

Thinking up the future

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Drawers from old pieces of furniture, wardrobes in the attic, storage rooms and basements, boxes that fill garage shelves. The vertigo of inventorying, the demands of tidying up. Dust. Time that has elapsed. The leftovers that prove the transformation of our lifestyle are everywhere. What was a flagship device only a short time ago is now destined for the next car boot sale. Looking at photographs we had saved, contemplating obsolete items that one day we chose to keep provides a good measure of the rush of the change that we are experiencing. Perhaps that is why we plunge into a present so hurried that we are not allowed to linger and evaluate past trajectories and assess future choices that always seem imminent and inevitable.

These days --and because of the Mobile World Congress-- it is the future that takes precedence over the present from the point of view of what is newsworthy. The fact that Barcelona is hosting the event merely accentuates and exaggerates the media's prospective exercise. There is frantic competition to grab our attention, to show or say "something new". At the crossroads of marketing, science-fiction and gimmicks. Everything that we cannot manage when it comes to tackling our biggest daily problems --adopting a reflexive attitude and showing a commitment to action--, we are emboldened to try out when it is about the technological advances that we have caught a glimpse of. Technology has replaced faith and miracles, and we are mesmerised. We cannot respond to the most urgent social challenges, but we are marvelled to know that we will soon be able to do things that we had never dreamt of, things that will capture our attention and change our lives. Seduced and abducted.

How do we forecast the future? What and who is the determining force? To what extent is a rigorous analysis of trends and risks part of the process? What is the purpose behind the main indications and prescriptions that we receive? Whose interests do they serve? Ours? Are they consistent with our priorities? Who sets the pace and the agenda? Are there any public policies that do not stem from the immediate interests of the large corporations? Are we happier, now? Have we managed to reduce inequality? Of all the possible paths, why have we kept to this one? Was there no alternative? Who is the winner and who has lost out in the meantime? On what?

There is talk of "bringing the internet to the world" that is not connected yet, and of "the internet of things" that are still off-line. Indeed, universal internet access seems an unquestionable goal. And it is. In this day and age, poor or no internet access has become one of the main forms of social discrimination. But we should realise that getting to where we are now was not inevitable. We can change the world that we have inherited by following different parameters and logic. Perhaps the fight against discrimination could be conducted on terms that differ from those of the interests of some large corporations which strive to prevail in the global scene.

Most of our needs are a historic social construct, a cultural construct. This explains why not all of us experience the same needs or set the same priorities, given that --on a daily basis-- our own individual lifestyles are different, too. However, the bulk of the world's population and a significant

part of our fellow citizens do not presently have their traditional basic needs covered: sustenance (food, shelter) and dignity (social recognition, education). So perhaps our humanitarianism and social commitment need not mirror the concerns of Google or Facebook's sales departments. And maybe the criterion by which we assess our progress on people's standard of living need not follow the logic of maximum profit and limitless accumulation of wealth.

Our routines are ancient. Change is well ahead of our ability to interpret it. Mobile connections are the current infrastructure of the industries of experience. The market knows so. We need to know so, too. For instance, the ease of interconnection has changed the procedures of politics profoundly. Nowadays everything is so much more transparent and accessible. Indeed. But it is equally less indebted to our own rationality that used to encapsulate some future utopia. It is as if today's connected political subjects were more prone to share emotions and slogans than a critical discourse or a comprehensive project.

What we share and how we share it are both entwined. Politics. For now, the Mobile World Congress does not feature a space dedicated to new democratic politics. This gives us a little thinking space. We should not allow the dazzling bling of today's interconnections to impose a space of confrontation that tomorrow might become too unfavourable.

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