

The Reflections of Late-modern Transition in the Images of the Future of Young Finns

Anita Rubin¹

1. Introduction

“I want the future to provide me with a good job, a family, a flat of my own, a car, a dog and a summer cottage”, a 15-year old boy declared in an interview which forms a part of the research of the images of the future of Finnish youth. The research which will come out as a doctoral dissertation in sociology, consists of two surveys and structured theme interviews.

The first part of the research was carried out at 12 schools and educational institutes in 1994-1995. The respondents were divided into four groups according to their age and school level:

Table 1. School Level and Students' Age Groups

School level	Number	Age group
Lower level of the comprehensive schools	3	10, 11
Upper level -" -" -"	3	12, 13, 14, 15
High schools	3	16, 17, 18
Educational institutes and trade schools	3	18 - 22

The results of the first analysis reveal that young Finnish people share a clearly dichotomist image of the future. When the respondents deal with their own personal future, the images are bright, full of hope, and show a great deal of confidence in one's own possibilities to have a say of how the future will be like. However, the further the images go from the personal level, the gloomier and the more hopeless they become, and the less possibilities the young see that they have to affect it.

This dichotomy is explained to result from the confusion and lack of views characteristic to the present time of transition. Some contents of the images rise from the concept of modern and reflect the needs, expectations and presuppositions of the industrial rationality, while some others already reflect the qualities of the change and the late-modern/late-industrial. It is argued further that the concept of late modern/late-industrial have explanatory power over the empirical findings of the images of the future.

2. Late-modern transition of the society

Both in cultural and sociological studies, postmodern² has been used in connection with the weakening or extinguishing of the modern movement (see e.g. Jameson 1986, 227). It is argued that

¹¹ Researcher, Finland Futures Research Centre
Turku School of Economics and Business Administration
P.O. Box 110, FIN-20521 Turku, Finland
Phone: +358-2-3383 533; Fax +358-2-2330 755
E-mail: anita.rubin@abo.fi

² Modern and postmodern are seen here not only as the aesthetic cultural movements reflecting the changing reality in general, but also as the determining Western socio-cultural rationalities which have set the paradigms of these eras (about this view, see e.g. Habermas 1986, 99-102). Modern and postmodern are understood as the varying aspects of the present reality, or rather, as the ways of grouping contemporary social phenomena which exist at the same time and which can result from each other in a dialectic process, the latter appearing from the maturing process of the previous (see e.g. Bauman 1996; Beck & Giddens & Lash 1996).

there are aspects in contemporary reality which cannot be explained with the terms and concepts of the modern anymore. However, this does not necessarily mean that "modern" has ceased from existing (see e.g. Vattimo 1989, 13-15).

The division of social cycles, or phases, to agrarian, industrial, and through late-industrial to postindustrial (see e.g. Bell 1973, Toffler 1980, 1990) is taken by many thinkers as pointing at the economic and industrial constructions of the society. In an analogous way, the division to pre-modern, modern and through late modern to something new can be seen as pointing at the socio-cultural activities and practices of the society.

Thus the present transitional period – the information society – between industrial and post-industrial is called the late-industrial, and the transition between modern and postmodern accordingly as the late modern period. It is argued further that *for the present, we live in a late modern, late-industrial information society which precedes a postindustrial society in the coming postmodern era.* (Malaska 1985, 1989, 1991)

Together with the promises of late modernity – potential for equity, authenticity, freedom, self-identity and creation, etc. – the concept of information society suggests a growing tendency to a culturally and ethically heterogenous world with all its ambivalence, pluralism, individualization of risk, short views of the future, contingency and fragmentation (Giddens 1991, Beck 1992, Taylor 1991). These phenomena are understood in relation to the changing human processes, which take place in contemporary Western societies, such as individualization on personal level and privatization on the level of societies. The relationships of these aspects are shown in the following figure:

