

# *futuribles* - no. 398 - January-February 2014

## **Higher Education and the Digital Challenge. MOOC: on the Importance of an Epiphenomenon**

*Pierre Mœglin*

ICT in general and the spread of the Internet in particular have substantially changed ways of life in the developed countries and also in the developing world. Among other things, they have appreciably expanded the possibilities of access to different forms of knowledge and opened up new opportunities in the education sector with regard to both the dissemination of knowledge and teaching techniques. For a number of years now, for example, MOOCs –Massive Open Online Courses– and their evident success have raised a number of questions in the higher education field. How important are they? In what respects are they innovative (or not)? What lines of development do they open up?

Pierre Mœglin has looked at the question and analyses it in this article. Examining these new forms of distance-learning in some depth and detail, both in their educational implications and their impact on various related cultural sectors, he comes to a nuanced view of the innovative character of MOOCs. He regards them more as an epiphenomenon than a genuine social phenomenon and sees the success of MOOCs and the debates they have prompted as pointing to a number of significant changes in the educational and cultural sectors not unrelated to economic consequences.

## **Is China Making a Land-Grab in Africa? Taking Fresh Stock of a Vexed Question**

*Jean-Jacques Gabas*

With sustained economic and demographic growth, a rising standard of living among its inhabitants and a growing demand for food, China has considerable efforts to make to meet the growing needs of its population. In this context, it has often been criticized by observers who take the view that it is evincing a form of neo-colonialism towards the African continent, not only with regard

to mineral resources, but also in the areas of land ownership and agriculture. What is the actual situation? Can China perhaps be seen as a country that is making a massive land-grab in Africa?

In the view of Jean-Jacques Gabas, drawing here on the two most reliable databases on land acquisition across the world, the actual picture is more mixed than it seems. Gabas first re-situates China within world agricultural trade, then provides an insight into global land transactions and a league table of the biggest investors in land, in which China comes sixth, far behind the USA. He then details where these investments have mostly been made and, with regard to the main African countries concerned, indicates the (small) proportion represented by Chinese investment. Lastly, he shows that Africa is not a geographical priority so far as Chinese investment in land is concerned, specifies the nature of Chinese projects on African soil and stresses China's increasing tendency to focus its activity in Africa on development aid.

## **Energy Foresight: the Possible, the Desirable and the Acceptable**

*Bernard David, Marie de Lattre-Gasquet, Sandrine Mathy, Jean-Eudes Moncomble and Julie Rozenberg*

In France a debate on energy transition began in late 2012 and went on for almost eight months. Various consultations with the major players and the general public were involved. The aim was to produce recommendations for an energy bill in autumn 2013, but, because the participants could not come to any agreement, it was simply a summary of these debates that was submitted to the government in July 2013. With each party holding fast to its position, the process has come to a standstill. The drafting of the bill has been deferred to spring 2014, the intention being to present it to Parliament in the autumn and for it to be passed before the end of the year. Among the points listed in this summary is a proposal for restarting the process by "carrying out a shared foresight exercise, informed by

macro-economic scenarios for France and Europe, microeconomic modelling and multi-criteria studies drawing on the partnership methods of the General Commission for Strategy and Foresight”.

This is an important point since, in this type of debate, aimed at providing long-term orientation for French energy policy, the contribution of foresight studies is key. Nevertheless, as is shown by this article, a product of the PROSPER foresight network and its thinking, foresight exercises on energy matters, torn as they are between quantitative methods and qualitative approaches often tinged with subjectivity, have difficulty convincing decision-makers or leading to political measures or strategies that can garner a minimum degree of assent. Yet what is at issue here is necessarily finding some accommodation between quantitative and qualitative approaches, overcoming obstacles produced by mutual misunderstanding on the part of supporters of those two approaches and seeking compromises between actors with very different points of view. In this connection, as this article shows, three quite recent energy foresight exercises have striven, with encouraging results, to reconcile the qualitative and the quantitative so as to develop scenarios that are both relevant and acceptable to the different actors concerned. David *et al.* outline the main characteristics of these studies and the lessons to be drawn from them with a view to developing a foresight exercise that enough people can get behind and that is likely to produce a scenario acceptable to a majority.

### **Producing Scenarios by the Hundred: How Statistical Approaches are Transforming Foresight Methods**

*Céline Guivarch and Julie Rozenberg*

Most foresight exercises requiring a quantitative assessment of the scenarios proceed in two stages. They begin with a qualitative exploration of determining factors, from which a limited range of sets of hypotheses are chosen, producing a –similarly limited– range of scenarios. A mathematical model is then applied which translates the selected hypotheses into input data, in order to quantify the various scenarios identified. Nevertheless, as this article stresses, the increasing complexity of contexts and the possible interplay between the different factors at work in the various fields of study have cast doubt on the appropriateness of this mode

of operation. The representativeness of hypotheses selected is no longer any guarantee of the quality of the scenarios deriving from them.

