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 Institute for Alternative Futures

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Forward Perspectives

David Brooks' Worst Case Scenario: Why We Dare Not Neglect Psychology

By [Bob Olson](#), IAF Senior Fellow

David Brooks, the moderate conservative columnist for the New York Times, has written an important "[Worst Case Scenario](#)" of America's economic future. From IAF's perspective, it is not a worst case scenario at all, but it does highlight a neglected topic, the important role that [psychology](#) must play in responding to the current crisis.

Brooks imagines that the Obama Administration's economic policies halt the economic decline and stave off a collapse of the banking system, but the recovery doesn't arrive. Public confidence in government action fades as the economy remains mired in stagflation. Political polarization makes it impossible to raise taxes or cut spending to deal with the crises posed by exploding entitlement debt and federal deficits. Other nations grow nervous about holding American debt. Interest rates climb. Congress erects trade barriers to protect struggling U.S. companies, leading other countries to implement protectionist policies. The global economy sinks further.

In this scenario, the central failure goes beyond economics. Obama's team has economic expertise of the first rank, uses sophisticated economic models to inform their decisions, and pulls skillfully on a variety of economic policy levers. The problem is that from the outset they define the crisis as economic, when it is largely a psychological crisis. A mood of fear and pervasive uncertainty is what leads bankers not to lend, entrepreneurs not to risk, and consumers not to spend.

Brooks turns to cognitive psychology, arguing that scientists "distinguish between normal risk-assessment decisions...and decisions made amid extreme uncertainty." These different

mental processes require strategies and produce different results. Economists and policy makers trust that people will behave in the rational ways that economic models assume, but in this period of extreme uncertainty behavior becomes nonlinear, unpredictable, and stubbornly resistant to Keynesian rationalism.

“The nation,” Brooks writes, “had essentially bet its future on economic models with primitive views of human behavior. The government had tried to change social psychology using the equivalent of leeches and bleeding.” Many of us at IAF would go further to argue that the whole “rational man” psychology that underlies so much of contemporary economics has been made obsolete by the behavioral economics movement, as exemplified by economists involved with the Santa Fe Institute. Beyond that, over the past generation future-oriented economists like Hazel Henderson and the late Kenneth Boulding have been pointing out major conceptual flaws in mainstream economics that have never been addressed.

Brooks titles his column the “Worst Case Scenario,” but it is easy to imagine worse ones. The [“Unholy Trinity Scenario”](#) IAF developed in 2007 imaged that a bursting housing bubble and out of control deficit spending eventually leads the Chinese and others to refuse to hold U.S. debt. The resulting global economic turmoil makes it impossible to invest significant amounts of money in renewable energy technologies and the world remains heavily dependent on fossil fuels. Despite economic decline, climate change accelerates leading to more severe consequences than scientists assumed in their conservative calculations.

The convergence of this trinity of crises – economy, climate and energy – creates a situation so serious that those of us who worked on developing this scenario could not agree on its ending.

Some of us argued that there is “no exit,” and that the only positive future to shoot for in these circumstances is one where ideas of a return to affluence are left behind. In this view, we botched the transformation to an affluent, high tech global society and must live for the foreseeable future in a world with much less wealth. Others of us think that if a scenario like this comes to pass it might create a moment of transformation. People everywhere could see that there are simultaneous solutions to our economic-climate-energy challenges and we could move along a path of cooperative sustainable development to achieve a technologically advanced, prosperous, but less materialistic global society.

These two views of the implications of this scenario are deeply incompatible. From the first view’s perspective, it is irresponsible of us to offer “hope” if that means saying that anything like the old system of the past 100+ years can be recovered, or that the wealth of the past can be restored or exceeded. It is even irresponsible to invest much in renewable energy. The great bulk of our failing resources should be invested in technologies for using energy and other resources far more efficiently, since these resources will be so much scarcer in the future.

From the second view’s perspective, it is irresponsible not to aim for a larger success: not just efficient technologies, but advanced superefficient technologies, new sources of energy and a broader green technological revolution; not a restoration of the old system of the past 100+ years, but a more balanced global economy that eliminates poverty and expands opportunities for all people everywhere.

Both these contrasting views believe it is critical to focus on positive aspirations – or at least the most positive aspirations believed possible under the circumstances. While proponents of the first view dismiss what they believe are false hopes, they stress the importance of holding

out hope that there can still be a good future, a world where relationships, cooperation and local community flourish, where we learn to live more gently on the Earth, and where non-economic values of all kinds assume the higher place they should have had in our culture all along.

This takes us back to David Brook's argument about the importance of psychology in dealing with our economic situation today and the challenges of tomorrow. Having positive yet believable visions of "what could be" circulating widely in society to inspire and guide change is one of the best ways of shifting the psychological focus from fears to aspirations. From this perspective, the kind of "aspirational futures" thinking in which IAF specializes is exactly the kind of thinking needed in our society right now.

I would like to challenge readers of this newsletter, and my colleagues at IAF, to take seriously David Brooks' argument about the importance of psychology and to share their thoughts here about the kind of ideas and actions that can change the psychological climate in our society. What lays beyond what Brooks calls the "primitive views of human behavior" built in to economic models? How can we go beyond what he derides as "leeches and bleeding" in our efforts to reduce fear and produce positive changes in our society's psychological climate? If aspirations are critical for guiding and motivating change, where do idealism and realism intersect in deciding what aspirations to pursue?

The Convergence of Ethics and Robotics

By [Craig Bettles](#), IAF Futurist

Every new technology raises questions that we, as individuals and as a society, need to address. The original vision of a 21st century dominated by autonomous robots, written about by science fiction writers like Isaac Asimov, has not occurred. However, ethical considerations in the use of autonomous robots will rise in importance as technology improves.