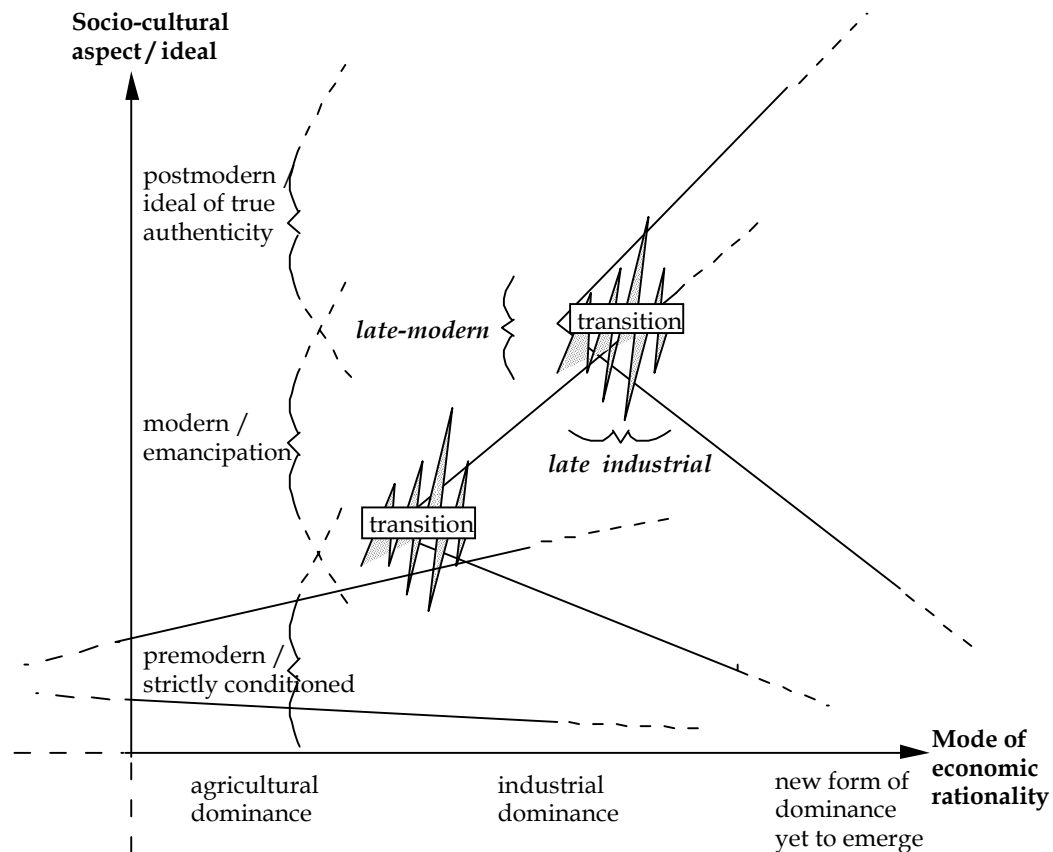


Figure 1, The evolutionary processes of the socio-cultural and economic dimensions which produce transition.

Figure 1 shows how the transitional phases form the essence of evolutionary social change. The socio-cultural character is developing from the strictly conditioned pre-modern era through the modern to the postmodern era. The propulsive force, which drove the pre-modern society into an era of change, the rise of by the emancipatory ideals of the Enlightenment, produced the modern, industrial society. The modern society, however, does/did not manage to maintain endlessly the emancipatory ideals from which it was born, but in the process of maturing, these ideals gradually produced the mass society which is/was more and more regulated by nature (Taylor 1991, Bauman 1993, 1996).

Now the development has reached the point where the industrial, modern mass society has started to change, produced by phenomena like individualization, globalization, growth of information, networking, etc. The change concerns the whole of economic rationality: there are features in the Western economic practices which derive from either the agricultural or industrial dominance, but this very situation is also producing something completely new into the society – thus transition is the producer and the product at the same time. It is difficult to make specific forecasts or analyses of what will come out of the change in social, cultural or economic terms, and how the reality, work, and everyday life will be like after the transition.

The speed of change increases, produces more and more new elements and phenomena, and finally the process will end up into a new state of steady growth and stability which can be called post-industrial and post-modern. True authenticity will prevail (see Taylor 1991). The Western countries have not reached the permanent features of the postmodern era or phase yet but perhaps in very few aspects of life.

There is a good reason to distinguish these differences in order to explain some of the attitudes of the youth, to understand the tension between the differences in these attitudes, and, further, to see where these attitudes originate from. A young person is growing up and trying to figure out his/her ways of coping in the middle of rapid changes, while the experience of the present is becoming thinner and more and more diluted and, controversially, more and more transparent (Vattimo 1989).