This is why, in this article, Guivarch and Rozenberg propose a different way of proceeding, retaining all the determining factors identified in the field of study and running the models hundreds or thousands of times to get as many scenarios as possible from them. Qualitative choices are then made in a second phase, in the “target-space” of these scenarios. Guivarch and Rozenberg outline this alternative method here, which consists in building databases of scenarios in order to explore the areas of uncertainty. They also indicate the advantages this represents for foresight studies and present an actual example of the use of this method in the field of climate change economics.

### **What does the Maghreb Want?**

*Nadji Safir*

The revolutions that have rocked the region (the famous “Arab Spring”) have kept the Maghreb on the front pages of the world’s press for more than three years now. Today it is at a crossroads. On the one hand, the countries of the Maghreb –Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia– are struggling to recover their political equilibrium. On the other, they are unable to meet the socio-economic challenges facing them in a context of internationalizing trade and strong competition from the developing countries of Asia. However, the region has many assets that could enable it to find its place in the global economy, if a genuine effort of regional integration were undertaken.

This is what Nadji Safir demonstrates here. He begins by stressing the limitations of the development policies pursued in the Maghreb and the region’s shortcomings in terms of the “social management of knowledge”. He goes on to outline the seven major sets of issues and constraints that are crucial to the future of the region, which he breaks down as follows: ideological and cultural; political and security-related; educational and scientific; social and economic; ecological and territorial; humanitarian and security-related; and political and geostrategic. On the basis of these issues and of the assets at the disposal of the countries of the Maghreb, Safir stresses that regional economic integration is an essential prerequisite for turning the area into a genuine growth hub

rather than a crisis zone, and doing so at the regional and also, potentially, the international level.

### **A Comeback for Cities: Can “City Localism” Provide a New Basis for Political Thinking?**

*Jean Haëntjens*

Economic crisis, ecological crisis, global warming – things have come to a serious pass. The situation may at times seem desperate, judging by the inability of states to meet these kinds of challenges at the national level and also internationally, given the difficulty of establishing global (economic, environmental etc.) regulatory regimes. Yet, as has been reported in these pages on several occasions (see issues no. 354 and 392), many promising initiatives have emerged at the local level which may turn out to be test-beds for policies that can be transposed to the national level or may, at any rate, make useful contributions to current political efforts to curb the consequences of these various crises.

Can we say, then, that cities are back? Might they, through local action, with the occasional support of networks formed between them, contribute to a renewal of political thinking, or even foster the emergence of desirable new social models. This is, at least, an avenue opened up by “city localism”, as Jean Haëntjens demonstrates here, and it might point to new paths that can be taken in the future by societies which, though globalized, are making little headway today.

### **The French Public Finances in Perspective: Medium- and Long-term Scenarios**

*Karim Triki and Gilles Dufrenot*

“The day has come when the accumulation of deficits and of uncontrolled spending since 1975, the year of the last balanced state budget, is decidedly compromising politicians’ scope for action”, wrote Alexandre Siné in 2005 in the opening lines of an article on the intolerable rigidity of public expenditure in France (issue 313). Eight years and one painful economic crisis later, what is the state of the French public finances? Without going over the history of the state’s financial situation in detail, Karim Triki and Gilles Dufrenot remind us here of the current conditions: a fierce economic crisis that has substantially affected the progression of

GDP, to which the government is striving to respond with budgetary consolidation measures that are, admittedly, aimed at improving the situation of the public finances (mainly through tax revenues), but could also have a lasting negative impact on economic growth and hence thwart the efforts at consolidation currently being undertaken.

In this context, how might public finances develop in France in the long term? Given the demographic prospects (an ageing population) and their consequences for public expenditure, the authors envisage two possible future scenarios for the French economy up to 2020 and 2050. There is a gloomy scenario in which the macroeconomic situation would continue to deteriorate and a bright scenario in which it would improve thanks to an international upturn and the beneficial effects of budgetary adjustment. Within these two scenarios they propose two variants for the development of the public finances, one without budgetary adjustment and the other with consolidation. Overall, they stress that there is little chance of the scenarios without budgetary adjustment becoming reality. At this point, the gloomy scenario with adjustment seems the most likely, allowing ministers little room for manoeuvre, whereas the most desirable scenario (the bright one with budgetary consolidation) would offer better prospects for France and almost certainly an opportunity to undertake the structural reforms that have become essential.

### **The Emergence of a European Neo-Populism**

*Jean-François Drevet*

2014 is an important year for the European Union. For the ninth time since 1979 the citizens of its member states will, in May of this year, elect the members to represent them in the European Parliament. Given proportional representation and a socio-economic context prevailing in Europe over the last six years that is, to say the least, tense, there is every risk that the ranks of the parties of the extreme Right will swell. This is to be expected since, as Jean-François Drevet shows here, “neo-populist” movements have grown in strength just about everywhere on the continent in the last few years, whether the countries concerned have been in crisis or not, and they are tending to converge beyond their respective national boundaries, both through their critique of how the EU

operates and their defence of “Western identity”. If we add to this the political weakness of governing parties with regard to questions of religion and identity, and the way nationalist extremists and fundamentalist Muslim groups have effectively boosted each

other’s fortunes, there is good reason to wonder what the outcome of the coming elections will be, what impact this will have on social cohesion in the various countries of the Union and what the consequences may be for the functioning of European institutions. ■

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