ELISE BOULDING KENNETH E. BOULDING

Images and Processes

ELISE BOULDING KENNETH E. BOULDING



Images and Processes

Copyright © 1995 by Sage Publications, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

For information address:



SAGE Publications, Inc. 2455 Teller Road Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications Ltd.
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU
United Kingdom
SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
M-32 Market
Greater Kailash I
New Delhi 110 048 India

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Boulding, Elise.

The future: images and processes / Elise Boulding, Kenneth E. Boulding

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8039-5789-0 (cl). — ISBN 0-8039-5790-4 (pb)

1. Twenty-first century—Forecasts.
I. Boulding, Kenneth Ewart,

1910-1993. II. Title. CB161.B655 1995

303.49'09'04—dc20

94-33029

95 96 97 98 99 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Sage Production Editor: Diane S. Foster

Foreword

More than 20 years ago, when I read the original version of this book, I knew neither of the Bouldings personally, but I immediately wanted to meet them. I was entranced by the writings of each separately, and even more so by the combination of the two together.

Their essays had—and still have—and astounding density of new ideas, provocative metaphors, and clarifying examples that sink into one's consciousness and shape one's thoughts. Since that first reading, I have been quoting the Bouldings almost constantly. Cowboy economy versus spaceman economy. Anything that exists is possible. Try to understand present events from the perspective of a 200-year present (100 years behind, 100 years ahead). Every nation's military is a parasite on its own economy.

I did, shortly thereafter, have the privilege of meeting the Bouldings, talking and working with them, and reading their subsequent writings for two decades. They turned out to be exactly the way I had expected, and that is not often the case when one meets a favorite author in person. Writing can be a gentle artifice; a way for an author to bring out just one part of himself or herself; to shine a light on what is hidden in the shadows. Not so with Kenneth and Elise. They are who they are on the written page or in person: extraordinarily informed, self-insightful, constructive, whole human beings.

The "wholeness" was my abiding impression of that first collection of essays. It comes from each of them and especially from both of them. Kenneth knows a lot more biology and technology than one would expect from an economist. Elise is an acute observer of the entire human spectrum, from families to the United Nations—as she says, "the gutsy human groupings that make life liveable and the future faceable." Together this couple makes one of the most powerful yin/yang combinations in intellectual history—Kenneth throwing out ideas like a pinwheel, letting them fall where they may; Elise picking up ideas from many peoples and cultures, especially ideas from the least-noticed and least-heard people . . . and nurturing them into mature and useful combinations. "We live in a remarkable cramped thought-world in Euro-North America," she says, as she works to uncramp it.

Kenneth thinks macro, Elise micro, but both are unusually aware of how the macro and micro connect. Both are masters of the English language. Both have a sardonic sense of humor. Most important, both make a disciplined and wholehearted practice of centering everything they do, think, and write in peace and love.

Kenneth is gone now, but he left so much of himself behind on paper, that I have the feeling, especially having just read this revised collection of essays, that we can still enjoy his company and his ongoing interaction with Elise. Here are some of the verbal treats that I underlined while I was relishing the conversation in this volume:

Kenneth: "No matter how rich we are or how powerful we are, if we do not produce people who can at least begin to expand into the enormous potential of man, the society must be adjudged a failure. The educational system . . . must never lose sight of the fact that it is producing people as ends, not means. It is producing men, not manpower, people, not biologically generated nonlinear computers."

Elise: "The change points in society are found on city streets, on school playgrounds, in the privacy of the home, and in all kinds of little-recognized civic spaces, from neighborhoods to global organizations."

Kenneth: "How did an organ as redundant as the human brain ever come to grow in a series of successive mutations when it was so little used?"

Elise: "Women found themselves increasingly compelled to deal with family destitution and the needs for education and human services for women and girls, yet legally they were everywhere classified with children and idiots." Foreword

Kenneth: "There does seem to be... a long, slow evolutionary process in which some kind of valuations survive better than others. I know of no present followers of Moloch, although there are plenty of people who justify the burning of children by bombs in the interest of the national state."

Elise: "Adults should know that they live in a world where 3-year-olds understand pollution."