3. Individualization and inconsistency as late-modern characteristics

According to Berger and Luckmann, the society is manifesting itself to an individual both as a subjective and as an objective reality. The subjective reality is composed of everyday experience, the reality of everyday life, and knowledge about how this reality is transmitted and constructed as social processes (1995, 226). This experience and reality people share with the other members of the society.

One of the main features of the present transition – and transitional phases in general – is the confusion produced by the mixture of old and new. This means that in the Western countries, features from both postmodern, modern and even pre-modern are merging together at the same time. Table 2 shows the discontinuities and tensions between some social reflections on the phenomena of modern and late-modern. The differences are explored in sectors of the concept of the human, institutional structures, and the concept of the world. Moreover, it is assumed that these phenomena produce certain characteristics to the images of the future, and these characteristics are also shown in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that some of the institutional structures and social functions, the physical structures of various organizations, such as e.g. the school and education systems, cultural institutions, political parties and labour movements and the beliefs on which these institutions were originally built, still base on the industrial needs, values and practices. Some others, mainly the qualitative structures such as the contents of education policy, social policy, emphasized individuality, networking and the global media, tendency to global culture etc., already reflect the change and the new needs of the late-industrial information society. Social interaction and communication with the others renew continuously the reality of everyday life, both on the individual, as well as on the social level. The process of individualization separates circles of life: people have ceased from understanding big social systems and the collective ways of thinking which derive from these as the imposer of guidelines or margin terms for their everyday decision making and activities. Instead, they rather adapt their actions and decisions to a current variety of social situations (Allardt 1995).

On an individual level, transition emerges as the growth of individualization. The concepts of the human are changing and the late-modern world is described as the world of individuals. People break loose from their institutional ties and instead, a person has to construct his/her life as a personal "self-project" (Ilmonen 1996). Late-modern questions the prevalent idea of everyday living by introducing several opportunities and ways for adaptation among which to choose instead of the one cherished by the industrial, modern human being. It keenly accepts and supports the differences between people, and instead of putting pressure on homogeneity and similarities, as was done at the modern era, late-modern emphasizes on the importance of originality and individual creativity (see e.g. Taylor, 1991; Hautamäki 1996, 35-36; Koski 1997).

The spread of monetary economics made more and more people dependent on each other in their livelihood, and this dependency covers a constantly growing amount of people (Alasuutari 1989, 23). Still the original ideals of modernity emphasize independency and individuality. The controversy brought by these phenomena is one of the features which mature modern into late-modern.

Beck (1996, 27-28) says that the people who live in the period of change have to plan, write, arrange, darn and patch their own biographies, act, stage, show and direct their own stories, identities, social networks, commitments and ideologies. People are urged to create themselves unaided by the others, but being in communication with them at the same time, and the identity is formed by the dialogic process of accepting and abandoning the views of oneself created by the others (Taylor 1991). There is a growing paradox on what is requested from a person in order to be a successful person in the late-modern society.

If seen only from the individual point of view, this social interdependency brings a heavy burden of responsibility on one's own shoulders, dealing with such duties as choosing the good life and right kind of values, etc. But if seen from the point of view Taylor (1991) emphasizes, attention is turned to the contents of values, the points which we share in them globally and locally, and this brings also social responsibility back to the discussion.

This basic right, however, brings along confusions and ethical problems: Ilmonen (1996) describes the challenges of present Finnish reality as the withdrawal of collective ethos. While social structures are being replaced by information structures and the old, traditional collectivity is disappearing, people feel more and more insecure and confused, powerless in facing social and political phenomena – especially on the global level (see also Taylor 1991), and the individuality is constructed in social interactions. Morals become a private matter and norms are more and more labile and grow lighter and lighter (Bauman 1993, 31-36). Social ties are bound to loosen and social integration to weaken in the process.

4. The dichotomist images of future: empirical results

The following generalizations of the images of young Finns about their personal, national and global future in some 50 years from the present day are constructed from the answers to the first questionnaire and theme interviews.

Young people's images of their personal future in Finland tell success stories of wealthy suburban families who live happily in beautiful private houses not far from the city, but not in the countryside, either. The families are composed of the parents – that is, the young themselves in the future – and two children, a daughter and a son. The parents who have just retired, or are about to retire, own a summer cottage, a boat and two cars. (The only really future-related phenomenon is that the two cars are defined as electric cars.) The house is made of bricks or wood and it is described to be very much like the houses today.

