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From the 'Forward Studies Unit' to ESPAS: genesis and (re)definition(s) of European foresight

In this presentation, we will define foresight policy as a set of methods for constructing public action, implemented in the name of the necessary consideration of the future. By adopting such a definition, it appears that attempts to include the 'long-term horizon' in the public decision-making process go back a long way: at the EU level, these policies have given rise to very different organisations, methods and products, which vary according to the political, social and institutional contexts in which they are invented and implemented.

Such an observation therefore invites us to denaturalise foresight, by analysing it as a particular public policy, a policy of the administration on itself or a 'process of reflection of the State on the State' (Andersson and Prat, 2015) of which this presentation will try to explore the conditions of possibility. This way of understanding foresight as a research object is in line with a rich tradition of social science work on this subject, notably on French and American administrations (Dulong, 1997 ; Gaïti, 2002). Here, by historicising foresight, the objective is to better understand why and how foresight develops within the Commission, and what factors determine the interest in it and the instruments associated with it.

In this perspective, we will first go back over the history of the Forward Studies Unit (Cellule de prospective), which represents an important moment in the development of this function within the Commission, as it is the first successful attempt to institutionalise foresight as a form of governmental knowledge at the highest level. We will show how the success of this form of foresight is linked to the professional culture of the European administration at that time, but also to the encounter between institutional ambitions and a favourable and supportive political context.

In its second part, this presentation will return to the relative 'decline' of foresight functions within the Commission, at the turn of the century and up to the beginning of the last decade. Indeed, the evolution of the Commission's role in the construction of European public action, as much with regard to the other institutions and the Member States as with regard to private actors and stakeholders, will transform its relationship to expertise and in particular to foresight and redefine its objectives, temporality, and methods.

As a conclusion, we will come back to Espas and the development of strategic foresight in the Commission to show how these recent transformations seem to break with the previous period and, on the other hand, sometimes echo the experience of the Forward Studies Unit. Finally, we

will mention some exploratory hypotheses to explain this new turning point, highlighting the role of crises, the restoration of a more political role for the Commission, and last but not least the effects of mobilisations, in and around the European institutions, aimed at politicising expertise, i.e making the question of how expertise is produced and used in European policy-making a central issue.

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Prospective et Moment Technocratique en France : une Perspective Socio-historique

Abstract

There was an attempt to institute an economic policy at the Community level based on foresight. This was led by the European Commissioner for the Economy and Vice-President of the European Commission (1958-67), Robert Marjolin, and was inspired by French planning.

The French planning experience has little in common with the experience of the communist countries. It was “indicative” and backed by an ambitious reform project that did not aim so much to plan the economy as to modernise the art of governing. The main focus of its promoters was to establish a new political representation based on competence (and no longer on representativeness) as well as new principles of public action based on economic efficiency (and no longer on legal regularity). Jean Monnet was one the leader of this technocratic project. After the second war he took the head of the Commissariat general au Plan, created 1946, and invented a new kind of decision making based on foresight and consultation with de nation key’s players (entrepreneurs, trade unionists).

In 1962 Robert Marjolin, a close colleague of J. Monnet, tried to import this experience at the European level but he failed. If there are technical and conjonctural reasons, the major factor is political : the opposition of Germany and the lack of political support.

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**Back to the future
Forecasting regimes and conjunctures**

The future has been constructed as a category of public action. It has been constructed in very different contexts: after the Second war, when it was necessary to think about and organize reconstruction and growth. Since the 1980s, when it was a question of confronting crises and trying to regain the possibility of acting in an uncertain world.

Foresight, planning and forecasting have become academic and bureaucratic specialties. These activities feed the process of rationalization of the State, of rationalization of decision making. They aim to develop the capacity of States to act. As we know, taking the future into account is never descriptive, or never only descriptive; it aims to tell the future. To tell the future is not simply to foresee its properties but also to orient and govern it. In the process of rationalization and disenchantment of the world, the future has thus become a time that it is possible to apprehend thanks to specific knowledge; it is also a possibility that can be made to happen, that can be modified or that can be avoided.

This ability to describe and create the future takes different forms depending on the situation and the country; it relies on different types of expertise (economics, social sciences, mathematics, etc.); it uses extremely variable tools: macroeconomic models, microeconomic simulation models, scenarios, opinion polls, consultations with social actors, philosophical reflections

It is nested in certain sectors of the State that are competing to take charge of forecasting (the Ministry of Finance, the Plan, the Prime Minister, etc.) but also in international organizations, research laboratories, think tanks, disciplines, and journals. It is carried by different social groups: senior civil servants, employers, international organizations, trade unionists, social scientists, economists, insurers, etc.

