CHAPTER TWO
THE FUTURE TOLD

Introduction

“Knowledge of the future is a contradiction in terms”, writes Bertrand de Jouvenel (1967: 5). Yet, despite this contradiction, futures have been told since time immemorial and forecasting the future is something we still do on a daily basis. All of us are prophets, predictors, prospectors and planners of the future when we negotiate traffic, keep appointments, honour obligations and commitments. The future is envisaged and assumed when we explain what we will be doing today, tomorrow and in the more distant future, when we declare that we are going on holiday in three months’ time, that we are learning to drive a car and taking out insurance for it, that we are moving house, changing career and signing an employment contract. All these projections and plans imply knowledge before the event and depend on a substantial stock of experience and tacit know-how. In our daily lives we move in and out of such different futures without giving much thought to the matter, treating many aspects of the ‘not yet’ as known, rarely attending to what it is we do in such situations and how we go about doing it. When the personal reservoir of knowledge appears insufficient, there has been and still is a tendency to turn to experts who have specialised in telling and foreseeing the future.

In this chapter we focus on the knowledge element of our constellation of action, knowledge and ethics. We consider who have been and who are still thought of as experts on the future, examine the sources of their specialist knowledge and survey the methods employed. We show that it is of practical significance whether the future is conceived as pre-given and actual, as empty* possibility or as virtual realm of latent* futures in the making*. We indicate that ownership of the future has knock-on effects for the way the future is perceived and responsibility anchored. If the future belongs to god(s), for example, efforts to know it are more likely to involve discovery, disclosure and interpretation of destiny, fate and fortune. If it is tied to the cosmos then calculation, prediction and extrapolation of planetary movements and auspicious
moments for change may be involved. If, in contrast, the future is seen as ours for the making and taking then imagination may be employed for conjecture, creation, colonization and control. Utopias* may be constructed and pursued. Once people’s relationship to the future changes from fated recipient to that of protagonist and agent of change (Peccei 1982: 11) the locus of responsibility changes too. It is moved from its external position to the new owners and protagonists. The onus is on them to know their projections and productions, including associated potential ramifications, in order that they may accompany these creations to their eventual outcomes.

The chapter takes the reader on a journey that extends from early Western cultural activity to the contemporary world of planning and producing futures by scientific, technological, economic and political means. Along the way it considers the many varied tools that have been employed to know the unknowable, to achieve glimpses of the not yet, gain knowledge before the event, provide advance warning, conjecture about possibilities and prepare for uncertainties. It familiarises the reader with practices of divination*, prophecy*, prediction, forecasting, foresight* and scenario planning* to offer comparative analyses that establish both continuity and distinctions between futures told across the ages.

_Glimpses of Fate and Fortune_

To divine the future is to engage with a _future present_*. It is to expect a future that can be known, ‘seen’ and anticipated. Unlike, for example, the future of contemporary scenario planning which is open* and defined by potential, the divined future tends to be pre-given, ready set out with little room for manoeuvre or influence. Divination therefore is an effort to know what gods and fate have in store for individuals and collectives. Furthermore, it is not the ‘future in general’ that is being sought but answers to specific questions about what will happen in a certain situation or to a particular person.

In ancient civilisations diviners were experts that tended to be held in high social regard. They advised sovereigns on all aspects of their rule, providing guidance for both mundane and life-changing decisions. From archaeological finds we know that their craft was taught and handed down through the generations. Thus for example, _hepatomancy_, the inspection and interpretation of the surface and cavities of the