If these snippets aren't enough to whet your appetite, let me conclude by saying that two consistent Boulding themes—the idea of the world as a dynamic, evolutionary, complex, and diverse system, and the idea of how powerfully human visioning of the "totally other" can transform that system—are, in my estimation, the two most crucially needed concepts if the human world is to achieve any kind of desirable future. To illustrate both the unconventionality and the present-day necessity of those ideas, consider Kenneth in what could be a comment on the stampede toward an uninhibited global economy: "The evolutionary process has survived the death of innumerable individuals and species because of isolation and diversity, but a single world system might face universal and irretrievable catastrophe. One world could lead to no world."

Or Elise, on how our incapacity to vision has left us unprepared for the opportunity of the Cold War's end: "In international affairs we are used to expecting the worst and then preparing for that worst.... Because what we imagine for the future guides our action in the present, we are continually increasing the danger of future wars by these practices.... If we had spent more time on best-case scenarios, we would not be floundering now, trying to figure out appropriate and creative responses to rapid changes in Europe and South Africa that will build toward stable peace."

DONELLA H. MEADOWS

Adjunct Professor of Environmental Studies

Dartmouth College

Preface

When Kenneth Boulding left his favorite planet a few weeks after his 83rd birthday, there was such an outpouring of reflections on and celebrations of his extraordinary intellectual and spiritual explorations of this rambunctious transition century that I have been pushed to the limit to digest, as part of my own grieving process, the life and thought of my partner of nearly 52 years. The different ways in which we experienced the world were the very spice of our life together. The differences came together in our love of creation, the Creator, and each other. They also came together in a passionate conviction that the world needs mending, and that what we do, whether in family, community, or the world itself, matters. I loved the way Kenneth's mind roamed the universe and created patterns in space and time—making unexpected connections that no one else would think of. Those patterns, no matter how vast, always included how humans behave, learn, and, at their best, love. My work was always to translate those patterns into the specifics of actual human behavior in everyday settings—first as a wife, mother, and community activist, then as a sociologist-peace researcher. The future—what lay before us as a human species—was never far from our thoughts.

Kenneth was always very proud of my post-child-rearing career, launched by the work of translating Fred Polak's two-volume *The Image*

of the Future from Dutch to English. It was therefore he who proposed, back in 1972, when I was only five years into my "second" career, that we put together a book of our writings on the future, highlighting both our differences and our commonalities. We actually collected papers for such a book but found no takers at the time. The manuscript was put aside and forgotten. Recently, Donella Meadows, who it turned out had been an enthusiastic reader of that early manuscript, asked me what had happened to it. After prodding my memory, she urged its resurrection as a way of remembering Kenneth. That urging gave rise to the present book. Because both Kenneth and I had written more about the future after 1972 than before, this collection includes mostly post-1972 writing. The spirit of the book is the same, and parts of the original introductions to our respective sections are kept intact, but the challenge of our different perspectives emerges more sharply in this version, as well as the sense of what binds our perspectives together.

Working on this project has brought both joy and sorrow—sorrow for the empty spaces Kenneth's absence has left, but joy in a profound underlying assurance that Kenneth's spirit continues to be present on the planet that he loved.

ELISE BOULDING

Acknowledgments

This book would not have come into being without the friendly prodding of Donella Meadows, and the prompt and positive response of Sara McCune, publisher and founder of Sage, to the idea of resurrecting an old project Kenneth Boulding had thought up many years ago. I am deeply grateful to them and to my editor, Diane Foster, and the whole lively Sage "family," with whom it is a delight to work.

Very special thanks are due to Vivian Wilson, Kenneth's administrative assistant for a quarter of a century, for efforts well beyond the call of duty in assembling all of Kenneth's many articles on the future to help me in my task of choosing the five essays included in this book. Marty Gonzales, my own assistant, has been of incalculable help in getting the manuscript organized, and I also wish to thank Delinda Wunder for her patience and availability as typist.

