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The Futures that We Wanted, the Futures that We Dreaded

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Review: Peter J. Bowler, *A History of the Future: Prophets of Progress from H.G. Wells to Isaac Asimov*, Cambridge-New York 2017, eBook.

Słowa kluczowe: historia, kultura, postęp, przyszłość, technologia

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Whether we are at the age of five or fifty-five, we have no choice but to think about our future. This is so not so much due to the dramatic choices we face — between strawberry and chocolate ice-cream or between red and white wine — as to the fact that the parietal lobe and the cerebellum of our brains force us to anticipate, predict, and imagine what is to come. However, as Peter J. Bowler's *A History of the Future: Prophets of Progress from H.G. Wells to Isaac Asimov* shows us more than explicitly, thinking about what is to come is an activity also pursued by those earnestly and professionally interested in the future and the shapes it could take. Already from the title — or rather the subtitle — of his text, we might surmise that the book outlines a history of conceptualisations of the future which emerged between the late 19th century and the 1960s in the English-speaking countries. And, to a large extent, this is what the text covers. On its pages, numerous visions of progress are delineated or mentioned and, even if the book goes beyond the adopted frame of reference every now and then, this is to its advantage. Bowler's gesture shows how important and across-the-board future-oriented thinking is.

A History of the Future opens with a preface and an introduction in which the author clarifies the groundwork of his text. In these, we are informed that

his intention is to delve into a selection of popular science and science fiction works — including those propagated by newspapers, radio, film, and television — from roughly between 1900 and 1965¹ in order to show the dynamics between various conceptualisations of the future proposed by both optimistic technophiles and pessimistic critics of the inventions appearing during the time. Going beyond the necessary explanatory part, Bowler also further expounds on the assumptions to which he anchors his work. Since, in certain cases, this gesture invites the reader to consider a number of questions troubling theoreticians of both the sciences and the humanities for decades or centuries, I would like to refer to those remarks which seem most inspiring.

One of Bowler's more brilliant comments points to our assumption that, by and large, progress *ought* to happen. When one stops at this thought and starts pondering it, the thus-far very obvious purpose of the sciences and the humanities might become much less so. If, as *A History of the Future* seems to suggest, new inventions alleviate old problems but generate new ones, the question this text pushes us to consider is whether we really progress or merely shift between different types of difficulties. And if we rid the sciences and the humanities of progress as their supreme objective, what idea could be endowed with this function? Although Bowler's book does not propose any solution to the problem — it merely pushes the reader to notice it — the idea of sustainable development might be one worth considering.

The author also draws our attention to the highly problematic question regarding the effects of choosing one's source material. Employing the “knowing just a part of the elephant” metaphor, Bowler substantiates the idea that teaching the culture of a given country solely via the lens of literature generates its fragmentary view. If, as he aptly notes, we understand the culture of the 1930s–1950s' America and Britain via the novels of the time — e.g., those written by Huxley or Orwell — we end up with the impression that it was highly pessimistic and that it saw technology as a tool which would bring upon the end of humanity. But, if we also look at this culture along the lines proposed by contemporary scientists, popular science and hard science fiction writers, Marxists, some liberal religious thinkers, and humanists, the picture becomes much more optimism-tainted and variegated, and hence, reflects the reality much more accurately. That the author emphasises combining various perspectives is, most likely, a well-thought gesture to draw on the idea of interdisciplinarity. However, that he puts this idea into practice in the following chapters is perhaps one of the most valuable assets of the book. Bowler not only criticises fragmentary understanding and proposes a different view on the matter, but also gives us examples of how such a multipla-

¹ Bowler treats his temporal, spatial, etc., frameworks very flexibly. Noticing that, one can avoid the confusion caused by his slightly different formulations of essentially the same ideas as they recur in the book.

nar understanding might be enhanced — each chapter that follows is a multiplanar analysis of particular conceptualisations of the future.

Furthermore, Bowler proposes a very interesting discussion on how — depending on whether it is concatenated with the category of certainty or plausibility — our understanding of particular concepts varies and entails different inferences. Should we wish to see the progress-oriented dreams and predictions of the writers he talks about in terms of certainty or lack thereof, many cognitively productive concepts these writers proposed might be discarded on the grounds of their failure to translate into reality. Treating these concepts as plausibilities saves them from the lot of mere figments of imagination and might serve as an argument in favour of their analysis as vital elements of our socio-intellectual milieu. That is why, although Bowler's discussion has progress as its cynosure — as depicted in the texts the author refers to — I believe it to be of pertinence to wider debates on the key notions with which to understand the real.² Also of a wider application are his remarks that the science fiction writings of the time allow us to understand “the attitudes, beliefs and expectations of a generation that was getting used to the idea that the future would not merely repeat the past” and “what some ordinary readers were prepared to accept as plausible visions of a future world.”³

Having provided the methodological grounds for his work in the introductory chapter, Bowler segues into delineating the context in which his further musings are embedded. In the second chapter, entitled “The Prophets: Their Background and Ambitions,” he depicts the socio-intellectual milieu he investigates. The amplex of information goes beyond what might be expected and, every now and then, the text pleasantly surprises the reader with tidbits such as that John Campbell received a visit from the FBI because, according to the bureau, a story by Cleve Cartmill which he had published “revealed” details of the Manhattan Project.⁴

When taken together, the discussed sections are possibly the most rewarding ones in the book. This results from the fact that, from the third chapter onwards, Bowler's work becomes problematic. Although the author declares that Chapters Three to Eleven are devoted to discussing thematically grouped visions of progress, as they appear in selected works of popular science and science fiction, his execution of the intention offers concurrently illumination and confusion. On the one hand, Bowler does arrange the presented knowledge thematically. The subsequent chapters focus on how the selected 1900–1965 authors imagined or predicted the following ideas: how and where we will live; how our communication, computing, and (land, air, and space) transportation will look like; how

² Cf. R. Schmidt-Scheele, *The Plausibility of Future Scenarios: Conceptualising an Unexplored Criterion in Scenario Planning*, Bielefeld 2020.

