

Centre Català de Prospectiva: Building Better Futures in Gray Times

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Abstract

The *Centre Català de Prospectiva* was the first futures studies institution in Spain; it opened the way for other organizations and it helped to imagine alternative futures at the end of Francisco Franco dictatorship. During more than twenty-five years, it realized numerous acts, including lectures, conferences, and international events; it also published several books and a magazine. But most of all, it developed a special way to work for better futures.

Keywords

futures studies history, futures activism, WFSF history, Barcelona, Spain

In 1997, Steven Spielberg released “Amistad”—a film that explains the true story of the 1839 mutiny aboard the slave ship *La Amistad* in which captured *Mende* tribesmen seized control of the ship, but fooled by two sailors ended in the United States. That provoked an international legal dispute and the U.S. Supreme Court ultimately resolved the case in 1841. In one of the key scenes, Quincy Adams, who had accepted to represent the slaves, explains to Cinque, the revolt leader, the odds they are facing and why they cannot be too optimistic because they are quite alone. Then Cinque replies that he will ask his ancestors to help him as he is all what is left of them. And this is how I feel about the *Centre Català de Prospectiva* (Catalan Futures studies Center), CCP for short, a remarkable organization, the one reason why I am futurist nowadays, but gone and almost forgotten today. And, for the better or the worse, all what is left of it, it is me.

So yes, this feels like a long overdue homage to a group of courageous and resourceful people that, despite having to operate in a rather disadvantageous circumstances, managed to pull through a remarkable feat. And

like many important things, it started as a very small endeavor.

But let us put this into context first. In 1973, Spain was still a dictatorship; Franco although old and frail was still signing death sentences, and the power structure he designed was well and in place. Nonetheless, the country situation was improving, and people’s longing for openness and freedom was more and more felt. The civil society was in a quite effervescent moment trying to make up for the regime shortcomings, particularly in Catalonia where the association movement had always been stronger. Thus, it was a moment you could find all sort of associations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) devoted to any subject worth enough: health, literacy, music, urbanism, nature, you name it. Every and each one of those

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organizations were like small windows to a better and more fair world.

And it is in this framework that a group of persons in Barcelona thought that futures studies could be what Catalonia and Spain needed. Rosa Menasanch, who had attended some of the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF) founding meetings, felt that futures could be the tool they required to build a new and improved society. Rosa was key at that moment; she combined a great deal of determination and energy with the most gentle and charming predisposition; it was very hard to refuse her petitions and she managed to accomplish features that others would have deemed as impossible. Soon a small group of people joined Rosa and, together, they decided to found the first Spanish futures studies association the “Club d’amics de la futurologia” (Futurology Friend’s Club). This is not the name I mention at the first paragraph; the reason is simple: in 1973, the label “català” (Catalan) was banned. That founding group included Josep Pereña and Petita Majoral who became the spine of the Center (with the addition of Albert Oliva later on); yet in the gray atmosphere of 1970s Spain, they needed something else to get it through administration bureaucracy. Luckily they managed to get the support of a very reputed lawyer, Josep Pi i Sunyer, who accepted to be the president of the new club and eased up the pressure of the government apparatus.

The addition of other people like Amadeu Serch, Juli Rafels, Antoni Ferrero, and Lluís Claudí provided the nascent Center with technical and professional knowledge about the emerging discipline. But it was women who really pulled the center and who gave it its particular energy. Not just Rosa and Pepita but also Pilar Lizarriturri, Conxita Bargalló, Rosa Palet, and Pepita Jané. There would be moments that some people believed that it was a feminist association. The point is that all these women believed that if they managed to attain a more advanced society, there would be no need to keep fighting for women’s rights.

Anyway, the new Club began an intensive activity, initially focusing in education and futures studies itself. They organized many

events and managed to invite foreign experts who came and let the club member gaze different future possibilities. However, they soon realized that their name was giving a wrong message, as many people believed that the club was devoted to tarot, palmistry, or other esoteric arts. By 1980, it acquired its definitive name, CCP. The Center remained active until 1998 to finally close a little later.