The couple has been happily married since the days of their youth. Both parents have had a successful and up-curving career: they are now in good positions as lawyers, doctors, teachers, or private entrepreneurs. They have also managed to give their children a similarly sound education and thus provide the future society with still more well-to-do doctors, lawyers etc. Unemployment has not really touched them, although it is clearly recognized as a future-related problem. There are occasional remarks of short periods of personal unemployment right after graduation, but the item is regarded as important only in general terms, not as forming a possible future course of one's own life.

As to Finland, its future is described as a society of corruption, unemployment, growing environmental problems, drugs, dirty urban centers full of poor people trying to fight for their living. The number of the population has grown due to economic and environmental refugees especially from Eastern Europe and Russia, and this growth has caused the welfare state and its administration to collapse.

An alternative image indicates that the number of population has sunk – all those who only could afford it, have gone away to wealthier lands and only the poor and those with less initiative have stayed. Corruption, crime and uncontrollable violence has taken over, and the use of drugs and alcohol brings the only escape from the sulky reality. There has been some kind of an environmental disaster quite close to the Finnish borders – a nuclear power plant has exploded, or a war has broken up – and that has spoiled the lakes and forests so that one cannot swim, hike, hunt, camp or pick berries and mushrooms anymore.

The future of the world is described as a devastating mess of hunger, wars, overpopulation and pollution – no hope or signs of any improvement in sight. The oceans have become huge pools of oil waste and dirt; the rain forests have been destroyed and global warming has caused huge droughts; the wars have driven millions of hungry people to wander from their homes westwards or northwards, and famines and large AIDS-like epidemics burst out everywhere.

While the views of the future of Finland and the world are oppressive and full of threats, the views of one's personal future are seen as a fulfillment of personal dreams. In the end of each interview session, the interviewees were asked how they would see it possible that their own bright futures can become true in the gloomy world they just presented. How could they live a happy life and carry on with their successful careers in this kind of a disastrous world? At this point, the interviewees are puzzled and they have no answer. The same dichotomic dilemma can be seen in the answers written down by an 17-year old upper comprehensive school girl student to the question of what she would say as a retired person to her grandchildren:

“Important events: *Wars, leaks from nuclear power plants, explosive population growth which had to be controlled, different and new diseases, many new inventions.*” ...

”Personal Achievements: *Started a family, worked and started own small animal clinic.*”

A 21-year old woman studying at a vocational school answers the same question as follows:

“Important events: *People messed everything up, the waters were polluted causing animals and nature to die. The ozone layer thinned so that it was not possible to live outside.*” ...

”Personal Achievements: *Started my own firm which was successful. Got married and started a family.*”

Life in the future in general is regarded as not as good as the present – the long-lasting belief in the ideal of economic growth and in the value of a constant struggle for growing welfare has ceased among the kids in Finland. The old idea of the parents struggling for a better future for their children does not seem realistic anymore to the little brothers and sisters of the X-generation, even though they still cherish the very same ideal for their own children. It must be remembered, however, that the research was carried out during the recession in Finland and this has coloured the tone of the images as well as some big national and international issues like joining the EU and the referendum before that. In addition to the historical facts and phenomena, the dichotomy needs an explanation from a wider social level.

5. Discussion

Being a natural part of each process of decision making, the future has a two-way effect on human decision making and planning processes: First, people are aware that their current decisions and actions affect the future by narrowing the variety of possible future alternatives. At the same time, the image of a specific future state in the given question one considers has an impact on his/her present decision making, as well on individual as on social level. Thus the individual idea of the future together with the prevailing social and societal ideas of it have a contributory influence on the general direction of the decision making and actions in the present day (Helve 1987, 154; Inayatullah 1993, Rubin 1995.) This reciprocating process is evolutionary in character, dialectic as well as interactive.

A person who feels that he/she can affect the future, also finds the future as controllable and encompassible, and is able to foresight. His/her actions are goal-directed and purposeful; he/she strives for creating strategies to plan his/her own future in order to make it the best possible (Bjerstedt 1992; Nurmi 1995).

