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The Prophetic Quality

What is the prophetic quality? The word *prophet*, as used in the ancient language, did not refer to a man who merely predicted the future. It invariably carried with it overtones of action and reform. The soothsayer or the fortune teller was closer to many of those who in our time apply themselves to projections or to the spelling out of existing trends. But the fortune tellers had something which added a special note of their own: they saw the intervention of accident and fate; they dealt with contingency in a way that many of our modern calculators do not. These fortune tellers may have been wrong as often as not, but they did keep alive in the prediction of human affairs the sense that some things would happen unexpectedly. It was the prophet, however, who synthesized in the grand manner the past and the future, the life of action and the life of thought. The prophet called men not merely to foresee the future but to so live in the present that the future might be transformed.

The modern world with its rapidity and depth of change requires this approach, yet among its scholars or within its great institutions finds it too seldom. There is often a tendency to speak as if everything which is now going on would continue along charted lines. There may be a recognition that two lines on the graph of the future will deflect one another or will cross, thus setting in motion new forces. Even such awareness is hardly adequate to the nature of the modern world. We have learned in the past century or so that the past does not repeat itself; we are not inclined, in the manner of certain ancient philosophers, to search for cyclical repetitions, nor like lawyers to stand on precedent. What we must now gain is something more radical and difficult: a realization that the present does not repeat itself. It cannot be extended by analogy nor projected by mathematical measurements so as to make a future in which we shall be easily at home. The new age will be new in every sense; it can be entered into only by an act of the will and the imagination.

This is not the imagination of dreams and reveries; this act is not an intellectual exercise, but the positive comprehension of the world in its full nature and dimension, as it is and as it is becoming. Seeing the world thus with the eye of the prophet (and perhaps also with the eye of the poet), we cannot assume that the future will be made by the play of blind forces, by technological imperatives or scientific compulsions. For we are not merely isolating trends and envisioning more of the same. We are envisioning a process of change in which men—men with their desires and needs and values—play a determining part. What we are at any given moment shapes the moment to be born. And the “we” includes us all—the observer, the detached scholar, along with those who are being observed and studied.

In one sense, of course, men have always been concerned with the future. For the present was fleeting, and the past had vanished; and what was significant, even in the quietest epochs, was to have a sense of the way in which their lives and their children's lives would be spent. They could find in what had been, or in what surrounded them, a mirror of what was to be. The past still contains the present—as the present, if looked at deeply enough, contains the future. What is perhaps most new today is the degree of depth to which our understanding must penetrate, the necessity to reach down to levels of the common life which could once be left unplumbed. Seen in this way, the challenge of “looking ahead” can give to all research a fresh sharpness and scope.—August Heckscher, Director, The Twentieth Century Fund. [This editorial is based upon Mr. Heckscher's Annual Report for 1961]