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THE STRATEGIC VALUE OF VISIONS

Lessons from Innocracy 2020 and
outlook on this year's conference

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THE STRATEGIC VALUE OF VISIONS

In the face of systemic challenges such as the climate crisis, we must transform the way we live, consume and produce as societies. Yet, no transformation can succeed without a clear sense of direction. We need visions of the future that unify and integrate democracies on their way forward. But can visions really help to open up the future – especially in times of crises? How can we learn to imagine and learn to develop visions that are tangible? This paper discusses key questions that arose at Innocracy 2020, presents avant-garde methods and projects that were at the core of last year’s conference and ends with an outlook on Innocracy 2021.

“We usually fight for the absence of something, but that is a different energy from striving towards implementing something. The one is dismantling, the other is building. We need both energies to create a better future. The building component is really missing in our debates on a just future and society. For this, we need to train our imagination muscles.”

(Kübra Gümüşay, author and speaker at Innocracy 2020)

Developing visions of a better future is not just an end in itself, it is a key strategic tool that provides politics of transformation with direction and gives people orientation in times of change. Innocracy 2020 was devoted to this very idea. Throughout the conference, we explored a wide range of methods and projects on how to use the power of imagination to make visions of a better future tangible. But is it not misleading to imagine, when we should be focusing on the more urgent task of defending our societies against the imminent threats of climate change, the rise of autocracies and the coronavirus crisis? Looking back at Innocracy 2020, we want to take these doubts seriously and critically reflect on the function of visions in a democracy and present the key findings of Innocracy 2020. In the first part of the paper we examine two

critiques on the value of future visions and then make a case for why visions are an important strategic tool in democratic societies. In parts II and III we present a number of future studies methods and real life examples discussed at Innocracy 2020 that can help us to imagine a better future. Lastly, in part IV we give an outlook on the main theme of Innocracy 2021.

I. THE VALUE OF VISIONS: REVERIE OR STRATEGIC TOOL?

THE PRAGMATIC CHALLENGE: IS THERE A PLACE FOR VISIONS IN TIMES OF CRISIS?

The German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz argues that, over the past years and decades, we have witnessed a shift from positive to negative politics. Positive politics understands the future as an open space full of opportunities, such as new technologies, more just social systems or closer international cooperation. Its modus operandi is to imagine, experiment with and develop a better future, its key driver is progress. Negative politics, on the other hand, conceives of the future as a road towards negative possibilities. It aims to prevent, adapt and become resilient to harmful outcomes, such as financial crises, pandemics or global warming.

The shift from positive to negative politics is closely connected to the increasing frequency of major crises and the decline of the Enlightenment narrative of progress that has seen a renaissance after the fall of the iron curtain. Amid the coronavirus crisis and in full awareness of the severe consequences of climate change, negative

politics seems to have the better answers. Do we need to set our priorities straight and focus on preventing the worst instead of imagining the ideal?

In our understanding, there is no need to choose between negative and positive politics. Both approaches are valuable and will be needed to safeguard and develop our democracies. Negative politics helps us be cautious about the future and consider the risks and externalities of our actions; positive politics allows us to strive for more than just defending what we have already (partly) achieved.

More importantly, the two approaches are not necessarily separate from each other. Especially in times of crises, we see that negative and positive politics are often intertwined. The European recovery fund is a good example of how a policy can prevent immediate harm – by supporting people, companies and states in their fight against the virus – and lay down the tracks for a strong future vision – a more integrated European Union based on solidarity. Crises can be accelerators of negative and positive politics. They strengthen our awareness of what is dearest to us and needs to be protected and at the same time increase our collective ability to imagine what is possible and desirable in the future.

THE LIBERAL CHALLENGE: DO VISIONS REALLY HELP US TO OPEN UP THE FUTURE?

A more fundamental criticism of the value of future visions stems from the liberal tradition. Rather than the question of priority (negative politics first, positive politics second), it raises the question of principle by asking whether or not it is helpful to give weight to visions at all. In this view, focusing on visions diverts us from remaining open towards the future and thus threatens a key factuality and value of our societies: pluralism. Instead of developing clear and concrete images of the future, politics should leave societies and markets room to apply the method of trial and error to reach the best possible outcomes. We should focus on safeguarding fair processes of social deliberation and negotiation, not on noble goals. The liberal critique holds that reality is too complex and too contingent for us to offer meaningful visions of the future.

