

By  
Michel Godet

Reflections on the  
Field and Differences  
between Foresight  
and *La Prospective*

# To Predict or to Build the Future?

A pioneer from the French school of *la prospective* discusses the development of futures-studies methodologies and the imperative of making methods accessible to all.



**L**a *prospectiva*, similar to the concept of “strategic foresight,” is the discipline devoted to shedding light on action in the present by using the power of possible and desirable futures.

The father of the discipline in France, industrialist and statesman Gaston Berger (1896-1960), used a highly appropriate image: The faster you drive, the farther ahead your headlights should shine. *La prospectiva* acts like a spotlight designed not to forecast the future but to illuminate actions to take now, in the present. It really focuses on the *now* first.

Berger said that the attitude in *la prospectiva* relies upon five principles: see wide, see far, see deeply, think of the human factor, and take risks. To these principles, let me add my twist, three new ambitions:

First, “see differently,” which means think outside the box, beware of clichés, and become aware of collective mirages.

Second, “see together,” which is important now because in Berger’s day the idea was to enlighten the “prince” or decision maker. Even if there was collegiality among intellectuals, politicians, and businessmen who occasionally exchanged ideas, the vision was rather aristocratic. Futures exercises were not participatory with the meaning of integrating the actors, or stakeholders.

And third, “have rigor for an intellectual non-discipline.” There are five conditions for rigor: pertinence, consistency/coherence, plausibility, importance, and transparency.

Of course, to be a *prospectivist* (or futurist), you have to be a bit cheeky, nonconformist, and multidisciplinary, but you need methods, too, that help reduce the collective inconsistencies. These methods have to be both rigorous and simple enough to be appropriated—that is, used by as many others as possible.

Throughout my career, the easiest thing was to make complicated methods, like scenario probabilization, whereas the hardest thing was to create simple methods that everyone could understand, e.g., *prospectiva* workshops.

## Methods and Experience

For some, including Berger himself, *la prospectiva* could be summed up in an attitude; for others, it absolutely required methods. Many people reject methods because they don’t understand them. Yet it is possible to show them the advantages of the methods—for example, their use in revealing variables that would not have been noticed otherwise.

In 1972, during a nuclear energy study mandated by the French Atomic Energy Commission, the group took into account 51 variables. The structural analysis highlighted the importance of the variables of “sensitivity to external effects” and “site problems for the locations of plants.” This raised the issue of the importance of social acceptability in developing nuclear energy. It showed the problems that the EDF (French Hydro-electric Corporation) would actually have in trying to set up a nuclear plant in the municipality of Plogoff, where local protests (1978-1981) led to the project being canceled.

Another challenge is to get people to think about the unthinkable. Basically, people tend not to hear what disturbs them. In other words, everything that pleases us is correct and what bothers us is wrong.

In 1990-1991, a futures-thinking exercise for the French iron and steel sector in 2005 yielded six pertinent and consistent scenarios. The use of the Prob-Expert software that we developed showed that these six scenarios covered only 40% of the field of probable futures and actually revealed three new, far more probable scenarios that the experts had not even identified because those three went against conventional thinking.

This case shows the advantage of “probabilistic interaction methods,” which take into account the interaction between events and verify whether the scenarios studied cover a reasonable part of the field of probable futures.

Even though I introduced methods into the field of futures studies, I think that scenarios are overdone. Making scenarios is fine, but so what? Once a scenario is drafted, what do we do to take action, to

make whatever we want to happen or not to happen? We should really be turning them into a project-based approach. The tools should be used appropriately.

Methods are necessary, but to paraphrase the late French intellectual and surrealist André Breton, we must use all the levers; in other words, rigor, imagination, rational knowledge, emotional knowledge, left and right brain.

I also believe that, if my impact has been through methods, it is probably because so few people have worked on them. I didn’t really try to develop new methods, because the existing toolbox already allows me to approach all problems.

