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# Anticipatory anthropology – anthropological future study

## Abstract

The author deliberates the fusion of two disciplines – futurology and cultural anthropology. She tries to indicate some anthropological tools and methods which are suitable to deduce cultural future and advances a thesis that the future is nowadays an inevitable area of study for cultural anthropology. By making the critical analysis of social threats, hopes and by critical observation of contemporary cultural trends anthropologists are able to construct the possible view of future. The project, described in the text, aims at preparing for changes and proving that anthropology enables predicting the future of the culture.

**Keywords:** futurology, anticipatory anthropology, anthropological future study, futurist, culture study

This article is an attempt to expand the anthropological perspective by proposing a new area of anthropological study and creating a platform for anthropological discussion. The author advocates the importance of “future” as study area for cultural anthropology, though still underrepresented. She investigates the opportunities to merge cultural anthropology and futurology as well as she demonstrates different tools and methods commonly used in cultural anthropology to study “future”. In addition, goals of futuristic cultural anthropological research and the potential of research quality are discussed.

Cultural anthropology distinguishes several approaches to the concept of time. The category of cyclical time and recurring events along with changing seasons slowly disappeared, as Christianity became a popular system of beliefs. Ultimately, time in Western culture was divided into two periods: before Christ and after, with the Last Judgment being the finale event (Guriewicz 1976). For the purpose of this paper the author makes the assumption that modern time is linear and divided into: past linked to past events, the present day linked to current per-

ceptions and future linked to hopes and fears (Nowicki 1983). Fryderyk Nietzsche wrote: “But he who discovered the country of *man*, discovered also the country of *man’s future*. Now shall ye be sailors for me, brave, patient!” (Nietzsche 1999: 150) The quote suggests that thinking about the future is a feature that distinguishes human beings from other creatures on Earth. Having experienced the past, men think about the present as well as they look out for the future that is yet to come. The thought about future(s) allows men to anticipate change and foresee forthcoming events.

The past, present and future are directly related. As people are not able to be experiencing the future, they are forced to understand the concept of “future” on the basis of the remaining time concepts – *present* (that is directly experienced) and *past* (that is known through sensual memory). “Future is the time, when the present becomes the past” (Russell 1956: 133). All time dimensions are inter-subjective and speculative. Whereas human memory is not perfect, memories are primarily modified “pieces” of the past (Kaniowska 2003). However, postmodernist knowledge is inter-subjective and shaped by power relations (Barnard 2008: 228–231). Intuitively, people “tame” every moment of time and each component of space. This practice led for instance to subdivisions into ages. Similarly, at present, events that at first appeared chaotic are defined and categorized in human mind. However, the future has different epistemological status. The future is continuously being tamed, as the borders of the future are changing. Taming of the future is usually the task of futurologists and science-fiction writers. Conversely, this article argues that social scientists and, in particular, anthropologists need to take the challenge of timing the future.

What is the basis for studying the future? In his work from the 90s *Does social anthropology have future*, Raymond Firth disagrees with Keit Hart’s view on social anthropology as overspecialized discipline that is divided and estranged from society. In such view, the “estranged” anthropology neither anticipates its own future nor can anticipate the future of humanity. Firth argues that “perhaps our field is at the state of a crises, a solstice or a turning point, time for a change” (Firth 2003: 2). His view opens the debate about the future of our field and contemporary conditions for its advancement.

Currently, the anthropology practiced in Poland is at the turning point and thus this is the best time to form the vision of this discipline: think over our dreams about its future and our expectations. During the IV Intercollegiate Anthropological Conference “Ethical problems” in Łódź, Professor Katarzyna Kaniowska suggested that soon our thinking about anthropology would change.

Till now we have been asleep with a belief that we all are anthropologists, that we all know what it means to be an anthropologist – however the belief about a common identity of our discipline is no more justified. It is high time to admit that anthropology takes many forms (Wala 2010).

Boundaries of anthropology are not clear due to variety of its forms. This is an advantage of the discipline that allows contemporary scholars to move forward and explore new research areas, as well as pursue interactions with other disciplines.