Against the backdrop of this critique, we believe it is important to emphasise that those creating visions should never aim to arrive at an ultimate truth about what the future should look like. Instead, a vision must always be understood as one of many ways to imagine

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the future. Developing visions is not an epistemic task of determining what is true, nor is it a moral task of making a judgement on what is right. It is a political task of exploring what is good. Which visions we then strive for as a society is up to democratic processes of public discourse and political decision-making.

Surprisingly, the value of visions understood in this way lies much more in the present than in the future. First, they can have the power to give people who are frightened by the uncertainty of what is to come something to hold on to. A positive and tangible image of the future helps us overcome our resistance towards change, in turn making the realisation of that future image more likely. Second, visions offer politics the orientation we so urgently need in times of transformation. We will not succeed in our efforts to consume, produce and live within the planetary boundaries if we do not have an idea of how this future could and should look. No transformation can succeed without a clear sense of direction.

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Nevertheless, the liberal critique points us towards the value of the plurality of visions as well as the value of the method of experimentation in developing and arriving at future visions. Moreover, it helps us understand that visions do not need to be substantial. Thinking about ways of how decision-making procedures can be organised in the future, for example by proposing more responsive and inclusive institutions, requires creativity and imagination too. Such procedural visions do not suggest certain outcomes but new ways of building futures.

VISIONS AS STRATEGIC TOOLS: BRINGING THE FUTURE BACK TO DEMOCRACY

For decades, Western societies have been characterised by their belief in the permanence of the status quo. A world defined by a virtually hegemonic reality, declaring the ground rules of both the political and economic system as sacred. In this world without alternatives, competing visions of future society have no place as the future is conceived of as nothing but a linear and necessary continuation of the past.

The events of 2019 and 2020 seem to have changed this. In 2019, the global protest movement around Fridays for Future and other activist groups shifted what was conceivable and utterable in mainstream political discourse. The protests were so timely and powerful that their demands and proposals for radical reform were able to change the political dynamic. For a short while, political incrementalism seemed but one option of how politics can be done, and decision-makers were pressured to seriously consider transformative, systemic approaches for slowing down the climate crisis.

In early 2020, COVID-19 began spreading across Europe. Within weeks, the pandemic forced governments and parliaments all over the continent to reconsider their role and authority. Massive interventions into the economy, public life and civil liberties followed, on a scale unthinkable even at the beginning of March 2020. Due to the crisis, people in societies all over Europe realised that contrary to the belief cultivated in earlier years, they do indeed have the capability to change course, through swift and decisive political decision-making. For a short while, the auto-pilot of political incrementalism was paused and the primacy of the economy was put on hold, clearly trumped by the primacy of politics.

AWAY FROM OR TOWARDS?

At the same time, it is clear that our last months' responses to the crises we face have been mostly driven by an "away from dynamic". We know we must lower our CO₂ footprint, we know that we must make our health systems more resilient. While there is nothing wrong with these insights, the political agenda that results from them still feels like crisis-driven patchwork. This is mostly because, as democratic societies, we lack a "towards dynamic", a strategic idea of the steps we have to undertake to transform society meaningfully. In other words, there are no coherent, positive visions of where we are headed, and thus there is a strategic void in politics. We lack an imagined point in future history that goes

beyond abstract targets, a point European society and politics can strategically focus on and move towards during the coming years. A point that orients, bundles and explains the various fundamental reforms we must achieve in forthcoming years and decades.

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While many political professionals scoff reflexively at the idea of creating visions, it is actually a common strategic practice in many other professional fields and sectors. Most leaders in the business world understand that an accepted, aspiring vision of what their organisation aims to be increases their collective capability to make coherent, strategic decisions. They know that the creation of an accepted vision helps to orient and align people who otherwise would feel disoriented. Aspiring towards long-term visions increases the collective understanding of what potential futures could look like – and thus sharpens an operative focus that goes beyond the limitations set by the status quo.

The creation of competing, realistic yet aspiring visions of future societies has various advantages for both the world of politics and political discourse. First, it substantiates the sense that citizens do indeed have a choice; that they can opt between differing long-term visions of where society should be headed. Second, it strengthens a sense of orientation, in both politics itself and society. Third, compelling societal visions help ease the political tendency to invest all energy into stabilising the status quo. They expand the strategic focus beyond what is, in favour of the worlds that could be. Fourth, they help

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us overcome presentism and include the fundamental needs of future generations in today’s policy making. Long-term visions are an effective tool to better safeguard the interests of generations to come and meet our moral obligation of trying to achieve intergenerational justice.

