future-oriented policy planning and futures research have assumed an increasingly “professional” nature. On the one hand, practices have become more tailored to the needs of customers and methods have become more robust. On the other hand, the awareness is growing that constraining futures research to a collection of specific techniques is far from being satisfactory and that a fundamental theory is needed. As a matter of fact, after decades characterised by diminishing interest in the theoretical underpinnings of futures studies, the past few years have seen the onset of a new concern with their foundation. Interestingly, the recent surge of papers discussing various aspects of what may eventually become a theoretical framework for the field has not been limited to the epistemological bases of futures studies but has also begun to address the problem of its ontological grounds. The *European Journal of Futures Research* also aims at being an arena for this kind of discussion.

In order to strengthen academic futures research and future-oriented policy planning and consultancies, it is necessary that

- (a) The research community “discovers” the field and its methodologies,
- (b) “Futurists” acknowledge and professionalise scientific “rules”,
- (c) There are specialised futures research programmes and grants,
- (d) There is a debate on quality criteria and a culture of reflexive foresight,
- (e) Futures reasoning is integrated in professional discourses,
- (f) Different policy actors, e.g. research councils and ministries, engage in the field and experiment with new and innovative approaches for policy developments [31].

The *European Journal of Futures Research* aims at acting as both a mediator of high level scientific activities in this field and a bridge between academic institutions and European policy actors, business sectors and civil society.

On the future of futures research

The future develops from a highly complex interplay of varied individual needs on one hand and varying demands of social, economic and political interest groups on the other. These needs and demands or interests develop in context of natural and economical living conditions and technological innovations. Based on the analysis of

- (a) Current economic, ecological and socio-cultural dynamics,
- (b) Currently planned future technologies, as well as
- (c) Currently developed visions of the future and future plans of individuals and institutions,

plausible hypotheses about future developments are possible—with all the requisite circumspection. Good futures research is thus future-oriented research based on the present [32]. Obviously then, the fact that the current lifestyles and living environments have developed over time must also be given due consideration. Good futures research has a future when it realistically evaluates its range of activities, its opportunities and its limitations.

In the coming years, the academic futures research in Europe has to face at least four major challenges, which are discussed below.

Distinction between future-oriented consultancy and academic futures research

Most European countries have a predominant section of people who call themselves “future researchers” and work primarily in the fields of political and management consulting. These so-called future researchers participate very rarely in the discourses of the scientific community. This is because, in the future-oriented consultancy business, the *generation* of scientific knowledge, i.e. research in the real sense of the word, is generally not a part of the consultancy project although most clients expect the application of relevant scientific knowledge. If the practical application of scientific knowledge is described as “research”, it only leads to an inflationary use of the research concept.

This problem has long been resolved in established disciplines. For instance, in the medical field, only those people who predominantly work towards generating new medical knowledge are called researchers or scientists; practising doctors never claim to be “researchers”. Even patients consider their doctors as academically qualified practitioners rather than as researchers or scientists. In this sense, all people

and institutes predominantly working towards generating future-oriented scientific knowledge must insist on an honest declaration: Wo “Forschung” drauf steht, muss auch Forschung drin sein (If there is a research claim “on the outside”, there must be research inside). The *European Journal of Futures Research* intends to contribute to the promotion of a scientific basis for future-oriented research.

(Inter-)disciplinary futures research or futures research as a separate academic discipline?

In the course of differentiation of the varied disciplines during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most disciplines dealt with the analysis of future-related issues. As of today, a greater part of future-oriented research takes place in the context of scientific disciplines that give a lot of importance to the analysis of medium-term and long-term future developments, e.g. demography, economic prognostics, climate research, risk research, technology assessment and (economic or technological) innovation research. A series of futures studies has also been carried out in the fields of sociology, political science and educational science. Most researchers see themselves in the context of their respective scientific disciplines and do not call themselves “future researchers”. Thus, the situation today is paradoxical: most of the scientifically substantiated future-oriented research done today is *not* carried out under the label of “futures research”. This also holds true for the participation of researchers and scientific institutes in future-oriented research programmes of the European Commission. Scientifically substantiated research, which can be explicitly called “futures research”, is a rare phenomenon today.

The need for independent futures science or futures research started becoming sporadically evident as early as in the 1940s. Thus, the German jurist and political scientist Ossip K. Flechtheim coined the term “futurology” during his exile in the USA in 1943—i.e. 3 years before the first American think tank for futures research (SRI) was founded. However to date, this concept of a new academic discipline called futurology or futures science has only been implemented in the form of a few institutes at individual universities. Obviously therefore, there are very few professors who work with the scientific principles of future-related research. These unsuitable conditions are responsible for the fact that there are only isolated instances of well-founded academic discourses about scientific theory and methodology of futures research. In the light of these reflections, clearly defining the scientific conception of futures research is one of the most important challenges before us in the coming years [33, 34]. The scientific journal *EJFR* intends to contribute to this.

