

CATASTROPHIC VISIONS OF DEVELOPMENT

National Conference (Jablonna, Poland, 9th–10th December, 2015)

Organised by the “Poland 2000 Plus” Forecast Committee at the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Young Scientists Team, the scientific conference titled “Catastrophic visions of development” was held at Jablonna Palace on 9th–10th December 2015.

Threats to be faced as the world develops have been the lead theme addressed by the “Poland 2000 Plus” Forecast Committee in recent years. The majority of analyses concerning the future assume that any assessment of sudden and improbable events, also known as black swans, is impossible. This category of events includes various catastrophic threats that, despite being predictable, stray from the expected development path. They may include armed conflicts of a major impact (also a world war), natural disasters and many other phenomena analysed in scientific papers, like an increasing risk of social tensions caused by migrations and differences in income. However, conclusions arising from the assessment of such dangers fail to gain reflection in the social and economic forecasts of a country or region, or the world. What can be noted in analyses of the future is extrapolation from the past, which may facilitate studies, but may alternatively lead to some serious disruptions in the adopted vision of development.

The aim of the Conference was thus to look at the issue from a different perspective. It was to stimulate a discussion on probable unfavourable paths of change leading to disaster. In many cases this would mean implementation of a continuation scenario potentially leading to the annihilation of civilisation as we know it. This approach ensured a Conference objective of finding answers to such fundamental questions as:

- Does the current migration crisis in Europe herald more serious migrations of people worldwide? What consequences would that entail?
- Can increasing inequalities in wealth lead to social tensions and revolutions in countries of middle-level affluence?
- Can the current War on Terror transform into a global war fought on many fronts worldwide? Who can be potential sides of the conflict?

- Can Europe feel safe in view of upcoming changes?
- How can the water crisis affect the demographic, economic and political situation of the world and its regions?
- Can changes in the natural environment lead to global social unrest? What could be the sources of such unrest?
- Is unceasing economic growth possible? If not, what should be the directions to changes in the economic system of the world and individual countries?

Although not all of the above questions could be answered, presentations and related discussions considered many interesting aspects that stimulated further reflection on the issue. Irrespective of the precise nature of future changes, most Conference participants were convinced that humankind is facing fundamental transformations, the direction of which cannot be indicated unequivocally. Consequently, the shape and name of the new era cannot be identified precisely. Historical experience suggests that the character of ground-breaking change was once revolutionary rather than evolutionary. Frequently, this meant bloody destruction of the old world order and creation of a new one on its debris. Such a view was emphasized in the introductory presentation entitled “Civilisation changes” given by Prof. Jerzy Kleer. A similar presentation was that of Prof. Julian Auleytner, who drew the audience’s attention to increasing global polarization, and called for the adoption of an integrated approach to studies on the future.

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the meetings organised by the Forecast Committee, Conference participants addressed a wide range of security-related matters, be these political, military, social, economic or environmental hazards. The organisers wished, not only to reflect on threats concerning the future that are frequently commented on in the literature, but also to indicate paths (scenarios) hypothetically leading to various disasters. In particular, they sought to assess (as far as possible) the likelihood of such incidents occurring, and the potential scale of the consequences should they do so.

Most presentations addressed catastrophic visions of development in specific areas. However, it emerged that such visions might involve a number of threads simultaneously. Conference participants heard from Prof. Zbigniew Sabak and a team led by Anna Dziurny Ph. D. (on military security), Łukasz Jurczyszyn Ph. D. (on threats to security posed by bottom-up radicalisation processes), a team led by Katarzyna Nawrot Ph. D. (on economic and social threats) and Konrad Prandecki Ph. D. and Artur Michałowski Ph. D. (on environmental factors potentially leading to a civilisational disaster). The last presentation was supplemented by two short requested addresses given by Prof. Małgorzata Burchard-Dziubińska and Prof. Janusz Kindler.

Authors of the presentations focused on negative trends in development, and pinpointed probable hazards. A different voice could be heard in what was said by Prof. Bogdan Galwas, who – in referring to seventeen goals of sustainable development – aimed to prove that humankind is able to counteract unfavourable trends and protect itself against any global catastrophe.

As with other initiatives of the Forecast Committee, the issues discussed at the Conference addressed a longer-term perspective of at least fifteen years; meaning that most scenarios were concerned with the 2030–2050 period. This does not mean disregarding the possibility of events happening sooner, given that a reliable assessment of phenomena taking place over a longer time period must of necessity relate to analyses conducted on the short and intermediate term.

Overall, the Conference served to confirm the existence of concerns regarding the future development of the civilised world. Presentations and discussions alike made it fairly clear that the most dynamic and unforeseen threats are those of a social nature. Political and military problems, including the threat of a world war or a series of regional military conflicts, seem less likely to arise, given that most international players attempt to settle disputes in a peaceful manner.

Forecasts in turn show how a long time span separating cause and effect will ensure that the consequences arising out of environmental threats materialise last, even though factors capable of bringing them about are already in operation. This means that environmental hazards can exert the strongest impact while at the same time being associated with the most limited opportunities where prevention is concerned. In conclusion, the Conference emphasised a general need for potential catastrophic scenarios in long-term studies on the future to be discussed far more widely.

Catastrophic visions of development will be the main theme of the magazine “The Future. World-Europe-Poland”, issue 1/2016, which is to be released in the middle of 2016 and is sure to prove a fascinating read for everyone interested in this topic.

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