CREATING A VISION: WHAT IT TAKES

Creating a vision requires human facets that go beyond what the professional political sector cultivates today: imagination, speculation, feeling. It takes human capabilities that are currently neither common nor respected in today’s political world, which has the tendency to dismiss imagination, and the courageous ideas it produces. As if imagination was nothing but a naïve act of dreaming, lacking both substance and consequence.

There is no fundamental change without imagination – not as an end in itself but as a strategic tool.

This, we believe, is a mistake. There is no fundamental change without imagination – not as an end in itself but as a strategic tool. Only those who can imagine alternatives to the existing reality have the strength to change it. Only those who follow the intuitive feeling that lays the path into another future have the strength to overcome the boundaries of the status quo. Indeed, dreams, intuitions and feelings accompany the beginning of every substantial change. They may seem diffuse, irrational, or perhaps a little crazy at first sight. But without them, we would never sit down and think more carefully about the steps we have to take to turn dreams into reality, intuition into knowledge.

Therefore, Innocracy 2020 focused on visions of a future society under the title “Bringing the Future Back to Democracy”. Throughout the conference we asked: What methods and frameworks can help us to feel, think about and create the future? What projects already exist that make it possible to experience the future? How can we move towards shared visions in times of polarisation and systemic challenges? In the following section we present some of the most promising answers to these questions.

II. MAKING VISIONS TANGIBLE: IMAGINE AND EXPERIMENT

The more perceptible and tangible a vision is in the present, the better it can serve its function of giving inspiration, orientation and direction.

One of the key findings of Innocracy 2020 is that for normative images of the future to have impact, they have to be as tangible as possible. The more perceptible and tangible a vision is in the present, the better it can serve its function of giving inspiration, orientation and direction. Experimentation on a local scale is one of the most essential tools for this.

We now present some best practice examples of current experimentation with future visions that were discussed during Innocracy 2020.

GUARDIAN OF TOMORROW: THE FUTURE GENERATIONS COMMISSIONER OF WALES

Sometimes it seems as though politics are entirely consumed by putting out fires. The current political handling of the coronavirus pandemic, unfortunately, serves as a good example. The virus is always at least one step ahead of our political responses. We are so busy handling the most urgent problem that by the time we have solved it two new problems have already emerged. This should teach us that the ability to prevent a crisis – instead of reacting to it only when things become so acute that options for action are already very limited – will be of particular importance in the future. Additionally preventing crises is usually much cheaper than reacting when it is already too late. But how can we begin to practise a proactive mode of politics instead of one that is reactive? One answer to this question is to build forward-thinking institutions.

In Wales, this is already happening. In 2015 the Well-being of Future Generations Act was established to provide a sustainable approach to the future in Welsh politics. In addition to setting out goals for economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being, the act introduced the office of the Future Generations Commissioner for

Wales, whose role is to serve as the guardian of the interests of future Welsh generations – independent from the government. The commissioner is authorised to monitor public bodies working in sustainable development. The current commissioner is Sophie Howe, who took office in 2016. Howe had previously been a local councillor and worked as a special political adviser and deputy police and crime commissioner.

As Future Generations Commissioner, Howe not only advises and encourages public bodies in their attempt to meet the well-being goals, but may also conduct reviews into the long-term impact of public bodies' decisions and recommend changes of procedure. When the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales makes recommendations to a public body, they must be followed – if not, the institution must publicly justify the refusal.

Howe introduced her office at Innocracy 2020 and explained why the current Welsh population profits from future-oriented politics. She recently proposed a new education tax to implement a curriculum that focuses on future based skills in a holistic way.

“It doesn’t always need mass changes to law, it just needs our current leadership to be committed to change in the system within their sphere of influence and power to ensure that the voice of future generations are heard.”

Sophie Howe, Future Generations Commissioner for Wales and Speaker at Innocracy 2020

This takes us back to the coronavirus pandemic. Howe provided an analysis of the draft budget to the Welsh Government for 2021 and 2022 outlining how recovery from the crisis in the areas of digitalisation and working life could be designed in a sustainable way. Also, she commissioned a poll on a basic income trial – which the majority is in favour of. The poll was motivated by the ongoing economic impacts of Covid-19. “The Well-being of Future Generations Act gives us permission to be bold and try new things that could take us towards a healthier and more equal Wales”, Howe said.