Potentials of computer simulations

Since the 1930s, the statistical modelling of data rapidly developed in the various disciplines of human, social and

economic sciences in the USA. This methodological innovation facilitated a fairly reliable mathematical–statistical description of (probable) development in the social systems. From the 1970s onward, this form of prognostics, which was primarily based on differential equation systems, benefited from the excessive improvement in the computing power of computers [35]. There was a rapid rise in the use of computer models and simulations of complex social processes within the framework of social sciences. A series of future-oriented studies was made against this backdrop, e.g. the study “The Limits to Growth” on behalf of *Club of Rome* [36]. In the subsequent years, the field of futures research took increasing advantage of the constantly improved technical efficiency of electronic data modelling [37]. With well-founded scientific knowledge and a sound, quantifiable data basis for the structures and functions of a research object, such simulation procedures could make useful contributions to the future-oriented analysis of systems with low complexity and dynamics.

The simulations of complex and dynamic systems, however, soon faced limitations due to significantly simplified (e.g. all humans have the same needs) and aggregated system hypotheses (e.g. the city as one system). Complex social issues can be examined in greater detail with the help of new simulation procedures such as agent-based models that are suitable for representing the variety of our social reality [38]. An important challenge for futures research is to scientifically examine the efficiency and significance of such procedures and to integrate the results in the established spectrum of techniques.

Establishment of taught and research programmes in futures studies

Today, futures research plays a significant role in most organisations that deal with long-term developments and strategic decisions. Methods and approaches of future studies have their place in areas such as research on climate change, technological impact assessment, research on demographic changes or on changes in corporate government (corporate foresight). There is, however, a lack of scientific training.

Globally, there are various efforts to establish futures research through educational programmes. According to the *World Futures Studies Federation* (WFSF) (2013), there are around 20 universities throughout the world that offer master programmes on futures research, futures studies and foresight methodologies. One of those is the Free University Berlin (Germany) [39]. The new “Masters in Future Studies” offers a unique chance to develop a comprehensive understanding of the fundamental aspects of future studies, as well as their potentials and limits, and to study the skills necessary to implement the results of research.

The course is designed as a two-year programme with 120 ECTS. The focus is on the following aspects:

1. Concepts and methods: Students deepen their knowledge of different concepts and methods of future studies. The courses deal with, e.g. the scenario technique, trend–impact analysis as well as conceptual considerations on the core aspects of future studies.
2. Areas of application: Students gather knowledge about different areas in which future studies can be applied. Students learn how to differentiate stakeholders and their interests and the different determining factors of different social areas (e.g. political arena, private sectors, etc.).
3. Practical exercises: During an obligatory internship in an organisation active in the field of future studies, the students develop their capacities to plan and carry out research and publish the results.

The worldwide and European offer in doctoral programmes with a focus on futures studies is still limited.³ Among the few existing possibilities to include a future-oriented perspective into the doctoral degree is the “Future: Education: Quality of Life” network situated at the Institute of Educational Science, University of Innsbruck, Austria. The *EJFR* seeks to support teaching initiatives and students by providing a platform for scientific publication and exchange also for junior researchers with proven scientific merit.

Focus themes of the *European Journal of Futures Research*

The following seven points are the intended focus themes; the subject matter can vary as long as it reflects the fundamental “European” orientation of the journal.

Society: Demographic change; changing family and household structures; migration; gender and social relations; welfare society (see also section politics); inclusion and exclusion; societal questions of time; etc.

Politics: Economic, financial and political integration in the European Union; welfare state politics, neoliberal politics, political participation and citizenship; European identity building; EU research, innovation, and (higher) education policies; foresight and policy making; etc.

Economy and business sectors: Futures of work and labour, production and consumption; competitiveness and technological innovations; growth and sustainable development; social environment and entrepreneurship;

futures of leisure, sports and tourism; from foresight to strategic management; etc.

Science and technology: technology foresight and technology assessment; emerging technologies; technoscience; radical technologies; logistics, transport and mobility; media and telecommunication; human enhancement; young generations and new technologies; European citizens and the broadband society; etc.

X-cutting issues: Gender-specific and diversity perspectives; sustainability; environmental challenges and the greening of Europe; climate change; etc.

Methodology and methods: futures studies in comparative perspective; new research methods; integration of qualitative and quantitative methods; future-related uncertainties, risks and ignorance; scenarios and narrative methods; cross-impact analysis; social network analysis; agent-based modelling; etc.

Philosophy of science: epistemological and ontological questions; theory of futures studies; “new” forms of knowledge; novel philosophical bases of futures research, post-positivist research approaches; ethical questions; reflections on futures studies as an emerging academic field; etc.

Invitation to contribute to the *EJFR*

As a scientific journal, the *European Journal of Futures Research* intends to strengthen futures research in Europe at the thematic and philosophical–methodical levels. High academic standards are not only guaranteed through the global, double-blind peer review process performed by internationally renowned scholars but also by publishing with Springer. Hence, we invite researchers who work with future-related issues to participate in this ambitious project by submitting articles and/or by joining the Academic Board and thus contribute to its success.

The Editors-in-Chief and the Team of Editors
May 2013

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³ For a list of tertiary education in futures studies, see the list at the website of the WFSF http://www.wfsf.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=section&id=16&Itemid=108, accessed on 19 March 2013.

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