



CAN NEGATIVE SCENARIOS OFFER REASONS FOR IMPLEMENTING POSITIVE FUTURES?

Negative scenarios and negative attitude about the future can also have a didactical function and push the stakeholders to take courageous decisions. The example of the European transport industry confirms this argument.

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Since the past century, Europeans have been enthralled with decline. The end of European political dominance of the world, implemented with colonialism and imperialism, was already understood during World War I: the success of Oswald Spengler's "Der Untergang des Abendlandes" put a cultural seal to an epoch. We have also witnessed that in the 20th century the British had the mania of decline (Clarke/Trebilcock 1997) and, as reported by the New York Times, there has been a recent new wave of "France's Obsession with Decline" (NYT 2017). European pessimistic perception of the future is a long-term element of the European identity. Such a mind-set is very pervasive, and it affects not just the political or cultural debate. The economic and industri-

al discussion is prone to gloomy scenarios for the future. I present here a particular case-study: the European transport industry trends and scenarios as developed in the past 60 years. Europeans have been particularly negative about the future of their transport industry, and, curiously enough, we still have a vibrant industry and globally successful products. It is worthwhile to have a closer look at how negative (and even apocalyptic) scenarios had the effect of mobilising innovation and changes, thus achieving positive outcomes. This can help us to better understand – in a comparative way – which ingredients can turn negative trends into success factors.

The decline of the transport industry

Today, the European transport industry holds – in many sub-sectors – the leadership worldwide. Transport equipment is one of the main areas of European export; European brands have been able to achieve international positions and to access global markets, including emerging economies. How did we get there, considering the ultra-pessimistic scenarios of the past 60 years?

The idea of decline, and more radically of a ruinous decline, that is apocalypse, is a concept with historical and religious roots, at least in the Judeo-Christian ethical tradition (O'Leary 1994). This – by the way – does not mean that dark scenarios have necessarily an apocalyptic vision or background, and even less that decline and apocalypse are used only in conservative circles (Friedrich Engels' slogan "Socialism or Barbarism" is a stunning example). One expected outcome is that negative scenarios can be transformed into self-fulfilling prophecies, impeding any positive action, legitimising the apathetic response to a crisis. However, even a figure like the biblical prophet Jeremiah, who provided a "horror" scenario for the kingdom of Israel, kept in his dystopian foresights a markedly didactical character; his real target was to warn and to avoid the realisation of his predictions.

Once we frame negative forecasts in this perspective, we see how "dark" scenarios can have a positive function of alerting the public opinion about certain issues, and therefore to mobilise societal forces to take action exactly as a response to this negative expected future. In other words,

once the discussion about negative forecasts and the threat of the future starts, the "dark" scenario acts as "no-go" path, thus activating actions and (bright) counter-scenarios (Skrimshire 2014).

This offers some elements to better understand 1960–1990 scenarios for the European transport industry, in which we can scout three waves of ultra-negative scenarios.

In the mid-1960s, the European debate was obsessed with the economies of scale and how USA gigantic companies dwarfed European productivity and market opportunities. The peak of the debate was the 1968 international best-seller "The American Challenge" by the French Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber. He claimed that "shock is better than surprise" (Servan-Schreiber 1968: 20), and he was often criticised for his pessimistic worldview, but exactly that certain diction might have been the right choice to not only let Europe readjust to new global conditions but to let Europe gradually extend its global magnitude.

A second wave of negative scenarios was related to the Japanese lean production and its devastating effects (devastating at least for the Europeans: it is worthwhile to note how a negative scenario for one side means a positive scenario for other sides). Among the many foresights (negative for Europe), like Hedberg's "The Japanese Challenge" (Hedberg 1969) or Kahn's "The Emerging Japanese Superstate" (Kahn 1970), the future of Europe was drawn in uncertainty and slightly pessimistic tones due to persistently anticipated



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growth rates up to the 1980s and due to Kahn's prediction of a world-leading Japan in the year 2000. A third wave of European pessimistic attitudes to the transport industry was (and still is) linked to China's economic rise. Indeed, following the indications of China's 12th five-year plan (2011–2015) key industries, particularly the automotive sector, aimed to

upgrade productivity, quality and technology levels towards high-tech segments, and this in order to achieve stronger domestic and global competitiveness. This alarmed Western producers, which had to face not only global competition but also Chinese overseas investments (as in PSA).

Can we learn from the past?

The impact of horror scenarios is, of course, related to the cultural, political and economic debate of a given societal landscape. Jeremiah, medieval Florentine monk Savonarola or Servan-Schreiber reached a wide audience because they were leveraging an already running discussion on the decline of their respective social environments. Servan-Schreiber was able not only to summarise the on-going elements; he has been able to address those issues in a systematic way, feeding a larger public and putting to an extreme the arguments supporting his thesis. His main ability was to escalate the debate, keeping his dark scenario credible and plausible even for the experts. In other words, despite the already known arguments, in his book he was able "to rattle the cage" (Zimmermann 2000, De Cugis 1969).

It is also true that negative scenarios do not always produce positive outcomes: avoiding negative scenarios does not happen by chance. Actually, quite to the contrary. It requests a large set of circumstances, including the decisive role of policy makers to understand the situation, and the presence of i) "political capital"; ii) social debate (which allows to activate incisive actions); iii) the will to renew the current situation (even from scratch); iv) positive attitude by the stakeholders; v) a know-how to react.

The combination of "political capital" and wide debate was essential in letting the stakeholders take action, and to give support and consensus to the initiatives undertaken to respond to the challenges.

Finale

It is indeed interesting to notice the twists in the transport industry trends: from negative scenarios to positive outcomes. Anyway, we cannot generalise the results of this case. Other sectors (like climate change and security, among others) also present gloomy trends, but we witness contradictory answers and often a lack of clear responses. My suggestion is therefore to investigate further which set of characteristics led negative scenarios to eventually develop counter-responses. In other words, we need to understand in which cases a dark scenario does NOT become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Naturally, this can lead to replications, and

not by accident, of such a mechanism and drive us to avoid dark futures. Second, in both theoretical and methodological terms, I go so far to claim that – to some extent – that the impact of scenarios is largely due to their didactical structure. I thus recommend that the authors of scenarios should reflect on and describe their didactical motivation, function and impact orientation of their scenario processes more explicitly. This does not deconstruct the scientific background of scenarios but supports and explains the background and impact of scenario processes.

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