ELISE BOULDING

Contents

Foreword Donella H. Meadows	vii
Preface Elise Boulding	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
Part I. Introduction Kenneth E. Boulding (with an addendum by Elise Boulding)	1
1. Expecting the Unexpected: The Uncertain Future of Knowledge and Technology (1966) Kenneth E. Boulding	7
2. The Limits to Societal Growth (1979) Kenneth E. Boulding	26
3. World Society: The Range of Possible Futures (1983) Kenneth E. Boulding	39

4. Power and Betterment in the Economy (1991) Kenneth E. Boulding	57
5. Moving From Unstable to Stable Peace (1988) Kenneth E. Boulding	76
Part II. Introduction Elise Boulding	89
6. Image and Action in Peace Building (1988) Elise Boulding	93
7. Familia Faber: The Family as Maker of the Future (1983) Elise Boulding	117
8. How Children See Their World and Make Their Futures (1979) Elise Boulding	137
9. Women's Movements and Social Transformation in the Twentieth Century (1993) Elise Boulding	158
10. The Dialectics of Peace (1990) Elise Boulding	196
Index	207
About the Authors	223

PART I

Kenneth E. Boulding

Introduction

Knowledge about the future is perhaps the most important fruit of knowledge about the past. The great predicament of the human race is that all experiences are of the past but all our decisions are about the future. Unless we at least think we know something about the future, decisions are impossible, for all decisions involve choices among images of alternative futures. This is why the study of the future is more than an intellectual curiosity; it is something that is essential to the survival of humankind itself. All our decisions are about imaginary futures and are made in the imagination, but if these imaginations are unrealistic and ill informed, decisions based on them are all too likely to be disastrous.

What unites the past and the future is the study of dynamics, and dynamics is the study of the space-time continuum and the patterns it contains. Statics is an invention of the human mind. Equilibrium is unknown in nature. What we have is a continual pattern of flux. For each person the present cuts the space-time pattern into two parts: the past, of which we have records and of which we can build up an image in our minds; and the future, into which we project patterns derived

from, but not necessarily identical to, the patterns of the past. The present is like a brightly illuminated spot in the middle of a long, dark tunnel. We look back into an increasingly shadowy past because of the impermanence and incompleteness of records; we look forward into an even more shadowy future, which does not even have records, but only projections of our images. As we walk forward into the future it becomes the past. We have experiences, which we record, and our image of the future changes accordingly. Some images are not fulfilled; this is disappointment, which is perhaps the most important single experience of the learning process. Disappointment forces us to reassess our perception of the patterns of the past and hence may lead to a change in our subsequent image of the future. Science might almost be described as organized learning from disappointment, but our ordinary learning of daily life is done by much the same mechanism in a less organized way.

The chapters in Part I cover a period of about 25 years, which is a period almost long enough to begin to test the hypothesis that all projections of the future are wrong, but are rarely completely wrong. In the 1960s, for instance, we were just at the beginning of the spectacular decline in fertility that has taken place not only in the United States but in most countries of the developed world, and even to a much smaller extent in the tropics. This, I think, was quite unexpected, though, as for a lot of other things, it is easy to say after the event that we should have expected it. Another thing I certainly did not expect in the mid-1960s was that the excitement about resource exhaustion and population pressure should have developed so soon. I certainly did not anticipate that the Club of Rome and the energy crisis, or even the environmental excitement, would all come within the decade, though I was expecting something like this before the end of the century.

I did not anticipate either the remarkable "cooling off" of the international system, which seems much less threatening today than it did in the mid-1960s. Again, this may be only a temporary lull. The rise and fall of student activism, also, is something that I think I would not have expected. I have been suggesting indeed that one thing we could do with is an institute for studying clouded crystal balls—that is, careful study of predictions of the past, what they were based on and why they failed, as they nearly always did. This should at least give us a little humility, if nothing else. I think in the sixties, also, I was too optimistic about the progress of science. Both science and technology look remarkably similar today to what they looked like in the sixties. It is hard to point to any great new ideas. We have, of course, been to the moon, but this

is circus rather than bread. As far as I can see, that accomplishment has produced no great new insights, just some very interesting details and some pretty pictures. The picture of earth from space indeed has certainly made vivid the notion of spaceship earth, which I originally outlined as early as 1966. It still remains, I think, a valid long-run vision. How long-run is very hard to say, because of the principle of fundamental surprise.

