Uncertainty by Design: Imagining and Enacting Future Scenarios

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Humankind has long struggled with the uncertainty of the future, and particularly with how to foresee the future, imagine alternatives, or prepare for and guard against undesirable eventualities. This project does not provide answers to such problems. It is neither a manifesto that sets out to describe an undesirable state of affairs that might be termed the 'uncertainty society,' nor a toolkit for designing the types of futures we might wish to see. Instead, my aim is to problematize different ways in which societies conceptualize and act on the uncertain future, and to understand how and why particular social technologies have emerged accordingly, as well as how these technologies reshape and affect the ways in which we experience our world. My principal objective within this effort is to shed light on one particular technology for systematically thinking, envisioning, and preparing for future uncertainties, that of *the scenario*.

The scenario technology differs from other means usually associated with managing future uncertainties (i.e. calculations and evaluations based on knowledge of past events, leading to possible prediction, control, or prevention of unknowable futures), which draw mainly on the construct of *risk* and the related notion of risk management. Instead of risk, I argue that the scenario draws on the construct of *uncertainty* and promotes a particular approach to the governing of the future that I term *uncertainty by design*. Scenarios create stories of the future neither to translate the future into assessed possibilities nor to predict it in advance, but rather to identify new potentials, to destabilize perceptions of the future as closed or certain, and to mitigate overreliance on existing knowledge and models in efforts to address the unknown future. Put differently, the scenario technology not only accepts the potential uncertainty of the future but also promotes uncertainty as a mode of observing and acting in the world.

My project consists of three anthropological cases of the use of scenario technology in the fields of security, energy, and health. I primarily present my findings from a long-term fieldwork research on scenario-based national emergency exercises in Israel. These exercises – known as Turning Point – build on nationwide scenarios and are intended to prepare all governmental ministries, local municipalities, emergency operation units, and the general population for future emergencies (e.g. war, earthquake). Further developing the conceptual framework of scenarios and uncertainty, I also examine the uses of scenarios in thinking about and preparing for unknown futures at the WEC (world energy council) and at the WHO (the world health organization). In these cases, I show how *global* future uncertainties are created and governed by the scenario technology.

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Her recent published works include *Modes of Uncertainty: Anthropological Cases* (University of Chicago Press, co-edited with Paul Rabinow); "Governing Future Potential Biothreats: Toward an Anthropology of Uncertainty," in *Current Anthropology*; "Biosecurity as a Boundary Object: Science, Society, and the State," in *Security Dialogue*; and "Practicing Uncertainty: Scenario-Based Preparedness Exercises in Israel," *in Cultural Anthropology*.