

21ST CENTURY VISIONS MAPS AND ROUTES

How will humankind evolve between now and 2100? That's the question this study by three foresight organizations ^[1] sets out to answer. It begins with an analysis of the major trends that will shape or influence human societies over the course of the century (maps). It then proposes several evolutionary scenarios based on the behaviors these societies will adopt in the face of the risks and opportunities that will arise (roads). The study (120 pages) is available at <https://visions.2100.org> (in French, in English in March 2025)

Megatrends

Planetary transformations

Humankind will be impacted by three major forces: climate change, a technological revolution and a demographic shift - movements on a scale and at a speed unprecedented in human history, the effects of which are already being felt.

Climate change has multi-faceted consequences: extreme events, sea level rise, modified biodiversity, etc.; it will cause major damage that could reduce global GDP by 20 percent or more by 2050; due to global warming, areas will not be livable anymore while others will become exploitable (e.g. Siberia, Arctic).

The protean and disruptive technological revolution with digital and AI technologies, biotechnologies, nanotechnologies, etc. will impact multiple domains (economics, warfare, health, research, etc.); these technologies will be devastating if powers seize upon them to manipulate societies, as we are already observing.

Demographic shift: the world's population is set to peak at around 9 billion in 2080, then decline; but there will be a growing imbalance between an ageing, declining North and a young, expanding South (Africa and India will account for more than half the world's population by the end of the century); this will lead to massive migrations and inevitable tensions between peoples.

A world in tension

Over the next few decades, these waves of climate, technology and demographics will sweep over a world that is seriously disturbed and on societies seeking their way forward.

On the geopolitical front, we are witnessing an increasingly open and multi-faceted war between retreating Western powers and authoritarian regimes on the offensive - a situation that is fueling a climate of global anxiety and severely curtailing efforts to combat climate change.

At the same time, on the economic front, the world community has become fragmented; it is being led down the path of protectionism; countries are settling into war economies; and economic and social structures are undergoing profound change as a result of technical and demographic change.

Finally, on the political front, societies - particularly Western ones - are being desorganized by fear and misinformation; democracy is being called into question; human rights are in retreat...

At the same time, new values are emerging around the world in relation to the environment, the living world and gender.

In face of challenges and stakes that lie ahead, we are today witnessing attitudes of withdrawal and closure, but also inclinations and openings towards new modes of governance, economy and existence. At the same time, risks of various kinds (geopolitical, financial, health, social, etc.) are accumulating, and could have disastrous systemic effects. This is why it seems appropriate to reflect on the future through a plurality of scenarios.

[¹] The Fondation 2100, the Société française de prospective, and the Réseau Université de la pluralité. The study is in the filiation of "2100 - Récit du prochain siècle", published in 1990 by the French Ministry of Research

Scenarios

Two types of scenario are proposed. The first assumes that people as a whole adopt “positive” behaviors, with proactive and transformative postures in the face of the problems they face. The second scenarios, on the other hand, are based on assumptions of withdrawal and inertia. And we imagine the paths taken by these positive or negative behaviors over three bifurcations located today (in 2025), then in 2040, and finally around 2060. The different scenarios are color-coded ^[2].

“Positive” scenarios

The first scenario, known as “techno-humanist” (blue), is in line with the “techno-solutionist” approach prevailing today, a proactive stance which, however, does not call into question production and consumption patterns. Technology is trusted to solve problems, especially those posed by global warming and the energy transition. According to this scenario, this is achieved in a “humanist” spirit, by placing technology at the service of societies, developing their creative potential, valuing the diversity of civilizations, respecting nature, and redeveloping the planet through major programs in a reasoned and concerted manner. This assumes that the world enjoys lasting peace, and that populations are actively and democratically involved in the use and choice of technologies.

The second (green) scenario, deriving from a sharp deterioration in ecological and climatic conditions, is based on a resolutely transformative approach to lifestyles and corporate governance. They adopt firm policies of economic and technological sobriety, and engage in policies of subsidiarity at all levels. Major wealth redistribution programs are implemented worldwide. This favors the development of a humanity living in symbiosis with the planet - hence the name of the “symbiocene” scenario, which takes the place of the “anthropocene”. Today, this scenario is unlikely, but we can't rule it out.

“Negative” scenarios

There are two types of negative scenario. The first scenario (red) starts with a withdrawal and leads to an over-armed plural world. The world gradually organizes itself into “blocs”. They arm themselves to conquer territories and resources, or to defend themselves. The accumulation of climatic problems and social convulsions led countries to transform themselves into “fortresses”, with strong control over their populations. Between the “blocs”, world trade is maintained while relative peace reigns, contained by the nuclear deterrent that continues to operate. This is the scenario we're heading for if the current geopolitical situation continues.

A second, negative scenario (black) derives from inertia that extends beyond the middle of the century. Vast areas of the planet become uninhabitable as a result of delays in combating climate change. Local and regional collapses are multiplying. Large migrant camps and mafia-run states are being set up on the bangs of these zones. Admittedly, some of these local collapses will be inevitable, but their scale will depend on the inertia of the people and authorities concerned.

Conclusion: It's clear that, given the irreversible nature of some trends and thresholds such as global warming, we need to act quickly and decisively right now if we don't want to find ourselves in increasingly complicated and difficult situations as the century progresses. This is a matter for the next two decades. It involves fighting climate change, taking control of technology and appeasing the global community, all three being linked as a system.

^[2] For the sake of completeness, because foresight must also consider extreme situations, we have sketched out, without elaborating on them, “dystopian” (white) scenarios: that of a nuclear winter (caused by a global atomic war), a digital winter (caused by a giant solar storm), a volcanic winter (caused by a massive eruption) and that of a sharp rise in the seas (caused by the melting of all or part of Antarctica).