The reader will detect interesting differences in the approaches of Elise Boulding and myself. I think we are agreed, however, that perhaps the best advice to anybody contemplating the future is this: Prepare to be surprised. We both have a sense that there are constraints on the future of social systems imposed by the snail's pace of growth in moral self-awareness of the human race. I may perhaps be the more pessimistic of the two of us; there are times when I think we may be living in a golden age, which is a very ambivalent feeling. I am pretty skeptical about the capacity of any system to produce the "totally other." I suppose it means one of us is an evolutionist and the other is an eschatologist; these are, after all, the two great approaches to the future, but I am not always sure which is which.

Addendum Elise Boulding

Because so much of Kenneth's best work on the future was written after 1972, only one of the selections in our original project has been retained: "Expecting the Unexpected." This piece is so delightfully Bouldingesque in its approach to the basic unpredictability of the future that it clearly belongs as the opening piece.

The second piece, "The Limits to Societal Growth," reflects his creative thinking in the late 1970s on growth as growth in complexity. His abiding faith in the human potential comes out in two themes: first, that although it is possible for potential to be exhausted, it can also be re-created; and second, that human betterment is possible through noogenetic evolution. However, he also wryly acknowledges that if humans are transmitters of the process of increasing complexity, we as a species may in fact soon be making way for our evolutionary successor.

"World Society: The Range of Possible Futures" also reveals that intellectual playfulness that so endeared Kenneth to generations of

students, colleagues, and conference-goers. His "planets, plants, plays, and plagues" analysis nevertheless succinctly addresses the issue: What is the human potential given the innumerable disaster scenarios we are faced with? Using his favorite triad of human interactions, "threats, exchange, and love," he points out the tremendous instability of threat systems at every societal level, the steadying effect of exchange systems, and the tremendous evolutionary potential in integrative systems. Kenneth's profound optimism in the face of crescendoing warnings of catastrophes in the twentieth century lies in his conviction that the creative potential of the human brain for learning, fueled by the mysterious alchemy of poetic intuition and the capacity for love, will bring a "kindly earth" despite all.

Kenneth's delight in the field he helped to create—general systems theory—was a delight in seeing the complex interplay of like and unlike elements in interlocking aggregates from the cell to the universe. Thus, in "Power and Betterment in the Economy" he treats the economy as part of the sociosphere (a term he coined), and that in turn as part of a total earth ecosystem. Invoking again his favorite triad of threats, exchange, and love, he explores them as fields and structures of power, as he did in his provocative Three Faces of Power (1989), written about the same time. Here he is focusing on the power for change in the troublesome field of economic development for the diverse societies of the sociosphere. Pointing out that the power to innovate is critical for economic betterment, he rejects centrally planned economies as antiinnovative and gives one very subdued cheer for market economies, prone to their own pathologies, as the least-worst systems for economic betterment for all. This is his most pessimistic piece. (A more upbeat treatment of human betterment is found in his book of that title. Human Betterment, published six years earlier, in 1985.)

Systems theory also permeates "Moving From Unstable to Stable Peace." Like the preceding piece, it is closely related to one of Kenneth's very important books, in this case written a decade before, *Stable Peace* (1978). In an ingenious use of the concept of phase boundaries, he deals with the transition of groups of states from war systems to peace systems in terms of the possibility boundary, or taboo line, separating the possible from the not possible. Shifts in the taboo line can make space for the rise of new integrative structures and eventually produce areas of stable peace. The stable peace triangle Kenneth describes here, stretching from Australia to Japan, across North America to Western Europe and Scandinavia—countries with no current plans to go to war

with each other—may, as of this writing, be threatened by the new phenomenon of intrastate ethnic conflicts spreading from the Balkans. However, Kenneth's basic point, that removing boundaries from the agenda is a condition of stable peace, is even truer now than when he wrote it. The hints in this paper of the power of integrative structures to bind peoples across conflicting interests urgently need further development.

Each of the chapters in Part I sharply challenges all of us on how we think about the future—what processes we discern, and what potentials we see.

Note

1. Kenneth's classic essay "The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth" (1966) is not included in this collection because it has already been reprinted numerous times.