We would like to recall that the production of the future provides information on the State's capacity to act and on the modalities of its action. My paper will first briefly review the French case and then propose some avenues for generalization

A A quick history of futures in France;

There is now a large body of literature on the subject This literature is primarily concerned with the history of economic forecasting and the history of planning. On the other hand, the history of foresight is still not well established. It has had discontinuous successes: it is now back on the political-bureaucratic agenda (in 2013, the Commissariat au Plan gave way to France stratégie, presented as the Commissariat général à la stratégie et à la prospective) and scientific (we can cite the Futurepol project. The project is funded by an ERC launched in 2012 and is entitled A Political History of the Future. Production of knowledge, governance of the future)

This history is structured around several poles, planning, foresight and economic forecasting. It can be summarized in 4 steps; (this is of course a very quick description)

The general hypothesis is that the question of the production of the future is very closely linked to a history of the State's capacity to act, and also to its capacity to convince people that it is possible to transform the social world

1: from 1945 to the 1960s: the "community of planners »

The Liberation period is very important in this history, because even if the time for reforms quickly closed, reforms durably transformed the State's capacity. Ordinances between 1944 and 1946 set up the ENA or the Commissariat au plan, and nationalized a large part of the economy. These reforms made the post-war State a decisive player in economic and social policies. They organized a new legitimacy for the State, at a time when the former social elites, both private and public, were discredited by their support for the Vichy regime. Senior civil servants, protected by a new status, called upon to be trained by a new school, the ENA, thought of themselves more and more as the vanguard of the social world, charged with a mission to renovate the country. They become the spokespersons of the necessary modernization of society, and in this sense, can think of themselves as the bearers of the desirable future.

A whole series of structural reforms made the State a key player, capable of compensating for the deficiencies of the market, of rebuilding, of equipping but also of innovating and modernizing:

To carry out these new tasks, the government relies on a General Commission of the Plan, which defines the priorities for action through consultation between administrations, experts and professional representatives.

The men in charge of the plan formed an alliance with certain senior officials from the Ministry of Finance and with statisticians from INSEE. Together, they formed a community of planners who were reputed to tell the future. They were the interlocutors of the Americans in the management of the Marshall Plan, and they invented a way of counting, of quantifying, of producing a national accounting system that would identify the priorities for action.

The production of the future required a conquering and interventionist administration. Senior civil servants, some of whom are economists and statisticians, collect data on the social world and feed macroeconomic forecasting models. They negotiate future priorities with representatives of social interests who must be convinced of the importance of modernization

On the other hand, foresight, launched by Gaston Berger, is more a matter of visions and even of visionaries. It is necessary to imagine the future at a distance from the timetable of public action. Here again, these were senior civil servants, but located in other sectors of the State (national education and research, regional planning, transportation) and allied with reformist bosses and sociologists. Many of them published articles and future scenarios. In the 1960s, foresight reached the university and the then emerging social sciences.

Between the planners and the futurists, one can identify a few intermediaries, but there is a relative ignorance of each other's work. The planners were integrated into the State apparatus, but the futurists and their work remained at a distance from public action.

In this first moment, therefore, there were three ways of telling and governing the future: at the Direction de la Prévision, economists and statisticians worked on data and saw themselves as aids to political decision-making. At the Plan, around Jean Monnet, we find economists with more

complex trajectories, undoubtedly more liberal (they will leave with Jean Monnet in the adventure of the ECSC); we also find civil servants who lead negotiations with representatives of different social sectors in which the aim is to identify the orientations of public action over five years. In the foresight networks, philosophers, sociologists, essayists and senior civil servants try to identify the future

Beyond their differences in training or position, planners, futurists and forecasters share the conviction that the State can and must act to create the future, that is, according to them, to modernize the social world. The State is the solution to correct the failures of the market and to lead to a global well-being

2 from the 1970s to the 1990s Caution and retreat from foresight and forecasting

This certainty of progress and of the State's capacity to make it happen is gradually cracking. May 1968 can be seen as a convenient date to inaugurate this weakening. May 1968 surprised the leaders. The meaning of the event, the values of youth, the consumer society are constructed as objects of media and political reflection. According to the new diagnoses that circulate in the public space, the production of a future organized around economic growth is not enough. Well-being requires taking into account the aspirations of young people, who also carry the future.