By integrating the rights and needs of future generations into our political institutions we not only honour the democratic principle of including in decision-making processes those who are subjected to their outcomes. We also give ourselves an incentive to think about and act on future challenges before it is too late. The role of the Future Generations Commissioner of Wales is a fascinating example of how this idea can be put into practice.

Find out more:

- [Lessons on leaving the world better than you found it](#)
Sophie Howes TED talk, 2020
- [Overcoming democracy's present bias: how to involve future generations in today's policy making?](#)
Sophie Howe at Innocracy 2020

CONCRETE FUTURES: SENSE THE CITY

Cities are strongholds for imagination and experimentation. This is particularly important as cities keep growing and with them their economic, social and environmental impact. Cities generate the biggest part of the world’s economic output but also almost three-quarters of the world’s carbon dioxide emissions. Continuing to build city infrastructure the way we used to would inevitably worsen this poor record. We need visions for different cities.

However, often visions of future cities, such as the concept of a smart city, are very techno-driven and lack a societal and normative dimension. These visions are mostly devised from a visual and functional perspective. Sustainability studies show that social and ecological transformation of cities needs more than a cognitive approach. The experiment Sense the City takes these insights seriously. It attempts to overcome the recurrent discrepancy between what urban experts are planning and building and what people actually need for their well-being. In order to make this happen, the project takes a sense-driven approach: what should the city of the future smell, sound and feel like?

Sense the City was created by the Berlin-based think tank adelphi. For the experiment, they created vision

workshops for 120 people from different professional and social backgrounds and different ages. The project and the workshop's findings were published in November 2020 by Alexander Carius, manager at adelphi, and Franziska Schreiber, one of adelphi's senior associates. Schreiber, who is also a researcher and lecturer at the Institute of Urban Planning and Design at the University of Stuttgart, presented Sense the City at Innocracy 2020.

The methods applied in the workshops are based on psychological, sociological and design studies. First, participants sharpened their senses by focusing on every sensory perception while strolling through the city. What was seen, heard, felt, tasted and smelled would be described in writing and discussed. A second step was to work selectively with each sense: with scent, taste and audio samples; plates and sheets to feel; and visual stimuli. Does the sensory perception activate positive or negative emotions? What associations do they trigger?

These findings were used to develop visions for the city of the future: participants imagined a scenario in which they had to come up with solutions for certain goals. If a city wanted to be climate neutral, what suggestions would they make concerning architecture, public spaces and quality of life? Which sensory experiences would they like future generations to have? Finally, the ideas were made tangible: models, collages and installations were created. This helped participants to analyse and improve the visions.

Sense the City generated artistic and very creative ideas, such as inflatable spaces for temporal communities or a sensory app that doesn't propose the fastest way to get from A to B but the most pleasant.

“If you start exploring cities and thinking about cities from a sensorial and emotional perspective, you will arrive at ideas that look different. They will be healthier, they will be more colourful, more natural, more mobile, more communal and much more oriented towards the needs of people.”

Franziska Schreiber, speaker at Innocracy 2020

Find out more:

[Sense the City: exploring visions for the city of the future with all senses](#)

Project website by adelphi, Berlin, 2021

[Concrete futures: what should our cities of tomorrow look like?](#)

Franziska Schreiber at Innocracy 2020

FUTURE DESIGN: CITIZEN COUNCILS WITH A TWIST

Do we live in a tyranny of the now? Future generations do not have the ability to raise their voices and they are not represented in our current political systems. Yet, their prosperity and fundamental rights matter. It is all the more important that we include the perspectives and basic needs of generations to come in our decision-making today. With short-termism at the root of today's crises – from the threats of climate change to the lack of planning for a global pandemic – the call for long-term thinking grows every day. But how can we involve future generations in today's policy making?

One answer to this question can be found in Japan. Tatsuyoshi Saijo, a professor at Kochi University of Technology, and Keishiro Hara, an associate professor at Osaka University, have created a form of citizen councils, which they call Future Design. Since 2015, it has been applied in a number of Japanese cities and municipalities. This is how it works:

Future Design combines the model of a citizen council with the idea of giving a voice to future generations in political decision-making. The Future Design citizen council consists of two groups of citizens of the town or municipality at stake: one group representing themselves, the other putting themselves in the position of imaginary future citizens (e.g. in the year 2060). Each group discusses the same predetermined issue that affects current as well as future generations. The sessions are usually held every four weeks and take place over the course of several months.

