

**Helga Nowotny**

## **The Odds for Tomorrow**

1.

In a witty and ironic novel with the title *The Odds Against Tomorrow* Nathaniel Rich invents a character named Mitchell Zukor. He is the vanguard of a new industry – nightmare analysis.

He is a professional and paid lucratively for the specialized skills he brings to the job. He would force his clients to look out of the windows of the skyscrapers and see what is going on. The more he and his clients learn, the more they find there is to fear. Bad news fortify Zukor, he is not only fascinated, but disasters feeds his fascination. He sells fear at a ferocious pace. His company, FutureWorld, is doing so well that – well, it invites disaster to strike.

I am not going to give you the whole story, but the message is clear: fear – *The Odds Against Tomorrow* – has become a huge business and as we can observe on a daily basis, has also proven to be a powerful lever in politics. The issue – and it is a global one – is how to distinguish the projected, willfully distorted, imagined and media-hyped reality from the much more sober, complex and messy reality that emerges from the work of scientists and scholars who want to understand what is going on. Their work is hard and often ungrateful, coming with its own bundle of uncertainties, doubts and a validity which is always temporarily limited.

*The Odds Against Tomorrow* also raise the question about the extent to which fear, and the imagined disasters and nightmares it generates, limits curiosity, this emotional driving force of any scientific endeavour which always needs to spill over into society to prevent its retrenchment into a state of creative apotheosis.

This brings me, perhaps not surprisingly, to my social science research agenda, cast in global terms. Admittedly, it has a bit of an utopian streak, but did not utopias flourish just before the dawn of modernity? Maybe, we need more utopian thinking at the beginning of the age of globality.

2.

The first point on my research agenda is about the *What*, the conceptual and intellectual object of thinking globally. I will therefore *not* begin by an enumeration of the global challenges that we all know, being continuously reminded through the media, and in a more refined form through the European research agenda of H2020: climate change, food security, water, energy mixes and so on. In doing so, I am not brushing aside the issue of social injustice in the world, arising from the uneven distribution of resources

and access to them, lack of capacities and other glaring inequalities around the globe. It is tempting and easy to fall into a deeply pessimistic mood. But – to return to the novel I mentioned at the beginning – apocalypse is for the faint-hearted. My research agenda therefore is an agenda *For the Odds of Tomorrow*.

Some empirical evidence already exists for assessing these odds.

The writing of world history has made a recent come back. Some historians give us a new and fascinating reading of the history of empires around the world (Jane Burbank and James Cooper). Others use mainly quantitative data over a long stretch of time, to assess where we came from and where we are going (Ian Morris). One can argue about these approaches, criticize details, the lack of data and omissions. But a genuine attempt is under way to come to a better understanding of the *global interconnections* in the *longue durée*. Bien sur, it was punctuated by periods of prolonged stasis and pitiful regression, often in the wake of frequent violence and brutal conflicts.

Global history tells us about our entangled histories, from different perspectives and from different parts of the world, wherever scholarly ingenuity unearthes empirical data and evidence to further the understanding of the commonalities and differences in our past. Thus, *The Odds For Tomorrow* agenda includes the richness of the historical and cultural record, re-thought globally.

Humanity has survived – *so far*.

There have been undoubtedly major improvements and, yes, material and immaterial progress – *so far*.

The understanding to be gained is about the local and global processes that have shaped the world we live in today and our part in its making and transformation - *so far*.

3.

The second major strand of my research agenda resolutely turns to what shapes the present. To begin with the newcomers have to be included and the shifts in global finance, the pressing needs for global regulations and governance, the glaring inequalities and much more, that result from and shapes the dramatic re-ordering of the geopolitical landscape.

The inclusion of the newcomers (even if their ancestors have been around for millennia) means to think globally in terms of fluid categories of 'here', 'there' and the 'in-between', as much as of 'us' and 'them'. This fluidity and ease of moving between different contexts, the *here* and *there*, has been greatly facilitated, often with unforeseen and unintended consequences, by science and technology. This not only affects Western prerogatives, as can be seen from the rapid increases in research and development investment or the output in scientific publications. It also creates a new variety of global mind-sets and transforms educational systems around the world, including the old question for which kind of (imagined) future we are educating the young generation.

So, the second point on my research agenda is the conceptual imperative and finding new methodological tools that will allow us think the 'here', 'there' and the 'in-between'

together. *The Odds For Tomorrow* resolutely must be based on a rapprochement between various disciplines and research fields, including a rapprochement between the natural and the social sciences. Economics and moral philosophy can be brought together, as exemplified by the impressive project initiated and funded by the FMSH/the Collège d'études mondiales and the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study, funded by the Riksbankens Jubileumsfond.

But it is also obvious, to cite another example, that bringing an STS (science and technology studies) perspective into the curriculum of engineers would have benefitted how to cope with the real disaster of Fukushima. Thinking in terms of 'here' and 'there' and carefully taking the different contexts into account leads to issues like curriculum reform, an issue that I cannot discuss here. It includes the necessity to provide more occasions for the kind of cross-training that athletes practice; but not between sports, but between the natural and social sciences.

4.

The third and last point on my agenda addresses the places where it can find an intellectual home. Where to start, how to proceed in taking thinking globally a more concrete step forward?

What is certain is that new ideas and innovation begins in particular places, with people and topics which together provide the right mix of intensity and passion for ideas that allows to move beyond what is already known. Some places that meet these criteria already exist: Institutes for Advanced Study.

- They still provide a degree of *institutional* autonomy that only a very few top universities enjoy.
- Through careful in-put control, they can select scholars who will be offered degrees of *individual* freedom which has become extremely rare in times of permanent impact assessment in a system devoted, if not obsessed by continuous output control.
- They are *breeding zones of ideas* cultivated far from the mainstream in which, as a Chinese proverb reminds us, only dead fish swim. Such a breeding zone protects against the pressure to conform, but also entices subversiveness. Switching metaphors, it provides the cracks through which, as Francois Jacob remarked, the new enters in unexpected ways.

In 1862, Emily Dickson began one of her mysterious poems with the lines:

*This is my letter to the World/that never wrote to Me...*

Today, the World is no longer addressed through letters, but through tweets and blogs, through you tube videos – and through conferences like ours.

If we expect the World to answer, it can only come through us.