For me, the development of methods does not mean inventing new ones, but rather creating new frontiers where those methods may be disseminated and appropriated. And people have appropriated this teaching in different countries, adding their own culture each time.

Without a lot of fanfare, I raised the funds to put the Prob-Expert *prospectiva* software online through the *Entrepreneurs of the Future Circle*. I managed to get all the tools uploaded so people can download them for free. Since 2003, the software online has been downloaded 40,000 times.

I hope that my legacy to the field is that I trained people and “infected” many with the healthy *prospectiva* virus. I have copied the model of the Catholic Church of training foreign students who became teachers in their own countries.

While there is great maturity in the field, *la prospectiva* is not a solid field in France; every year, newcomers arrive who do not know its history. All *prospectivists* or futurists should know a minimum amount of the history, development, and thinking of futures studies—foresight or *la prospectiva*—to avoid going back to square one. This way they can avoid some of the pitfalls.

## What Is the Difference between Foresight and *La Prospectiva*?

On an international level, *la prospectiva* is not a stable, uniform field at all. The same disciplines are not

# Strategic Foresight and La Prospective: What's the Difference?

	STRATEGIC FORESIGHT	LA PROSPECTIVE
ATTITUDE AND GOALS	Focuses more on pre-activity, prediction, and anticipation.	Focuses more on pro-activity and building the future.
KEY SUCCESS FACTOR FOR INNOVATION	Focuses more on technical changes. From Technological Forecasting and Social Change to emphasis on technology foresight.	Technical change is important but not essential. 80% of innovation is low-tech (social, political, management, etc.)
FORECASTING TOOLS	Great influence of Rand Corporation in rationality (system analysis, Delphi) and of Herman Kahn (scenarios).	The same influences, plus historical and philosophical influences integrating actors and projects.
POSITIONING OF SCENARIOS	Central, reduced to a limited number of variables (Global Business Network).  Often thinking out-of-the-box.  Also used for storytelling, consensus, and communication.	Central with unconventional thinking, but with more variables, more rigor.  (Over)using morphological analysis.  Questionable because scenario building becomes an end in itself.  Too many scenarios and not enough projects.
FINAL RESULT AND ROLE OF THE FUTURIST/ PROSPECTIVIST	Client reports that feed stakeholders with knowledge-based visions.  These visions are mainly produced by the futurist as an expert in the field.  Futuring is used as an acceptance process.	Client reports are less important than the process involving clients as producers.  The aim of futuring process is appropriation by end-users.  Prospectivist is a coach who facilitates the collective production of knowledge. His or her expertise is not necessarily in the field. The prospectivist provides rigorous techniques for collective thinking and decision making.

Table by Michel Godet

used in *prospective* research in all countries.

In Great Britain, political scientists are the experts. It changes according to country, too. In the United States, practitioners have stayed close to the science of the future in the same way as there is a science of the past—history.

An enormous problem today is the Anglo-American domination in the field, especially in Brussels. Obviously, we missed the chance to structure *la prospective* on a European scale and thus form a European community of *la prospective*.

Several times I did try, unsuccessfully, to change things, but the European Commission in Brussels views *la prospective* through the prism of

technology foresight. This type of *prospective* falls into the technological mirage that I have long been denouncing.

We have to link fields, rather like a sociologist-demographer, who takes into account family and social factors. We do not want to have only a technological viewpoint; instead, we need to be multidisciplinary, using different levers. This always reminds me of the dream of the hammer, or the popular expression that for the hammer every problem resembles a nail. Life is not like that. The same tool does not work on every problem.

In the English-speaking world, foresight, as it is usually called, often remains based on the Delphi method

(consulting experts in a given field), based on technology, and with the ambition of foreseeing the future. The original sin of *la prospective* remains a temptation: Experts, consciously or unconsciously, want to play the part of oracle.

