

Dismal Theory, Methodological Chaos in Scenario Planning

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STS and Scenario Planning

- Increasing intellectual traffic between Futures Studies and Science and Technology Studies
- **Scenarios are the “laboratory” of the future.**

Claim 1: Martelli 2001: p. 62

A methodological chaos?

Scenarios suffer from a lack of paradigms in Kuhn's sense (1962), i.e. they lack a set of theories, principles and practical rules commonly accepted by the majority of theoreticians and practitioners (roughly corresponding in Kuhn's terminology to research and applied scientists). Scenarios share this situation with business strategy and, to a certain extent, also with management, but their predicament is in this respect more extreme. In fact, there are some theories, principles and rules for building (and to a rather lesser extent also for planning) with scenarios. The problem is that they are vastly different and even furiously conflicting with each other. For

Claim 2: Chermack 2002: p.25

“The status of theory and theory development in the area of scenario planning and, for that matter, future-oriented practices in general is dismal.”

Chermack, Thomas J. 2002. “The Mandate for Theory in Scenario Planning.” *Futures Research Quarterly*, 25–28.

Practice-led

Practice-oriented field.

- ... emphasizes needs of the client over needs over methods or theory as starting point.

Pre-Paradigmatic

It is true:

FS never reached a state of “normal science”

-remains a ‘cabinet of curiosities’ instead of a curated museum

Dismal Theory, Chaotic Methods

- Do I agree with these claims, that this is the state of affairs?

STS- Inspired Research Question

- However, if we are able to remain agnostic with regards to our judgements to whether or not the claims are true or false...
- What might be the secondary or collateral consequences?

Exhibit: Bradfield et al. 2016

“Scenario planning has been around for more than 50 years and during this period a multitude of techniques and methodologies have developed, resulting in what has been described by Martelli (2001) as ‘methodological chaos’. The literature reveals an abundance of different and at times contradictory definitions, characteristics, principles and methodological ideas about scenarios. The consequence, according to Khakee (1991), is that ‘few techniques in futures studies have given rise to so much confusion as scenarios’ (p. 52). This ‘confusion’ results from the fact that there is a paucity of theory underpinning the use of scenarios as a means to consider the future, leading Chermack (2002) to conclude that ‘the status of theory development in the area of scenario planning is dismal’ (p. 25). This is equally true of futures studies in general, which Miller (2006) contends, lacks a coherent and commonly accepted foundation when compared to other well-established academic disciplines” (p.60).

Dismal Theory, Chaotic Methods

The obvious pattern: For decades, scholars in futures studies have initiated scientific communications by conspicuously bemoaning the lack of theory to support the scenario planning method.

What would STS say about this?

Claims repeated 20+ times

... a few obvious possibilities emerge.

Point of Consensus

Rare point of consensus in futures studies:

-... that a lack of consensus about theory and method in futures studies.

Ritual

Just a cultural cue among elites.

-... a ritual signal to insiders (gatekeepers).

Functional

The statement is too rhetorically valuable to challenge in any meaningful way:

-license to contribute (yet) another orderly typology (... which only contributes to the chaos it is meant to obviate or resolve)

-license to contribute (any) theory unteathered to the roots of futures studies (... which ironically robs futures studies of the shared, foundational theory it states it needs-wants)

