

**Ariel Colonomos, La politique des oracles: Raconter le futur aujourd'hui  
(The politics of oracles: Telling the future today)**

(Paris: Albin Michel, 2014), pp. 303, ISBN 978-2-226-25371-2

*Reviewed by Grégoire Mallard*

Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva

The proliferation of expert rendering of the future raises the question of how the future is turned into an object of knowledge and political intervention in a multiplicity of settings, from financial markets to internet betting sites, from demographic research institutes and think tanks specialised in political trends to environmental regulative agencies. Ariel Colonomos raises many interesting questions about futurologists and their predictions that are seldom addressed by social scientists and political theorists. Can new technologies used for predicting the future deliver more accurate predictions than antique oracles, palm-readers and other specialists in ancient divinatory practices? What happens when modern experts of the future fail correctly to predict the future? What kind of sanctions do they face for failure? Do the rules of 'predictive markets' – for example markets in which 'predictions' are exchanged – work as theories of market efficiency predict, by sanctioning bad predictors and rewarding good ones? What happens to experts when their predictions have real-life consequences in the present (for instance, if they create panics)? Are they held accountable for these unintended (or partially intended) effects?

These are the kinds of questions that this very insightful and particularly well-written book addresses. Compared to the growing body of literature on anticipatory practices in legal, economic, medical and environmental fields, Ariel Colonomos' essay is original in at least two specific counts.

First, it weaves together *descriptive* analyses of predictions formed in a wide array of contexts with *normative* concerns, which have long been central to political theory. This will not come as a surprise for readers of Ariel Colonomos's past work, either that on moral crusades and sanctions<sup>1</sup> or that on the rules of preventive war.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the author has always situated his work at the intersection of normative political theory (especially the kind of normative theory that, like Rawls' theory of justice, draws upon market analogies to address questions of distributive efficiency and accountability) and the sociology of experts (especially the neo-Weberian theory of elites that adopts a macro-historical focus to trace the trajectories of ideas within a broader history of relationships between scholars, experts, policymakers

1 Ariel Colonomos, *La Morale dans les relations internationales - Rendre des comptes* (Paris: Odile Jacob 2005).

2 Ariel Colonomos, *Le pari de la guerre – guerre préventive, guerre juste ?* (Paris: Denoël, 2009).

and bureaucrats). More specifically, Colonomos's new book builds upon his past reflections on preventive war. Indeed, as the Bush government resurrected the notion of preventive war in the context of gaping failures by US experts to predict accurately the threat that Saddam Hussein presented to the world, it seems logical now to reflect upon the reasons for the inaccuracy of the predictions produced by official and semi-official futurologists and for the lack of accountability of those futurologists before their main public of policymakers, who seem little concerned with the role of those faulty predictions in the long-lasting chaos that has affected the Middle East since the collapse of the Iraqi state.

Second, this book has a specific focus: despite a general title, the empirical examples of predictions (both accurate and inaccurate) discussed in the book mostly come from the social and political sciences and, more precisely, from the fields of development and international relations (IR). In particular, it focuses on the academic institutions (Harvard, MIT, etc.) and experts in international relations who have worked since the Second World War to provide the US government with the necessary expertise to assess the danger and imminence of future threats represented by the Soviet Union, radical Islam and China, in that order (chapter 3). Secondly there is consideration of the outsiders who believe they can draw on the collective wisdom of the 'public' by engineering betting websites and survey-based indicators to assess various levels of threats associated with terrorism or other transnational dangers (chapter 2). Finally there are the Washington-based think tanks which sell their predictions to Washington policymakers (chapter 4). In doing so, this book furthers the literature on the social history of IR<sup>3</sup> and development.<sup>4</sup>

These two characteristics differentiate Ariel Colonomos's book from the recent stream of research in anthropology,<sup>5</sup> history<sup>6</sup> and sociology that has focused on anticipatory knowledge practices. First, the latter generally refrain from mixing normative and descriptive concerns, or when they do so, they generally use other normative theories than those implicit in Colonomos's framework. For instance, when reflecting on preventive security logics, they tend to draw on normative concerns inspired by Carl Schmitt's reflections on the dangers associated with the use of 'emergency rule' in liberal democracies or by Michel Foucault's critique of neo-liberal market-based governmental logics. These critiques of liberal democracy have inspired many anthropological denunciations of the illiberal aspects associated with the rise of anticipatory logics at the heart of the US national security state<sup>7</sup>. Second, many sociologists and anthropologists working on anticipatory knowledge have been less concerned with the accuracy of the outcomes – e.g., the predictions – and the role of experts in the macro-level structuration of the 'predictive market' at the nexus between the state, the public sphere and academia, than with the search for a vocabulary that could be used adequately to describe anticipatory practices at the

3 Nicolas Guilhot, 'The Realist Gambit: Postwar American Political Science and the Birth of IR Theory' *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 2 No 4 (2008), pp. 281–304.

4 Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

5 Annelise Riles, *Collateral Knowledge: Legal Reasoning in the Global Financial Markets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011);

6 Jenny Andersson, 'The Great Future Debate and the Struggle for the World', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 117 No. 5, (2012), pp. 1411–1430.