We should remember that one meaning of foresight is actually intuition; i.e., the future is to be guessed. For us in the field, the future is to be built; in other words, a completely different approach from guessing or prophesying. The break between these approaches is significant, because the idea of a future to be created puts us initially in the situation of actors.

So there is no international academy of *la prospective* or futures stud-



Author Michel Godet in Paris.

ies, and I doubt there ever will be.

But this also means that *la prospective* is no longer a solitary pleasure. That's new. Another positive step forward is how widespread the field has become. The newcomers tell the seniors that their practices are outdated because they think they need new methods; in other words, the ones that they themselves bring.

The need for new methods remains to be seen. However, the trend toward using qualitative measures to understand phenomena is good. And using creativity sessions is a positive development for *prospectivists*/futurists. You have to put creativity in the workshops and to remember that what counts is not the final report but the process that leads to the report. A department manager at a store can create his future just as much as an executive can.

Another trend in *la prospective* is that the issue of sustainable development has become dominant among futurists. The differences between the fields of sustainable development and futures studies have shrunk, because the goal of sustainable development is to keep the future open, to make choices in the present that are not to the detriment of future generations. In other words, thinking about humankind in a responsible manner.

*La prospective* and sustainable development are sister concepts. Maybe the word *prospective* will even disappear from our vocabulary. Regardless, the idea of responsibility with respect to the long term is included in sustainable development.

## What Legacy Do I Leave?

Can I make a difference? And

what do I leave behind? These two key questions reflect the times and nature of futuring. Obviously we hope for positive answers.

Today, more than before, I am following the political scene. It's normal to be both a futurist and a "public intellectual," because thinking for oneself by oneself doesn't make much sense.

Like the lookout during his watch on board the *Titanic*

upon seeing the iceberg, my ambition is not to say "We hit an iceberg!" but to warn everyone so as to avoid collision. Good forecasts are not those that occur but those that lead to action. I feel that I am a player, too. I try to warn the leaders and citizens so that we can avoid problems. A problem well presented is already partly solved.

I am sounding the alarm now on the problems of integrating increasing numbers of immigrants and stemming the demographic catastrophe on the horizon due to aging populations and rising dependency ratios in Europe. There rarely is consensus on the key or priority questions, so the objective of participatory futures exercises is to generate, through debate, more consensual priority decisions.

My personal growth, which has been almost a round-trip back to square one, has meant being less interested in the future and more interested in the present, plus giving meaning to action.

History constantly rewrites itself according to the needs of the present, so the ambition of *la prospective* is to illuminate present action in light of possible futures. *La prospective* is focused on the present, giving meaning to action, for action without a goal has no meaning.

I also realized along the way that the goal is not everything. Going through the process all together is important. The goal is a pretext to the collective journey that creates ties among participants. The meaning of life comes through those ties. Wealth is really educated, fulfilled people in a society that has confidence plus projects: This phrase sums up my entire personal and pro-

fessional path, a result of the attitude of *la prospective*.

You can see the coming together of my thoughts as a practitioner, citizen, man of action, project starter on the ground in terms of entrepreneurship and local development.

Paradoxically, I also noticed that, besides accelerating change, inertia plays an important role. The greatest changes often come from inertia, a factor that has been underestimated.

The world changes, but the problems remain, because they are linked to an invariable: human nature. Over time, men retain very similar drives that lead them to behave in a comparable manner in comparable situations. In short, they are predictable.

As a consequence, we have to study human nature to understand phenomena. For me, *la prospective* has been and will always remain a passion. I tried to not only do it as a business, unlike some practitioners whom I criticize for not caring enough to pass on their know-how.

The *prospectivist*, or futurist, commits to action, with a project, a dream. Already, the language denotes a sensitive knowledge: "dreams fertilize reality." However, rigor and methodology are also needed. In short, both left and right brain must be activated. I pay attention to this intellectual blend. Without reason, passion is blind; without passion to fuel a project, reason leads nowhere. □

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### About the Author

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