³ P.J. Bowler, “Introduction”, [in:] idem, *A History of the Future: Prophets of Progress from H.G. Wells to Isaac Asimov*, Cambridge-New York 2017, eBook.

⁴ P.J. Bowler, “The Prophets: Their Background and Ambitions”, [in:] idem, *A History of the Future*.

our military, energetic, and environmental issues will develop; and, finally, what will become of human nature. The chapter titles reflect their content and even go beyond what is expected. For instance, in his discussion of the affinities between new biology and various ideas of progress — in the chapter entitled “Human Nature” — Bowler also references French/Russian takes on the topic. A similar effort of his can be found in other sections of the work and, when coupled with occasional philosophical, political, etc., comments, it is highly suggestive of the informativeness and insight of *A History of the Future*.⁵

On the other hand, however many captivating thoughts the book puts forward, their delivery tends to be confusing. First of all, the general impression it gives is that, in lieu of descriptions and analyses of the dynamics between various conceptions of progress or, at least, clear-cut juxtapositions of how such conceptions *function* in selected works of science, popular science, science fiction, etc., we read by and large a history of inventions regarding selected aspects of human life interspersed with lists and/or short descriptions of how a given entity was depicted in various texts. To give an example, a student delving into the book would encounter the surname of Wells and the titles of some of his books many a time. Much as the reader would learn that Wells wrote and opined in certain texts about particular inventions of his time and of the future, no more tangible knowledge of Wells’ texts is offered. Unfortunately, the realisation of the author’s wish to provide an overview of how selected ideas about progress are reflected in various types of texts is much closer to an encyclopaedic collection of loglines regarding the books, films, etc., which covers chosen aspects of the technological progress circa 1900–1965. This makes the work chaotic. Even if the materials on which the book focuses are organised chronologically and thematically, their discussion seems to be stochastic. We can only guess that the themes, writers, and works to which Bowler refers have been chosen due to their general importance, but the reader would definitely benefit from being informed about the rationale behind the author’s choices and what makes them consistent.

Secondly, even if the analytic chapters have their separate topics, the use of the same examples to substantiate various points might leave the reader puzzled. Not only is there no need on the part of the author to repeat his examples, but also this gesture is incompatible with his preliminary declarations at least for two reasons. If the author asserts that the intention behind his text is to avoid presenting a fragmentary view of the 1900–1965 American and British culture, clinging to some examples works against the assertion. Moreover, Bowler does not take into account a substantial source which is of direct pertinence to the ideas he discusses. The source in question are the comic books produced by Marvel (originally Timely Comics) and DC Comics (originally National Allied Publications). Since these texts are evidently focused on technological progress, their

⁵ P.J. Bowler, Chapters 3–11, [in:] idem, *A History of the Future*.

popularity kept increasing since their inception in the 1940s and, nowadays, it is next to impossible for a person in touch with contemporary culture to be unaware of the Marvel movies phenomenon, Bowler's omission of these comic books remains bewildering.

Taking the above into consideration — as well as the fact that the epilogue included in *A History of the Future* usefully summarizes the main ideas put forward in the analytic chapters⁶ — one will, possibly, remain of two minds as far as Bowler's text is concerned. Therefore, further suggestion seems appropriate in this case. Much as the reviewed work poses some problems, its value could be seen more clearly when taking into consideration the contexts in which it might be used. First, it might serve as a reference in the courses and research projects devoted to the history of inventions, be it general introduction courses or dissertation projects that demand both general information about the inventions created in the period covered by Bowler's work and detailed data about the — broadly defined — literature on a given invention.

Second, students of interdisciplinary seminars and researchers concerned with the affinities between the sciences and their cultural context as well as between particular inventions and their cultural reverberations are also a group which will find *A History of the Future* valuable. The subchapters of the analytic sections make useful models for case studies of a chosen invention and its perception. Altogether, despite certain lapses, the book is worth reading — it could either allow one to verify or grasp the idea of the technological progress between 1900 and 1965, or become a guide for further research on the topic it covers.

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Summary

The article is a review of Peter J. Bowler's *A History of the Future: Prophets of Progress from H.G. Wells to Isaac Asimov*. The book presents the history of chosen inventions — and their pessimistic and/or optimistic presentations in various 1900–1965 media — which were to contribute to the progress of British and American culture of the time. Working with a panoply of sources, i.a.,

⁶ P.J. Bowler, "Epilogue", [in:] idem, *A History of the Future*.

selected works of science fiction and popular science, Bowler strives to discuss how particular inventions were enthusiastically and/or fearfully embraced and shaped the future of British and American society.