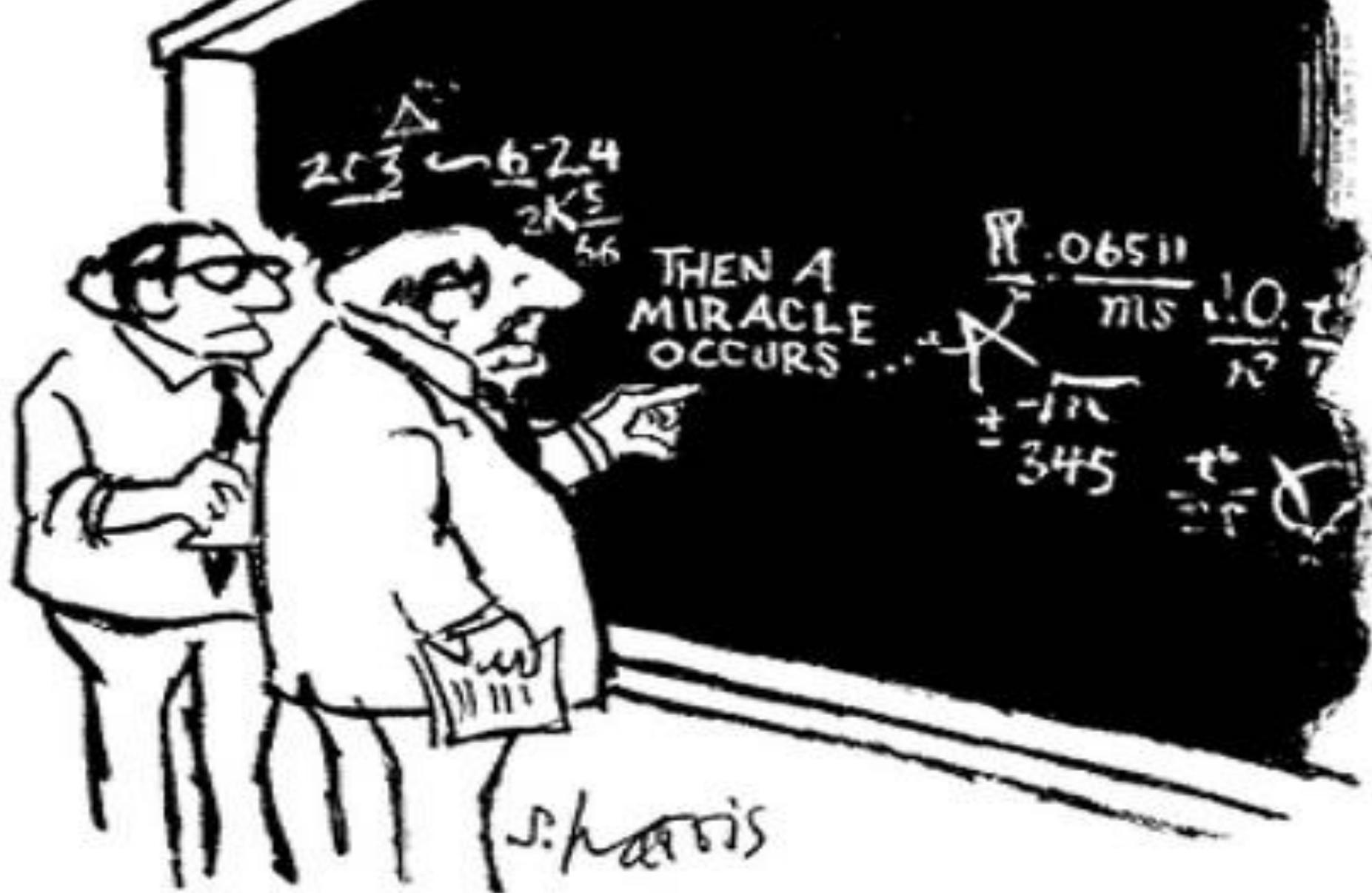
Sufficient theory and method?

What would it even look like?

-if we lack theory, then what would sufficient theory even look like?

-if we lack coherent methods, then what would sufficiently coherent methods even look like?

... answers are elusive at best.



"I think you should be more explicit here in step two."

The Scenario Planning Paradox

No one has a vested interest in overcoming these claims:

- ... valuable as rhetorical tools.
- ... gatekeepers contribute to them.
- ... attempts to resolve contribute to problem.

Thank You

Dismal Theory, Methodological Chaos in Scenario Planning;

***or* The Scenario Planning Paradox**

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Thank You

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Exhibit A: Martelli 2001

Martelli's "Scenario building and scenario planning: State of the art and prospects of evolution," published in 2001 by *Futures Research Quarterly* (now *Futures*), contains the proverbial lightning-rod statement on methodology in futures studies. After surveying scenario practitioner-facilitators and then hosting a panel-discussion among them, Martelli (2001) states that "methodological chaos" characterizes scenario planning in practice.

Exhibit B: Chermack 2002

This focus on practical application and development can certainly be appreciated as the refinement of these methods has, in some cases, produced agile organizations that seem to be able to anticipate change. One need only look at [Shell's] success with scenarios to see this impact. On the other hand, some scenario projects have resulted in remarkable failure and there has been little effort in searching for the cause. The greatest danger in this situation is *atheoretical application*.