A facilitator controls the deliberations and summarises the results at the end – and so do the participants. It is important to note that the act of summarising deliberations is never free of arbitration. This can be prevented by providing transparency of the context in which the discussion and the summary are held.

In the town of Yahaba a Future Design council was held in 2015 and the session’s results were used to create an official document, addressing Japanese government policies.

When applying Future Design, it is crucial to follow five principles:

1. The designer or researcher should not have any role in deliberations nor guide the participants in any way.
2. Everyone involved must share information with everyone else involved. Nobody must preside over a deliberation or lead the decision-making process.
3. Before a new method is deployed it must be validated through theoretical verification or laboratory testing.
4. If citizens receive support from researchers or outsiders, they will eventually be able to apply what they have learned without the original supporters being there. The supporters are assumed to withdraw completely eventually.
5. A researcher who supports a Future Design session or an outside stakeholder cannot be part of the external party that is needed for critical evaluation.

Tatsuyoshi Saijo summarises the philosophy of Future Design as follows:

“The core idea of Future Design is less about setting out a political position for future generations but more about empowering local people to imagine their own future.”

Tatsuyoshi Saijo, professor at Kochi University of Technology and speaker at Innocracy 2020

Find out more:

- [Future Design: a new policymaking system for future generations](#)
Keiichiro Kobayashi, Professor of Economics at Keio University, on Future Design, 2018
- [Overcoming democracy’s present bias: how to involve future generations in today’s policy making?](#)
Tatsuyoshi Saijo at Innocracy 2020

III. HOW TO DEVELOP VISIONS: TRAINING OUR IMAGINATION MUSCLES

Envisioning a future that is not just the linear continuation of the past is difficult, and we are not used to doing it. Another key takeaway of Innocracy 2020 was that imagination and the development of visions takes practice and requires creative methods. In a number of future studies classes, we learned about and applied methods of future studies at the conference. Here we describe three methods which are particularly useful for training our imagination muscles.

EXPLORING THE FUTURE: SCENARIOS AS FORESIGHT TOOLS

No one knows what the future holds. Yet especially in times that are characterised by uncertainty and complexity, it is crucial to deal with the future in a systematic way. The tools of strategic foresight allow us to be better prepared for the future, so that we are not caught off guard by unexpected developments. They can also be used to help us identify our goals and interests more clearly and to discern appropriate courses of action. In this way, they assist us in coping with complexity and uncertainty.

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Scenarios as instruments of strategic foresight are particularly suitable for stimulating policy debate by creating vivid images of the future. On the one hand, they can be used to help groups agree on desirable developments or on those that should be avoided (normative scenarios). On the other hand, they enable participants to examine possible futures thoroughly without focusing on the question of which developments should be pursued or averted (explorative scenarios). Finally, scenarios can form a starting point for the collective formulation of strategic questions, for agreement on specific goals, and for the development of concrete options for action through tools like “backcasting” and “roadmapping”.

Working with scenarios also offers the opportunity to structure group processes so that it becomes possible to have a productive conversation about the future between experts from different sectors and disciplines. This breaking down of silos is particularly important because major social trends and challenges are highly complex and often cut across scientific fields as well as political and social subsectors.

Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft's project Digital Europe 2030 has shown that strategic foresight can be applied in particular to address overarching socio-political challenges. The project started in the run-up to Germany's EU presidency in the second half of 2020, aiming to introduce new perspectives to the debate on European digital policy. The role of examining the issues at stake from a long-term perspective is well suited to flexible civil society organisations that are independent from day-to-day political developments.

The project's success builds on three factors. First, and decisively, the composition of the working group matters. The organisers took great care to assemble a diversity of institutional and thematic perspectives on the topic. Second, Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft designed the project from the outset in such a way that the dissemination of results was accorded just as much weight as the construction of the scenarios. After all, even the best strategic foresight cannot have a significant impact if it is not seen and reflected upon by decision-makers. Beyond publications on the website of Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft and on social media, the team worked to spread the word in journal articles and opinion pieces and by linking the scenarios to a customised country-wide representative survey on Europe's digital future. Third, the project was adapted continuously to changing circumstances, from bringing it fully online at the beginning of the pandemic to tailoring successive implementation workshops to interested government bodies and private groups alike. In collaboration with decision-makers from various institutions, the scenarios served to open a discussion on strategic questions and to allow participants to think through possible courses of action.