During that time, they organized countless presentations and lectures, nineteen-week long conference cycles that, framed as Education, Environment, or Foresight Weeks, tackled all sort of subjects. In 1985, the CCP held a big education seminar that involved teachers, professors, and students from all education levels, including primary and secondary schools and universities as well; it was the first time ever that it was discussed the addition of futures studies in education in Spain. In 1991, it even hosted a WFSF World Conference devoted to democracy and participation. In the two years, 1993 and 1994, the CCP also held two international WFSF courses. Another milestone of the Center was its publications; it managed to publish several books and booklets with the conferences or seminars proceedings, but the jewel of the crown was the magazine *Papers de prospectiva* that had two periods and in its second round was published in Catalan and English. You may think that this is not so remarkable for an organization spanning more than twenty-five years, but you have to take into account that the Center never had more than two hundred members, that most of the work was done by a team formed by four persons and, usually, with a tight budget.

That is to say that all what the Center did was an act of love. A group of people fueled by the certainty that to achieve a better future, they had to make things happen in the present. And that is the CCP main lesson: you do not have to be a futurist to work for a better future; you do not need to be knowledgeable in futures methods to able to make positive changes for tomorrow. What the CCP members understood is that to attain more positive or desirable futures, you need to consider the future as a myriad of alternative possibilities, and that to

choose the future option, you have to understand the implications and consequences of each alternative.

So, the first strategy that the CCP used to gain the knowledge it lacked was resorting to any available source that could provide it with the required information. In this sense, the WFSF was very instrumental. During the Center's life, many members and representatives from the federation were invited to Barcelona, people like Eleonora Masini, Jim Dator, Mahdi Elmandjra, Robert Jungk, Hidetoshi Kato, and Simon Nicholson. All of them helped the Center to develop its task and, I would dare to say, were infected by the CCP special energy; actually many of them developed long-life friendships with Center members. All and all, the CCP and the WFSF developed a singular bond as the Center came to perfectly embody the notion of the WFSF as a network of networks and becoming one of the most active nodes of the Federation.

The second strategy was to develop a debating culture, making reasoned discussion the most important learning and deciding mechanism. When I first entered the CCP, I was told that they took pride in the fact that all important decisions were taken unanimously. Initially, I thought that it seemed a bit cultish behavior and that I was not sure to be so compliant. But later on, I discovered that I got it totally wrong; it was not that all the member had to agree with whatever the secretariat or the director would say (like in a Soviet Party); they wanted to be sure that everybody was convinced that whatever decision would be taken it was the best for the Center, and if someone had an objection or a different idea, it had to be discussed carefully because he or she could have a better solution. Actually, I personally witnessed several meetings in what one person convinced the rest and changed the outcome of the decision. What I did not appreciate at the beginning was that, in those meetings, when someone talked the others would be listening; at that time I thought that it was normal; only later I found out that, too often, people do not listen when others talk. What can I say, some reunions

were long, as the different alternatives had to be considered, but we always would leave the venue with the certainty that we have taken the right decisions.

Of all the CCP members, I am the only one who completed a formal academic program in futures studies and I am the only one who has led a professional career in foresight or, as I like to say, who is a futurist. I have no doubt that if I had never met the Center, I would be something else, and that my way to approach futures has been deeply shaped by what I learned and experienced in that small apartment that the CCP used as its venue. Now that the CCP is gone, it is easy to think that it did not make such an impact, but every now and then, I find someone who remembers the Center, or its magazine, and what it achieved, and then I realize that it also changed other people's lives. The point is that the CCP was the first organization to present, explain, divulgate, and, up to a point, do futures studies in Spain; it opened a way that other institutions have followed (although not all of them may be aware of the Center pioneer task). Nowadays, we find several public institutions in the field like the *Observatorio de Prospectiva Tecnológica Industrial* (Technological Industrial Foresight Observatory, OPTI for short) or several substate agencies like the *Direcció General d'Anàlisi i Prospectiva* (General Direction of Analysis and Foresight) in Catalonia. There are a bunch of university courses where futures studies are taught (although not as official programs yet), and even some private firms doing foresight consultancy. And, if nothing else, concepts like future scenarios or futuribles (possible futures) have made it to the general public.

The CCP opened a window of hope in a quite dark time; it helped to build alternative visions in a period of change and, most important, became an effective vehicle for futures studies to arrive to Spain in a quite convoluted moment. But, looking in retrospect, I realize that it was the fact of being created in that particular moment what made it so difficult for the CCP to carry on in a different time. Today, there is no need to undertake that risks or to undergo the ordeals the CCP suffered to work for the future. But there is still the need to

collectively think, imagine, and discuss our preferred future; actually, there is no better way to honor the Center legacy than keeping on making futures studies accessible to the whole society.

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