The Plan loses its administrative and political capacity; it suffers from the weight of ministerial routines and loses its capacity to organize the economic modernization of society and to impose priorities on the different ministries. On the other hand, the Commissariat au Plan succeeded in gaining a new perimeter: around Jacques Delors, planners developed social indicators that aimed to objectify the social world and the changes to be made. The social sciences were thus mobilized to conduct large-scale surveys financed by the State.

The economists of the Direction de la Prévision (Forecasting Department) fell back on the Ministry of Finance and were closely associated with the orientation of economic policies. At the end of 1968, they attempted a more ambitious operation with the launch of the "Rationalisation des choix budgétaires", RCB, which aimed to transform the decision-making processes within the State. They failed. Moreover, the Keynesian macroeconomic models they had developed since the 1950s were losing their relevance and were gradually being challenged.

In this more anxious and cautious period, the narratives produced by futurists are regaining strength. It is a narrative that has been largely transformed since the Berger era. Futurists meet in clubs, in a journal called *Futuribles*. They are present at the Ministry of Research with its Centre de prospective et d'évaluation, in mathematics laboratories (a foresight department was created in 1958 within the Société d'économie et de mathématiques appliquées). A European research program, FAST (Forecasting and Assessment in Science and Technology), was launched in 1978 and involved prospectivist circles. American political science is mobilized and translated (Dahl for example); as well as the work of the Rand corporation. New attention is paid to the reports of the Club of Rome (the famous Meadows report in 1972)

Futurists do not rely on calculation methods but on stories and on the construction of scenarios. In 1971, the DATAR (Delegation for Regional Planning created in 1963), which at the time was the main administrative body for foresight, produced a "scenario of the unacceptable" by calling on private experts.

Apparently, these scenarios are not very convincing if one follows the report in *Le Monde* of July 20, 1971 ("Scenario of the unacceptable")

"This is the picture presented to us by one hundred and seventy pages of text that is too often boring, of indigestible statistics, of organization charts more complicated than a labyrinth. It is impressive. But is it anything other than an amplification of the current fashionable themes? In conclusion, one would have liked to see recipes and lines of action formulated so that "the shock of the future" would not turn into a deflagration. But these are cruelly absent, unfortunately, from the work, which appears to be an essay in geographical science-fiction built on starting data whose importance can easily be questioned and on postulates that are mostly imaginary. Don't the OTAM experts themselves write on page 12, in their jargon. "Because of the assumption made as to the stability of the criteria and modes of decision and the durability of the economic and social system in force - an assumption whose objective validity could not be tested, - no definite probability of realization can be associated with the trend scenario as it is presented here. »

Foresight takes (or try to...) a very applied and strategic turn. It determines threats, and intends to provide advice to avoid revolutions and crises of the university.

In any case, forecasters, planners and futurists now seem to doubt the capacity of public action to lead change

3 The reversal of the factory of the future (1980-2000)

This moment could be summarized by this formula: if we cannot transform the social world, we must transform the State and the modes of decision-making. Or if one prefers: "To transform society, one must transform the State".

The inability of the State to lead change, to reform society, to set a course, has become a media subject, constantly taken up, associated with the crisis of representation.

The State, which in the 1950s and 1960s was the vector of social modernization, has become a problem; it must be reformed in order to be able to act on the present and therefore on the future. We can refer here to the work of Philippe Bezes on putting the need for a strategic State on the bureaucratic and political agenda. This time of recomposition of public action involves putting to sleep the places where the future is made within the State (the Plan is abolished and foresight retreats into the world of management and private enterprise).

The reform of the State becomes the condition for the development of foresight. The organization of the State must distinguish between two levels: an autonomous but controllable operational stratum and a transversal, strategist management stratum, which diagnoses, evaluates and sees in the long term.

This strategic State develops in very specific places within the executive branch, it takes place in an interministerial stratum (around the Prime Minister and the President of the Republic, in the General Secretariat for European Affairs, in the Inter-ministerial Crisis Centre, in the Budget and Treasury Department, etc.). This layer should concentrate the power to control and direct action. The "executive core" becomes the place for forecasting. The time for forecasting is folded around the time of the political mandate

4 From the 2000s to today: the future in a time of uncertainty

Since the 2000s, the succession of crises (the financial crisis of 2008, the terrorist crisis of 2015 in France, the social crisis with the Yellow Vests, the health crisis, the energy crisis, the environmental crisis) has presented government leaders with new challenges: how to prevent crises, how to regain the capacity to act in an uncertain world.