For the Digital Europe 2030 project, working with scenarios proved to be greatly beneficial. It is only by dealing with the future systematically that our democratic societies can formulate goals and work to promote desirable developments while preventing undesirable ones. When proactively shaping the future, scenarios can provide a highly valuable impetus.

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Text by Claudia Huber, Head of Europe Programme at Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft and workshop host at Innocracy 2020

Find out more:

[Digital Europe 2030: The Public Sphere and Digital Sovereignty – Three Scenarios for the Future](#)

Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft, Berlin, 2020

FUTURES FREQUENCY: CHALLENGE, IMAGINE AND ACT

The pandemic isn't the only crisis we're facing. Current megatrends demonstrate the urgent need for a transition to a fair and sustainable society, so this is a time of transition for foresight. Individual projects or scenarios reports are not enough. We need to increase our collective capabilities to think about futures and to act despite uncertainty.

In response to this challenge, The Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra has developed the workshop Futures Frequency as part of our project Future Makers, which seeks to make foresight and change-making more inclusive and accessible for non-foresight experts. We had the opportunity to run a Futures Frequency on democracy at Innocracy 2020.

Futures Frequency is a three-hour workshop that combines future-oriented thinking with change-making. The methods used stimulate participants to think of a future worth imagining and striving for.

At the core of the three-step method are challenging assumptions about the future, imagining preferred futures and making them a reality. The design of the workshop makes the method compatible for use both online and in person. The workshop is based on short lecturing parts and group exercises. If the workshop facilitator wants to focus on facilitation, the short lectures can also be

found as videos. The materials needed for facilitating a workshop are openly available and free of charge at www.futuresfrequency.fi.

The workshop method suits a wide range of target audiences and does not require prior experience of futures thinking. It is designed to be used and applied by anyone who has some experience on facilitation and interest in the themes.

The workshop can be used for example as a first step when participants want to familiarise themselves with future-oriented thinking, foresight and change-making, as part of an organisation's vision-building and strategy development, as part of different training and education programmes, as a tool to locate new directions and alternatives, as a way to learn more about how colleagues think and to build a stronger sense of community, or as a means to stimulate creativity and confidence in the future.

Futures Frequency was launched in January 2021. This far we have seen exciting ways to use the method. There is a municipality in Finland that uses Futures Frequency as part of its strategy renewal process, consultants use it with their customers and a Finnish university plans to integrate it to the introductory course that every new student takes.

Shaping the future is a skill that can be developed. Futures Frequency wants the participants to walk away from the workshops feeling equipped with new tools to think about the future – and believing that they, too, can be an agent of change.

Text by Jenna Lähdemäki-Pekkinen, Social Foresight Specialist at Sitra and workshop host at Innocracy 2020

Find out more:

[Futures Frequency – a new workshop method for building alternative futures](#)

Sitra, Finland

WHAT IF? BUILDING FUTURE STORYWORLDS

When practicing imagination, it is no surprise that we can learn from science fiction authors. They are trained to conceive the worlds of tomorrow and to confront us with possible changes. Even if these worlds may almost never come true, they allow us to discuss futures we consider (un)desirable. In the creative method of world-

building, one practices the development of storyworlds: thick descriptions of possible futures. Starting with a “what if” question that contains a certain disruption or novelty, for instance, “What if companies don't have office spaces anymore?”, the method invites participants to derive first and second-order implications of the imagined disruption. The chain of thoughts triggered by this approach allows for a very vivid and detailed description of an alternative world.

The process starts with an image of the future. Depending on the field of interest, this can be a cultural change (e.g. office spaces, new food culture or a global pandemic) or emerging technologies (such as synthetic biology, neurointerfaces or artificial intelligence). We find those images in journal articles, TED talks, news reports, as well as (own) project visions and others. Often those images are very thin, lacking a socio-cultural context in which they are embedded. World-building offers a structure on how to imagine this context. Building on a defined „what if“ question the process follows three steps, which J.P. Wolf calls „Invention, Completeness, and Creation“ (Wolf, 2012, p.33). In these steps, thick descriptions are created as the interconnectedness of the storyworld is laid out.