Our society has already integrated machine robots and virtual (ro) bots into our personal and business lives. Automated guided vehicles routinely deliver supplies to workers in warehouses, container ports and hospitals. Sections of the London Underground, Copenhagen and Paris metro systems use automated, "driverless", train systems. Soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan routinely use teleoperated robots to scout hostile terrain, defuse bombs and engage the enemy. More than 4,000 robots are deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan by the U.S. armed forces.

The militaries of the United States, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, Iran and China all plan on increasing their use of military robots. South Korea and Israel have deployed armed robot border guards. These [automated sentries](#) can identify intruders and fire weapons when instructed by their operators. The United States Congress recently set a goal of having one-third of ground combat vehicles unmanned by 2015. The Pentagon plans to spend \$4 billion by 2010 with the goal of increasing autonomy to free up troops that would otherwise have to monitor the robots closely.

So far, human operators control the use of lethal force, but that will likely change in the near future. Ronald Arkin, a computer scientist at Georgia Tech University, is working on software for the US Army that helps autonomous robots make ethical decisions. The goal of the project is to create robots with an "artificial conscience" able to identify targets, and make ethical decisions. Arkin argues that autonomous robots can be designed not only to conform to international law, but to outperform human soldiers in their ethical capacity in certain situations.

Not all ethicists and robotics experts agree. Noel Sharkey, a computer scientist at Sheffield University, doesn't believe robots are able to make ethical decisions. Asking robots to make moral decisions will greatly complicate the already challenging task of building reliable, efficient and safe systems. Dr. Sharkey proposes a global ban on autonomous weapons until they can comply with international rules of war prohibiting the use of force against noncombatants.

The United States needs to create an open, democratic dialogue about the ethical uses of autonomous robots. Other countries, including Japan, South Korea and the European Union, have already started the process by developing recommendations, charters and roadmaps for the ethical development of robotics. Japan, for example, is already wrestling with the societal impact of "social robots" that provide companionship and rudimentary social interaction with their owners.

As futurists, IAF believes it is equally important to monitor, and promote, the social framework in which technologies develop in as it is to monitor the emerging technologies themselves. One important part of the social framework is the ethical considerations of those that develop and use technology. For more information on IAF's technology forecasting, contact Craig Bettles at cbettles@altfutures.com.

News & Events

Health Equity: Focusing on Health in All Policies

The Disparity Reducing Advances (DRA) Project, in conjunction with the Congressional Black Caucus Health Brain Trust, held its third DRA Foresight Briefing on Wednesday, February 25th, 2009 in Washington, D.C. More than 140 people attended the standing room only event. Clem Bezold, Founder and Chairman of the Board of IAF, convened the event.

Congresswoman Donna Christenson, from the United States Virgin Islands, kicked off the event with some remarks on the importance of primary prevention. Congresswoman Christenson talked about the importance of including primary prevention and health equity as part of the recent stimulus bill and the new administration's health reform efforts. She called on the attendees and panelists to support the new health empowerment zone bill. Congresswoman Christenson believes there is currently a great opportunity to eliminate healthcare disparities and get our health where it needs to be.

Larry Cohen, Executive Director of the Prevention Institute, talked about a personal experience that moved him to advocate for bringing equity and prevention together. A couple of years ago, Cohen faced a health challenge and since that time he, like most of us, paid much more attention to his health. At a local farmer's market, Cohen began to get very, very angry as he reflected on the challenges faced by people who did not have same access to opportunities and resources. Good health is more than just good healthcare. Community health is vital to improving health.

David R. Williams, Staff Director of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Commission to Build a Healthier America, stressed the need to completely redefine health policy. Health policy is not just what happens in the medical field, but in all the aspects of society that affect health. If adult Americans who have not completed college experienced the lower death rates and better health status of college graduates, they would live longer and healthier lives. These improvements would translate into potential gains of \$1.007 trillion annually.

Dolores Acevedo-Garcia, from Harvard School of Public Health, talked about the importance of affordable housing in reducing health disparities. Living in a high-poverty (low-opportunity) neighborhood, neighborhood violence, housing insecurity and poor quality housing all have negative effects on health. Public policy to address housing inequities can improve health outcomes. Examples of important legislation include the Section 8 Voucher Reform Act (SEVRA), the Youth Promise Act and the Healthy Housing Bill.

Brian Smedley, Director of the Health Policy Institute, identified the stimulus bill as an important opportunity to work towards health equity. Economy recovery is not possible unless all segments of society can participate. Policy-makers need Health Impact Assessments to determine the public health consequences of new housing, transportation, labor and education policies. Health inequality will worsen during the economic downturn unless we create healthier communities and expand economic and educational opportunities.

Copies of the presentations and the summary of the event are available on the DRA Project website (www.altfutures.com/draproject).

Upcoming Events

Health Equity: Focusing on Health in All Policies, DRA Foresight Briefing, February 20th, 2009, Washington, DC.

Wiser Futures Workshop, WorldFuture 2009: Innovation and Creativity in a Complex World, IAF Futurists Clem Bezold, Craig Bettles and Eric Meade, July 17th, Chicago, IL.

Health For All and a Health Care System Worth Creating, WorldFuture 2009: Innovation and Creativity in a Complex World, IAF Futurists Clem Bezold and Craig Bettles, July 18th-19th, Chicago, IL.

The Futures of China, WorldFuture 2009: Innovation and Creativity in a Complex World, IAF Futurist Eric Meade and Social Technologies Futurist John Cashman, July 18th-19th, Chicago, IL.

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Institute for Alternative Futures, 100 North Pitt Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314
(703) 684-5880 Fax (703) 684-0640 [Map to IAF](#)
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