On the other hand, a person who does not feel that he/she can have an effect on what the future will be like, finds the future as impossible to be outlined, confusing, often also as preordained and inflexible. When facing this kind of a future, he/she has to return continuously to his/her original aims and strategies and thus re-interprets the situation over and over again (Nurmi 1995). He/she finds him-/herself only as a pawn in the game of the forces of transition with only very few possibilities to affect. These forces he/she finds too big and too mighty, and outside reach, making the degrees of freedom of his/her choices and activities very small.

The contradicting expectations and models, deriving partly from the fading industrial age and partly from the emerging information age, confront in the point where a young person has to make personal selections and decisions for his/her own future, e.g. to choose his/her main study subject, profession, marry and start a family, search for a job, etc. In this situation, this dilemma becomes visible: The

social environment or his/her personal experiences do not necessary support a young person in this decision making anymore, at least not as clearly as it used to.

For instance, it is more than possible that a young person in Finland cannot find a permanent job comparable to his/her long years of studying, at least not very easily. Also a young person most probably cannot gain material welfare and property to the same level his/her parents did – it is possible that this generation is the first one for many centuries who cannot reach for better life and more material goods than their parents did. The very idea of growth as progress – be it economic well-being this time – has changed.

Does this mean that a young person will feel that he/she has failed for not being able to reach up to the standards of “good life” or “success” which still prevail in his/her mind and anticipations? Or, to the contrary, is he/she going to blame the society for failing him/her in its inability to provide the welfare he/she finds as the just birthright?

The high expectations of personal future take the form of happiness and success in the way the young people understand these values, interpret these social expectations and translate them into the language of how success and happiness have been defined for tens of years now. Finnish young people’s expectations for their own future, evaluations and objectives have changed in the last years only very little, while the social context in which these objectives and expectations should come true has changed much faster (e.g. Rauste 1974; Rauste-von Wright & Kinnunen, 1983; Helve 1987.)

On the other hand, young people’s images of the state level future and global future are based on diversified, but not profound information on the global problems dealing with the environment, diminishing resources and population growth. These images derive mainly from the various phenomena caused by the constant inflow of new information and from the values which lie in the center of the education and production models of the transitional information society. In this aspect, the images of Finnish youth are very much alike those of young people elsewhere (e.g. ASTEC 1996; Eckersley 1988, 1996; Hicks & Holden 1995, Hicks 1996). The dichotomy and discontinuities in the images of the future by Finnish young people indicate that the images derive from different time interpretations. It seems that the personal positive images are based on and the personal future interpreted from the processes of primary socialization, which still strongly lean on the needs, and values of the industrial, modern era. At the same time, the images of the future which deal with issues away from one’s personal life and possibilities already show features which base on the late-modern, late-industrial era. There is no continuity between these images – as if they belonged to a completely different time and age.

It is apparent that there exists an unchanging picture of what a good and happy life is or should be like. The descriptions of personal life in the future are constructed of hopes and positive expectations, and fears or unpleasant expectations are left out. It seems that parents' and grandparents' happy and successful lives of the fifties and sixties still remain a model to strive for in the hearts of many young people. At the same time, the future outside the personal level seems frightening.

The prevailing images of the future of the young on a personal level are based on the ideas and values of the welfare state model and its basic social unit, the nuclear family, which lie in the focus of the social and educational functions of the industrial phase. These functions answer to the needs and expectations typical to the industrial era. Thus also the idea of how to define success and happiness derives from this model – the positive expectations can be understood as deriving from an optimistic strategy which indicates a straightforward driving for success (Nurmi 1989). These ideals

and this model are deeply rooted in the minds and expectations of the youth, as can be seen in contents of the images.

The contradictory situation might result as an inability to act, indifference, reluctance to make decisions for one's future, or it can come out as passive and negative reactions to decision making and cynical, indifferent or even hostile attitudes to the functions and practices of the society, and, finally, tendency to alienation from the society and its processes. Or, on the other hand, it might result as a growth of support of various anti-social, religious or extremist groups which are more able to provide the young person with a clear world view, strict value structure, sense of right and wrong, and an authoritarian model to which it is easy to adjust in these days of confusion and change.

Transition places thus a great challenge for educators, parents and decision makers in their work on to how to try to increase young people's optimism, true possibilities to affect, and, as most important, their faith in the future in national and global terms.

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