The Future of mankind – being for decades the subject of thoughts and conversations – is also a suitable topic suitable for an anthropologist. Firth stated that:

Scientific problems for an anthropologist can be found in spaces of communication between peoples. I never accepted an argument that social anthropology would disappear along with “aboriginal” communities, which will either disappear or will change due a clash with technological, economic, social forces (Firth 2003: 19).

A discovery of an indigenous tribe was the dream of the XIX-century ethnologist, who empowered the development of our field. Slowly, however, the subject of anthropology was changing. Spaces free from Western civilization were disappearing, as well as cultures were changing. Anthropology as such continued to explore “otherness”. Wojciech Józef Burszta defines anthropology as a discipline, which is based on interaction with ‘otherness’, attempting to learn and understand different forms of human life (Burszta 1998: 34). I propose that the future needs to be understood as a virgin research territory, undiscovered land and the people from the future shall be viewed as undiscovered tribes. Such perspective opens new doors to explore the “otherness”. The idea to explore the future as a new research area implies merging of the two disciplines: futurology and cultural anthropology.

## Futurology

Futurology is a discipline focused on anticipation and forecasting futures for instance a cultural future. The discipline of futurology does not examine societies from a static perspective, but rather from a dynamic point of view. In other words, it concentrates on examination of change. The term *futurology* was introduced in 1943 by Ossip Kurt Flechtheim in his work *Futurology: Battle for the future (Futurologie. Der Kampf um die Zukunft)*. However, the scientific activity of futurology began in the 60s and the 70s of the XX century. Futurology became a trend around the world. Many institutions of futurology were established, in addition to futurological work. For instance, the French government founded *Year 1985* group, which was assigned to gather information about the past of France. Another examples include the project *Mankind 2000*<sup>1</sup> started in Great Britain, and Research and Forecast Committee *Poland 2000*. The idea of similar projects in Europe was born on the basis of argument that economic growth does not translate directly into social development, or human development. Moreover, the two processes may be divergent. The purpose of the report was to demonstrate areas at socio-civilizational risk based on the analysis of possible paths toward reduction

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<sup>1</sup> Historical initiative by Jacob Wellesley-Wesley that led to the release of *Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential*. The Encyclopedia places emphasis on the potential of new metaphors for governance as a major unexplored resource to enable paradigm shifts, and offers radically different perspectives to policy-makers, social researchers and those concerned with development strategy.

of civilizational distance between Poland and more developed members of the European Union (Polska Akademia Nauk 2011).

Futurology, as a discipline aspiring to “learn” about future societies, does not claim right to predict social structure in a dozen or so years. It is important to realize, that “even small progress in every field uncovers large, previously unforeseen foreground of our ignorance” (Lem 2000). Futurology is sometimes excluded from social sciences, in case it is based on speculations making it impossible to accurately predict the future or predict it in a great detail (Bonisch 1980: 6).

Studies of the future can be defined as a science as soon as they question the study subject, understand their own limitations and propose only hypothesis about future development as opposed to postulating its rights (Bonisch 1980: 23).

Studying the future may be described as “art” rather than science (Bonisch 1980: 6). In this regard, futurology is similar to anthropology: placed between art and science (Benedyktowicz 2001). Despite the doubts about the scientific background of futurology, futurology may contribute to the practice of social sciences by generating scenarios which penetrate different research problems.

Studies of the future should not only diagnose the future but also shift attention to risks, in order for people to apply the produced knowledge to intervene in events (Bonisch 1980: 23).

Futurologist goals are to (1) shift public attention to the future problems, as well as (2) provide solutions to these problems, warn the humanity and call for the reduction of certain processes (Bonisch 1980: 1). The example of a futurologist whose visions of the future came true is Stanisław Lem (Sikora 2012). His sense of envisioning the future was based primarily on his intuition. Could it be achieved with scientific methods? How can anthropologists use this discipline to acquire such skills?