During the first phase – invention – the assets of the storyworld are defined. This is done through renaming already familiar elements (e.g. an actual city like Berlin becomes New-Berlin, which implies a new concept). It also includes adding new elements to the world like technologies, new objects or artefacts but also inhabitants, a set of customs, religions, institutions, companies and many more.

Within the second phase – completeness – the previously mentioned elements are completed as their context is enriched. Every asset created in the step before needs to be contextualized through a set of questions such as: What values do people or entities carry? What capabilities do new technologies have? How are new objects used and how can they be accessed? Which particular events lead to the described change?

The last step – creation – determines the relationships between the elements. In this step the actual storyworld and its complex interactions are created – or rather, the storyworld is created by itself. Once the world-building process develops enough details and inner structure, it creates a logic of its own and even its authors have to obey the rules that result from it. The inner coherence of the storyworld automatically fills in the parts of the world that have not been created by the author before.

It is obvious that this created storyworld is not a prediction

of a future present. Rather it allows transforming, discussing and reflecting the depicted thick images of the future. Understood as a starting point, elements of the storyworld can be transformed into speculative design objects and exhibited to give an insight into this possible future.

Last but not least, the participants are invited to discuss the future presented in terms of desirability. This builds on the immersive experience in the created worlds, as technologies are depicted in sociotechnical, ecological, cultural, etc. (inter)relationships. We can ask whether we would like to live in such a world, what aspects of it are (not) desirable and what this would imply for current actions and decisions.

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Text by Wenzel Mehnert, Research Assistant for Building better Worlds at the Berlin University of the Arts and workshop host at Innocracy 2020

Find out more:

[Wenzel Mehnert](#)

Berlin University of the Arts

IV. INNOCRACY 2021: DEMOCRATISE!

In contrast to authoritarian systems, democracies keep the future open and at the same time shapeable by all. Ideally, in democracies the future is not a result of centralised planning or the will of the most powerful, but a reflection of the plurality of ideas, interests and needs present in a society. Only the collective processes of deliberation and decision-making in a democracy allow each citizen an equal say in one of the most essential questions in a society: what should our future look like?

There are, of course, fundamental challenges that need to be overcome in order to approximate the democratic ideal of a future shaped equally by all. Not all people continuously subjected to democratic laws have the right to vote and participate in law-making processes. At the

Only the collective processes of deliberation and decision-making in a democracy allow each citizen an equal say in one of the most essential questions in a society: what should our future look like?

same time, many who do have these rights no longer feel represented in current democratic institutions and political participation is still highly dependent on material conditions – less wealthy social strata participate in politics less often and less intensely than the more affluent do.

Looking at these shortcomings, we often think of improving democracy exclusively in terms of widening and deepening the possibilities of participation. In this interpretation, democratisation solely means that more people should be able to participate in the political process in more innovative and impactful forms, e.g. by means of citizen councils or a more inclusive franchise. However, while the question of *who* should be able to participate in democratic decision-making processes in *what* way is crucial, it should not divert our attention from the equally important question of what it is that we decide about democratically. Over the last decades, trends of privatisation, internationalisation, constitutionalisation and power shifts in favour of the executive branch have massively decreased the influence of parliaments and the scope and depth of democratic control. A political system in which everybody can participate in democratic processes equally but where crucial decisions are taken outside these processes does not live up to the democratic ideal of a future shaped equally by all.

At Innocracy 2021, we want to identify fields which are being excluded or removed from democratic control and explore whether and how (re-)democratising them could lead to a better future.

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Das Progressive Zentrum is an independent, non-profit think tank founded in 2007, devoted to establishing new networks of progressive actors from different backgrounds and promoting active and effective policies for economic and social progress. It involves especially next generation German and European innovative thinkers and decision-makers in the debates. Its thematic priorities are situated within the three programmes Future of Democracy, Economic and Social Transformation and International Dialogue, with a particular focus on European integration and the transatlantic partnership. The organisation is based in Berlin and also operates in many European countries as well as in the United States.

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Over the past four years, Das Progressive Zentrum has established Innocracy as one of the largest conferences on democratic innovation and transformation in Europe. During that time, the think tank connected with a variety of brilliant people and organisations from all across Europe, who work in this field. Together, the participants have managed to develop a better understanding of the challenges liberal democracies are facing today and the ways to overcome them. Our consensus is that it takes both incremental change through democratic innovation and fundamental transformations through radical reform. But most importantly, politics in liberal democracies need direction – a democratic debate about clear and bold ideas of what our future societies should look like.

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