The return to an interest in the production of the future and in expertise in this field is taking place at the highest level: foresight centers attached to the Prime Minister, the return of the Plan, the recruitment of modelers, mathematicians, and epidemiologists in certain ministerial departments

This return is accompanied by the institutionalization of new expertise (micro-simulation models, experimental economics, epidemiological modeling, predictive computational methods); state centers or private laboratories call on new experts capable of deploying these instruments.

B the production of the future: some lines of research

- 1 The regimes of prediction

In his thesis on economic forecasting, Thomas Angeletti distinguished two forecasting regimes

- A macroeconomic forecasting regime, implemented in the post-war period, associated with planning. This model proposes a "realistic" vision of the economy: economic phenomena can be measured, numerical series can be produced and change can be "read". In this view, the State is the only entity that can intervene and correct things. Forecasters are interventionists and structure the programming of economic policies. This can be seen as a paradox: the figures tell us what the economic evolution is (we are in hard "science") but the State can dictate an economic policy that goes against it (and here we depend on the assumptions of the model). This realistic forecasting regime was more complicated to apply after 1968 and especially after 1973; the models did not succeed in stabilizing the links between inflation and growth and tried to include "externalities" (the behavior of social agents) in the model.

- A second forecasting regime was launched in the 1970s at a time when economists were emphasizing rational expectations. (Liberals were in the process of overturning Keynesian domination; Hayek and Friedman won the Nobel Prize in Economics in the mid-1970s) New independent centers took over the production of figures; this time, we no longer reasoned from social aggregates but from individuals. The forecasts generate feedback loops. In this framework, state intervention is possible, but forecasting is done through incentive systems

This transformation of forecasting regimes is accelerated today and the second forecasting regime has been widely developed: the method of randomized evaluation proposed by Esther Duflo, for example, focuses on forecasting approached in a new way: in order to implement action in the future, it is necessary to test it, to conduct supervised experiments: it is necessary to build the future in the present

We can also mention the work of modellers, which was revealed during the health crisis. INSERM has recruited mathematical modellers and has developed a plan to bring public health into a medical revolution with a predictive dimension. We can also mention the micro-simulation models that work from databases and that transform the ways of thinking about public action decisions;

these models, for example, examine future reforms based on estimates of who will be the winners and losers in the short and medium term from the implementation of these policies

- 2 Links between forecasting regimes and policies

One of the issues at stake in these new expertises and disciplines is the transformation of ways of governing. For example, how can we understand the "Rules as code" paradigm, which proposes another way of making the future: legislation could (should) be translated into codes and could be unfolded in the form of equations to be solved in order to find the right intervention formula. Some evoke a new form of legitimacy of action, based on the legal-algorithmic character of decisions (Dominique Cardon)

Are these new ways of predicting and instrumenting the future in line with the neo-liberal project? Here too, the forecasting systems that are emerging, centered around the collection of big data on social activities, raise questions: they emphasize their flexibility and their non-directive nature, but propose a very fine-grained monitoring of the social practices that need to be studied and predicted

- 3 democratization, pluralization, technocratization of the production of the future?

Parliamentarians are now recognized as evaluators of public action; they have established links with data production centers. More concretely, microsimulation models could give MPs a new capacity to act. Another example is Openfisca, an open source micro-simulation software for socio-fiscal systems created in 2011, whose primary purpose is to make tax and social legislation more transparent. The production sites of the future have multiplied: new administrations, agencies, international organizations, private companies, insurance (catastrophe bonds market). New university courses have been created in economics, management and mathematics departments; new professions are being organized. How can we analyze this pluralization of production sites and producers of the future?

The formation of a field of production of the future is now underway. The position of state administrations in this universe is still uncertain. But a transformed State is being built around the production of the future. The formation of so-called strategic strata at the top of the State is one of the areas of development. A reforming nebula of experts on the future is mobilizing heterogeneous technical and scientific knowledge. This could be used to serve a democratic project: it could also promote a technocratic conception of public action. These experts offer leaders a reservoir of solutions to social, environmental and health crises that make public action both necessary (imperative) and risky. The uses of these solutions remain a field open to numerous empirical investigations