COMMENTARIES

History and scenario planning: A commentary on Schoemaker 2020

James Derbyshire [iD]

Middlesex University, London, UK

Correspondence: James Derbyshire, Middlesex University, London, UK.
Email: J.Derbyshire@mdx.ac.uk

Schoemaker's (2020) paper 'How historical analysis can enrich scenario planning' is a welcome addition to this journal, and could not be more timely. Schoemaker (2020) notes Santayana's famous statement that 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'. An interesting question is whether memory of a major pandemic, such as that we are now living through, had faded to such an extent that the need for a highly precautionary approach in response to them may have been forgotten. The most depressing aspect of COVID-19 is not the *uncertainty* it now brings, but the absolute *certainty* of a major pandemic at some point, yet the seeming lack of preparedness for one. Since pandemics are very much a known possibility, a scenario planning that learns from history may have assisted in preparedness for COVID-19. Can we hope to – finally, this time at least – learn lessons for the future from this present crisis, which will one day pass into history?

Indeed, in exactly this vein, at least based on this commentator's reading, Schoemaker (2020) is essentially responding to Santayana's statement with the question: 'Are those who *do* remember the past still destined to repeat it anyway?'. As researchers concerned with futures and foresight science, we are behooved through our endeavors to ensure a 'no' response is warranted. Schoemaker (2020) notes Mark Twain as famously suggesting that history 'does not repeat itself, but often rhymes'. As this implies, there are gains to be made from a closer scrutiny of history, which can rectify the tendency towards a-historicism of some popular scenario-planning approaches (Bradfield, Derbyshire, & Wright, 2016). Neglecting history in order to emphasize the potential otherness of the future is fraught with danger. However, the full extent of the difficulty we face when considering the future only becomes evident when we also acknowledge that doing the reverse, by paying too much attention to history and thus neglecting the otherness of the future, is equally fraught with danger. Judiciously balancing antecedent and novel (or more contingent) causes when considering the future is a central requirement

for a useful scenario planning. Historians have much to teach us in this respect.

In considering how we might achieve such a balance, it is right to focus on complexity and counterfactual thinking, as Schoemaker (2020) does. The latter teaches us the fragility and contingency of history – how things might have been very different if 'micro-causes' (Wilkinson, Kupers, & Mangalagiu, 2013) had combined in a slightly different way, such as if Archduke Franz Ferdinand had taken a different route on that fateful day in 1914. However, as useful as counterfactual thinking is in counteracting any natural tendency we might have as humans towards determinism and teleology, the question still remains as to how counterfactual thinking aids anticipation of the future. Complexity teaches us that the same or similar events shuffled in a slightly different order, or begun from even a slightly different starting point, can lead to very different outcomes. To this 'sensitivity-to-initial-conditions' we might add 'sensitivity-to-intermediate-conditions' because, saliently for scenario planning, a difference at any point in a causal chain *might* have given rise to a wholly different future. This raises an issue for counterfactual thinking, and the extent to which scenario planning can learn from what might otherwise have happened in the past. There are a myriad counterfactuals in terms of what might have happened instead of what did, and which one would have transpired had this-or-that been different cannot be known. There is also path dependence and attractor states, as Schoemaker (2020) correctly notes. To say the first world war would *not* have happened had Archduke Franz Ferdinand taken a different route in June 1914 is to fall foul of a type of causally isolative and deterministic reasoning associated with Newtonian mechanics, which seeks to understand the effect of individual causes rather than considering the whole, and which might therefore lead to overemphasizing a single cause determined to be a key trigger, rather than the messy confluence of circumstances.

Given the prevailing circumstances, the first world war may still have happened, with a different trigger, or it may not have. History's real value is surely in considering the mish-mash of complex causes as a whole, and the interactions between them, and how a particular contingent future emerged from the confluence of multiple factors at a particular point in time.

However, again, here lies another danger: 'narrative fallacy' (Derbyshire & Wright, 2014; Taleb, 2008). Historians are very good at creating neat and plausible sounding explanations for complex historical events that, at the time, were messy, incoherent, and highly indeterminate. Within scenario planning, making use of this tendency may, according to Schoemaker (2020), be a 'price worth paying in order to imbue foresight with greater credibility'. Yet, if it simply raises the perceived likelihood or plausibility of a set of considered scenarios, at the expense of the myriad others left unconsidered, will scenario planning increase or reduce susceptibility to blindsiding by surprise futures?

Nevertheless, the future *is* forged in the interplay between path dependence and path disruption, as complexity teaches us. As a result, most systems of interest to scenario planners lie on a spectrum between absolute determinism and absolute contingency, and few if any lie at either extreme (Derbyshire, 2020). Firstly, this means that considering the future and planning is not a futile exercise, although the extent of its usefulness depends on the system in question, and where it lies on this spectrum. We are not destined to be corks bobbing in a sea of chance without recourse to any form of navigation. We must beware the tendency, as perhaps very evident in some countries' responses to COVID-19, to blame uncertainty, chance, and contingency for a lack of preparedness that has much more to do with incompetence, hubris, and sheer lack of foresight. Secondly, it means that scenario planning's role is to uncover the tension between path dependence and path disruption within a focal system of interest, and to consider what futures may emerge from it, and how.

In this endeavor, what history can provide us with is clues as to how complex causation works within a focal system of interest, and a means of considering how it may work in new ways in the future to bring about novelty and change. It is how causes combine to lead to emergence, which acts as a break on path dependence, leading to *new* futures that are both a continuation of and a break from the past that are our central focus as scenario planners. It is in gauging the relevant importance of both continuation *and* change in any potential future that is the bread-and-butter of scenario planning, which history can help us with. However, this is complicated by the fact that scenario planning can also be about constructing a desirable future,

as evident in the Mont Fleur example on which Schoemaker (2020) focuses, in which scenario planning was used to galvanize consensus as to the type of future it was desirable to create following apartheid in South Africa. Sadly, the Mont Fleur scenario planning exercise again provides us with evidence of the nature of complexity, its sensitivity, and the uncertainty and indeterminism stemming from it. As Schoemaker (2020) correctly implies, the South Africa that has emerged today cannot be said to represent the 'Flight of the flamingos' scenario created in the Mont Fleur scenarios. The Mont Fleur scenarios are indeed a highly egregious example of what happens when there is a lack of attentiveness to history in scenario planning. In focusing so much on creating a *new* future, the weight of the past was perhaps overlooked. Lessons could have and should have been learned from the failures made in many similar societal transitions. Alas, as on so many occasions throughout history, these lessons of the past not only went unheeded, but weren't even considered. Beware of scenario planning that neglects history!

ORCID

James Derbyshire iD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1505-412X

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