## Anticipatory anthropology

Anthropology has a potential to deliver high quality research about the future that keeps the present perspective by critically analyzing contemporary fears, hopes and cultural trends. The term *anticipatory anthropology* was introduced by the anthropologist Marion Lundy Dobbert in 1984 and it combines the study of future and culture. It is an area that adopts perspective, theories, models and anthropological methods to anticipate behaviors. This is not a separated subfield, but rather it is a simple model to arrive at the conclusion that could be put in practice by other anthropologists. Anticipatory anthropology focuses on anticipation of different alternative scenarios of the future in which socio-cultural systems are able to survive (local, regional, national and global).

In doing Anticipatory Anthropology, the anthropologist focuses on what a particular human group (which might or might not include the anthropologist) visualizes as a possible, probable, or preferable future for that group (Robert 1999: 2).

Anthropology uses different terms to express the same idea: futurology, futurism, anthropology of future, speculative anthropology. All these terms relate to “thinking about future”. The anthropological study of the future is about creating future scenarios, of which potential comes from peoples’ dreams and fears. These scenarios provoke to afterthought about western culture.

The study of the future does not involve studying facts understood as events that occurred at a particular place and time. The study of the future is more about anticipation of future plausible events. Anticipatory anthropology relies on facts understood as visions, expectations and preferences expressed by members of society. The facts are obtained through conversation, then analysis and interpretation. It is nearly the same as the studies conducted within contemporary anthropology or ethnography, which “is not concerned with facts but with what people tell about facts” (Tokarska-Bakir 2004: 17). Within anticipatory anthropology, facts are discovered as a result of demographic, technological or economic phenomena and value systems. The phenomena serve as a source of information needed for societies, communities, leaders and citizens to make intelligent decisions. Similar analysis will allow the implementation of better scenarios, while avoiding those undesired (Robert 1999: 2).

Anthropological perspective, theories, methods and tools are useful for anticipating social and cultural futures.

Anthropologist have much to offer such anticipatory fields as Technological Forecasting, Social and Education Planning, Regional and City Planning, Environmental Impact Assessment, and Land Use Planning, as well as the broad field of Future Studies (Robert 1999: 1).

In addition to objective cultural reality of structured systems, in a discussion about development and culture social organization of cultural life must be taken into account. The method of researching future is the analysis of modern events and phenomena based on the social observation, media and identification of the most important mega-trends. Anticipation of cultural change (*culture foresight*), as well as the anticipation of the society future and determination of different scenarios would be based on the semiotic and anticipatory analysis of social codes and values (Hiltunen 2008). On this basis, one can design different future scenarios. Another method is a creative interview (Fontanna 2009: 101), which is based on suggestions of what would happen in the future, identifying plausible scenarios, interviewees’ desires and fears. A researcher induces them from collected data and forms generalized statements. These statements allow to anticipate the future. Long-term perspective (5–15 years) supports long-term goals rather than ad-hoc tactics. When drawing a conclusion about the future, anthropologists implement the holistic approach sensitive to different contexts. In fact, anthropologists are usually experts in a holistic approach comparing to other social disciplines that focus mainly on demographics, economics or law. Therefore, anthropologists have opportunity to develop unique theories regarding the future.

Anthropologists need to be empowered to introduce changes in social systems in order to stop negative social trends, to increase quality of human development

through education (Gidley *et al.* 2004) and shape the society's cultural transformation. The following points discuss several potential areas of anthropologists' influence:

- Collaborate with leaders of governmental organizations on alternative future scenarios in fields such as demography, culture or education: collaboration helps to anticipate effects of political decisions.
- Anticipate effects of computer science revolution, including possibility of large-scale change: selected societies would be examined in terms of Internet impacts.
- Evaluate potential effects of biotechnological revolution on local societies such as development of previously unachievable medical treatments, food factories that will have negative impact on natural environment: biotechnological revolution can bring ethical dilemmas due to inventions such as cloning of humans and body organs transplantations.
- Evaluation of results in Materials Science: development of materials that would benefit society but they do not occur in nature, would be a significant solution for exploitation of natural resources.
- Society analysis and a future scenario for sustainable use of natural resources
- Analysis to what extent society is prepared for new technology and evaluation of possible negative impacts of this technology on society's members.
- Cooperation with planners toward solving the problem of traffic jams in cities (Robert 1999: 3).

