



Exploring the future from an anthropological point of view

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An old human skill: interpreting the invisible future

- An exemple of divination in the High Lands of Madagascar

- Vankaratra :



<https://vimeo.com/543087395>



Discovering an unknown society by describing practices, social interactions, and material culture

- When Bronislaw Malinowski, the father of the participant observation method, had to carry out a field study of the population of the Trobriand Islands in the Pacific, he didn't know anything about this population.
- He stayed four years observing, participating in, and discussing their daily life.
- Step by step he discovered how to describe their way of life from an economical point of view to a social and religious one.
- Thanks to Malinowski, we got the main tool to discover what is unknown which means describing how this unknown society was working.



The Future is an « exotic », « dark », and unforeseeable world

- That means, when entering into this unknown world, we don't know where we are. We don't know what to do. We don't know how to choose the right way, mainly when there is a climatic, sanitary, economic, or political unforeseeable crisis or a « black swan » (or a turkey...) in other words an unpredictable event
- Given that, many « experts » have been trying to forecast the Future from the beginning of the human societies by reading guts, looking sky, building long statistical series or doing probability.
- These methods are useful to help social actors to get through action, to take a decision with the feeling of acting in a less unforeseeable world.
- But it is impossible to forecast what is unforeseeable .
- In other words we have to accept getting within the Future, partly taking a leap in the dark.

A mobile knowledge is required to observe what is emerging from the present what means avoiding the cognitive tunneling trap

- The future is not in front of us like an invisible painting. It doesn't exist even if it works like an oil tanker taking a long time to stop or turn
- That is why a part of the elements which are building the future are visible, most often as weak signals.
- The new combinatorial of the elements are unknown which means that the elements which organize the human society are relatively stables but there combinatorial is unforreseable
- The new combinatorial is made of continuity with the past (as a structure, as a pattern) and unpredictable discontinuity
- That means we can observe the emergence of the futur but not the future in itself
- This emergence is very mobile and uncertain what means the observation has to be mobile moving along thanks to six main intelectual tools

The six main mobile tools adapted to the non linear mobility of the emerging future

- The skills of an anthropologist: creating the landmarks which are organizing a situation
 - the scales of observation (changing the scope of observation)
 - the itinerary method (following the steps of a decision-making process)
 - the story life method (following the stages of ages)
 - the system approach (describing the evolution of social actor interactions depending on the evolution of the situation)
 - The comparative historical method (comparing the continuity)
 - The geographical moving method (comparing the changes)

The observation focuses on the mobility of the new unforeseeable combinatorial

- One historical example:
 - In 2010, I was asked to give a lecture and then an article to big French companies which wanted to invest and trade with China. I explained that the most important observation was about the huge growth of the Chinese middle class which leads to an important need of raw material, energy and proteins (food for pork and for Chinese because Chinese eat a lot of pork). If China cannot meet all of its needs, the risk of war could increase. At this time war risks were tiny and invisible.
 - I was stroked by the similarity with the German history at the end of the nineteenth century. It was becoming the most powerful country therefore confronting the UK and France. Its industry and army need energy. They were under the control of the UK. So, Germany had the feeling of being locked in a trap. Then Germany entered into war with the UK, France, Russia and Italy because it has no more solution to survive.
 - In 2010, my hunch was that China was as stressed as Germany was in 1914. Today, in 2021, we know that the risk of war between China and the US is high.
 - Even if the historical situation is not the same, there are many structural similarities. The most powerful country is challenged by another powerful country, China. It is called the “Thucydides trap” referring to the Peloponnese war between Sparta and Athens in the 5th century before our era.
- We don't know the future, but we are aware of a possible new combinatorial because there are some similarities with the “historical situation” of feeling to be trapped.