7 Claudia Aradau and Rens Van Munster, *Politics of Catastrophe: Genealogies of the Unknown* (NY: Routledge, 2011).

micro-level – e.g. practices ranging from the collection or removal of information from the public sphere,<sup>8</sup> to the packaging of information within formal models, or the construction of ignorance through sequencing techniques,<sup>9</sup> to the use of imagery to produce convictions and stimulate effects. Thus, both normatively and analytically, Ariel Colonomos's book stands apart from most of what is being produced on the topic in sociology and anthropology. This innovative position has both disadvantages – as the perspectives and findings in sociology and anthropology are not discussed – and advantages – as a new line of inquiry on the topic is now being opened.

In doing so, *La politique des oracles* clearly invites debate from political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists. In particular, Colonomos points to a very interesting puzzle, which – to my knowledge – sociologists and anthropologists have yet to consider in all its ramifications. Interestingly, he points out that apart from a few betting websites published by outsiders to the US field of predictions, most anticipatory knowledge practices do not aim at producing a precise number value associated with the likelihood of occurrence of a future event – a 'prediction' in the technical sense of the term. Instead IR experts strategically produce ambiguous predictions by proposing 'scenarios' that map out alternative futures without necessarily ordering their likelihood of occurrence, to avoid paying the costs of predictive failure. They also adopt ambiguous postures, when, like the academic Sovietologists during the Cold War, they appear to predict something at the same time as they refute the exercise as being futile and out of scope with their academic endeavour – for example predicting broadly that 'the future is likely to look like the past,' which, enunciated as it stands, is not clearly a prediction and may be interpreted as a refusal to engage in anticipatory practices. These various ambiguities also serve the needs of their clients, as policy makers do not want to be told precisely what to do and not do, they merely ask for expertise that seems to corroborate their preferred course of action – and they thus claim a right to co-produce the scenarios used. The chapter on economic forecasting – which follows more closely the micro-level knowledge practices of future-producing agents than the chapters focusing on IR models of the future – begins the work of further theorising the ambivalent nature of anticipatory practices and the ambiguity of predictions, especially when it shows how anticipation of risks is constructed around stories whose main goal is as much to steady the anticipations of investors as to decelerate the advent of negative catastrophic futures.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, what may be less convincing to anthropologists and sociologists is the notion that there is a 'predictive market' with a clear-cut boundary between the producers and consumers of predictions, or that the circulation of predictions, scenarios and alternative futures follows the logic of a market, where a demand meets the supply and results in an equilibrium (a suboptimal one, in many cases). In fact, in the opening chapter, which looks back at predictive practices during antiquity, Colonomos seemed to have hesitated between using the market metaphor and the network metaphor (or, in Deleuzian terms, the rhizome metaphor) to define the set of

8 Joseph Masco, *The Theatre of Operations: National Security Affect from The Cold War to the War on Terror* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

9 Grégoire Mallard and Andrew Lakoff, 'How Claims to Know the Future are Used to Understand the Present: Techniques of Prospection in The Field of National Security', in Charles Camic, Michèle Lamont and Neil Gross (eds.), *Social Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011), pp. 339–377.

10 Pierre Pénat and Grégoire Mallard, 'From Risk Models to Loan Contracts: Austerity as the Continuation of Calculation by Other Means', *Journal of Critical Globalization Studies*, 7, 4–50 (2014).

relationships between experts, policymakers and the public, and the narratives that predictions weave together. When reading Oedipus's story, Colonomos points at the fact that both the process and the final outcome of Oedipus's deeds were produced by a series of prediction-producing and prediction-searching campaigns on the part of the protagonists, which never resulted in a clear outcome. At each step in the process of looking for, interpreting, and circulating predictions, the desires of the protagonists tainted their interpretation of ambiguous divine signs, leading them to search for clearer signs in the desired direction – an elusive quest, to say the least, with many unintended consequences. All along the way, the consumers of the predictions co-produced them with the oracles whom they consulted; and vice versa, the oracles who produced new predictions also consumed old predictions made by competing oracles, narrated to them by the protagonists who came looking for justification for their past, present and future crimes.

Moreover, it seems that the metaphor of the 'market may not be adequate to describe the relationship between the different parties and the circulation of predictions, because no one keeps the clear role that market roles suppose. In fact, this might be one of the most important findings of this essay – a negative but productive finding. We may venture that the circulation or exchange of predictions distinguishes predictions from other products scrutinised in academic research precisely because it is the one product that escapes market logics – assuming the others do follow market logics. Perhaps this is due to the inherent ambiguity of predictions, or to the sustained ambivalence that each party has towards the roles available in the market metaphor (no one wants to be considered either a passive consumer or an active producer of predictions, which is why the boundary between the two roles is consistently blurred in practice). More research is necessary to dig deeper into this question of how predictions are interwoven and how they resurface with new meanings when new future-searching campaigns multiply, as this thought-inspiring book encourages us to do, and we can only hope that it will interest a wide public in political science and beyond.