These and many other issues suited for anticipatory anthropology show great potential of the suggested research. However, not many studies are focused on similar problems, especially in Poland. Besides, anthropologists often skip the opportunity of many potential applications of solutions provided by anticipatory anthropology. While studying cultural systems, anthropologists focus primarily on the past and present of a system. In practice, studies of the future are rare and none of the conclusions are precise enough to shape the future of the social systems (Robert 1999: 1).

Nowadays, new tools such as the Internet can be used for the studies of the future. Superstruct Game is an example of the process. "Superstruct was a massively multiplayer forecasting game, created by the Institute for the Future, and played by more than 8000 citizen future-forecasters from September – November 2008."<sup>2</sup> The play serves as a source of data; players share their views of the future that are gathered in database. Thus, based on the created database, scholars can conduct anthropological analysis.

Following the arguments for promoting anthropology research that is more accessible to an average citizen, I suggest that in addition to a scientific text, conclusions drawn on the basis of a detailed analysis of the collected data need to be presented as a futurologist story. The story would be a combination of science fiction and anthropology. The anthropologist Leon Eugene Stover spoke out about science fiction in anthropology. The anthropological science fiction answers

<sup>2</sup> Collected materials and description: <http://superstructgame.org/>

philosophical question about the nature of men, while anthropology as a scientific discipline focuses on learning process (Stover 1973: 340). Since anthropology is a discipline studying men, the authors of fantasy and in particular science fiction books should use anthropological discoveries and use them to write fiction. The difference between a scholar and a writer lies in the limits of speculation. A scholar must take into consideration present conditions and then make a small step toward the unknown future, while a writer can easily follow their fantasy (Stover 1973: 343).

Karl Steinbuch differentiates science fiction from studying future. Whereas science fiction is dominated by poetic images, future research is based on the careful analysis of the existing development trends with the goal to define the future of the system based on available forecasting tools (Bonisch 1980: 23).

Florian Znaniecki believes that stories can only relate to individual elements of culture. The total process of cultural development is non-schematic. The human nature is a base for countless varieties of cultural systems (Znaniecki 1934). Thus, anticipatory anthropology has opportunity to discover futures with alternative scenarios. However, the goal of such anthropology would not only be forecasting, but also raising awareness of perspectives and preparedness for upcoming changes. The effect of the study of the future and cultural research would improve social chances for implementation of preferred futures and avoidance of undesired ones. Studying the future allows for anticipation of failed ideas and the consequences of system mistakes. Both citizens and leaders will receive quality information to be used in decision-making (Robert 1999: 1). Anticipatory Anthropology attempts to empower people to consciously control the future of humanity. It is a discipline that aspires to learn and understand the world of future generations (Žuk 2008: 55–60).

It is worth mentioning the issues related to the proposed topic. The findings of research in anticipatory anthropology could be used to establish ideological justification of current power relations. Such research is at first to serve as a tool in social propaganda for authorities. It already happened in case of state futurology, which adjusted future to the needs of a country (Nijakowski 2000). In the United States, it was beneficent and beneficial capitalism, while in the block of Soviet countries it was a picture of victorious communism.

The future is a great area of study for cultural anthropology, because of interdependence between future study and culture. Contemporary culture is developing from dreams about the future and fears derived from potential threats. Anthropology has an opportunity to investigate the future from the perspective of the present by analyzing modern fears and hopes as well as observation of the current cultural conditions and trends. The role of anticipatory anthropology is to foresee the changes that determine whether cultural and technological processes will impact our civilization. This direction toward research focused on the future and consistent implementation of necessary tools and decisions will open an opportunity to impact life in the future. Anthropology will support science in determining the future and it compliment scientific knowledge about it.

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