

An Interview with Elise Boulding

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Best known for her work in peace and disarmament activism, Elise Boulding is one of those people you love for their naturalness and charm. Her work in futures studies has been pioneering; she is a member of the generation that moved into the future more for moral reasons than for scientific ones. As you will see, she has not only intellectual depth but an ethical dimension and a sharp sense of humour as well. Her involvement in all sorts of international forums has given her an unusually broad perspective which lets her tackle a great variety of subjects. In this interview we look at her background in futures studies and peace activism.

Papers de Prospectiva: Could you tell us how you became interested in futures studies?

Elise Boulding: It was back in 1954. My husband, Kenneth Boulding, and I were in California at the Institute for Advanced Studies. It was a new institute. Fred Polak, from the Netherlands, was a fellow there, and he lived with us. He had just received a Council of Europe award for his book *The Future is Past Tense*, (that would be the translation of the Dutch title). At that time he was very eager to talk about that subject. I was still at the stage of raising children, and there was still another baby to come, but I was so excited to hear him talk about his work that I tried to read his book. The book was in Dutch, but I'm Norwegian by birth. Norwegian is my native language and I know German well, so I thought that, with a little effort, I could master Dutch. So I kept saying to Fred: 'We have to translate your book; this is something that English speaking readers should have'.

Polak's basic thesis, through his historical research, is that every society that has an image of the future is empowered by that image, making it a dynamic society. If a society does not have an image it becomes stagnant. Translating the book from Dutch into English got me involved with Futures Studies. It took me two years because there were two volumes, 600 pages. It was a truly massive study with the English title of *The Image of the Future* (Elsevier, 1973). The book changed my life because I had not only the task of translating the book itself, but also had all the references, philosophy, psychology, art and history to cover. In short, Polak had looked at every aspect of culture. I always say that was my real doctoral degree, not the one I took later. That book made me a Futurist. From then on I could only think in terms of how people see the future, and how they affect their future.

PP: You're especially well-known because of your future workshops in which you get people involved in futures studies and future thinking.

EB: I have to explain that my futures work and my peace work are the same, and that I came to the idea of future workshops through a discovery I made as a peace activist. During my term of office in the mid-60s as president of the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom, (a European organisation with an American section), I attended a workshop in Denmark on disarmament. We had a very distinguished panel. I asked the question: what will the world look like if we really achieve disarmament? Nobody in the panel or in the audience could answer the question, and I wondered, 'how

can we work for something we can't imagine'? So, if we're going to have disarmament, we must start developing futures in our mind of the kind of society without weapons we want, how it would function, how we would solve conflicts, etc. I kept thinking about it for a couple of years, and then it finally occurred to me that using Fred Polak's concept - that you need to have an image of the future, that an image of the future empowers and guides your action in the present - maybe we could set up workshops to help people to do precisely that: imagine futures with no weapons.

The first workshop was held in 1980. I gathered a group of people and, using Polak's theory, I told them: 'Here we are, we are members of a society of the future, we have to start picturing how it functions, what institutions it has, what kind of educational system it has, what kind of economy, what the family is like, how the infrastructure of the society is set up'. To get the participants to really imagine it, first we have to acknowledge the history that has brought us to this point, and then move on into the future. Thirty years into the future is the best time span, far enough so that the present isn't in control, but close enough not to become pure speculation. 'You are thirty years into the future, you are there'. You have to let them build their image of the future, and this image will help them to decide: 'what do we do now? What are we going to do tomorrow?'. The image of the future becomes a goal, an objective, according to which we decide in the present, this makes the whole workshop a very empowering exercise - and it works. Of course, you could always find one or two people who can't use their imagination, but most people can.

This kind of workshop has been set up in Europe, in Asia, in Africa, with UN diplomats, with experts, with non experts, etc., always successfully. So I know it's a process that can work and can serve many different purposes. For example, in women's groups, if they want to discuss the betterment of women's choice in society, they can do it by placing themselves thirty years into the future and discussing how they would like the world to look as regards women's status. After the workshop they end up with new ideas about how to work for change because, for the first time, they really think about the kind of social, economic and political institutions they want to head towards. That's why it's such a powerful method.

I've also done a workshop with native American people in the United States. Many of them are very disadvantaged people. The USA has been terrible to these people in many ways. I asked them what the future would be like if they could live the full, rich life they long for, if they could teach their traditions, keep their way of life. Well, it was one of the most exciting workshops I've ever done, because for native Americans visions are a part of their spiritual exercises. Sometimes I've found that spiritually centred church groups could relate the workshop exercise to their meditation practice. I've also worked with military and business people. Once you get them in the right frame of mind anybody can do it. Finally let me say that it's a very exhausting exercise, because it takes a lot of psychic energy. But it's also very rewarding; people have thought out what their image would be like and what kind of problems they will be facing; it becomes very empowering.

PP: There's no doubt that these workshops have been turning-points in the lives of many people. Don't you think that this is also because workshops make people feel that they reclaim the future?

EB: One of the basic themes in my whole adult life, and it's an assumption deeply rooted in my futures workshops, is that we shape society by the way we live, and that everyone contributes to the shaping of society, whether they want to or not. Nothing is there; everything exists because we act as if it were; it's only our behaviour that gives society substance. In such a case, everybody's actions matter. In my teaching I have always tried to show my students that their actions matter, that anything they do contributes to the shaping of society, and to the reshaping too. My very strong feeling about social activism, which some people think of as a special category, is that we are all shapers of society. The places I have particularly looked at are families. Every family is part of the social creation, and children are futures creators, through their playing, the way they think, the way they respond to the whole of society. Also, and often, very young children have imaginative ideas and begin new activities that become part of the social world.

Women are also changers of the world. I've written a lot about the views of women through time; the role of women going back to the earliest sapiens, through the neolithic shift from hunting and gathering to agriculture, and then to cities and civilisations. There's always a shaping role that women have had that was rarely recorded in history books. It was there but it wasn't recorded. Showing how women are shapers of the future, now and through time, has been an important part of my work.

PP: In your experience, is there any specificity in women's images of the future?

EB: In general, women have less trouble starting to imagine the future than men. As they have been marginalised from public life they are more detached from present reality, so it's easier for them to criticise it and to engage in futures imagining. The other specificity comes from the traditional division of labour: bearing and raising children has made women more responsible in inter-family conflicts. Women have also been used as ambassadors, or even as the cement or glue between neighbouring tribes or communities, mainly through marriage. This kind of informal diplomacy has given women a lot of experience in resolving conflicts, especially because, in order to solve those conflicts, they had to understand the larger social context. This part has been missed by society. Society acknowledges women as nurturers and child bearers, but it has missed the degree to which women understand society and their role in solving conflicts. Women themselves undervalue their own knowledge and uncritically accept the definition they are given by society; that's why I've spent a lot of time showing women their knowledge and understanding about society.

PP: Although you've worked extensively and intensively with women, you seem to refuse the label 'feminist', but feminists have built a powerful critique of futures studies -in terms of its Western, White, Male basis- what do you think of this criticism?

EB: I've been following the feminist critique in Futures Studies for years, particularly within the World Futures Studies Federation, of which I'm a member. Sometimes it's been very angry, and I think that is understandable, but I have no part in it. To me, this criticism has underestimated the task carried out by some women. Here I am thinking of Eleonora Masini, for example; she's transcended the typical western viewpoint. Before others were doing it, she was really understanding the non-Western point of view. She went behind the iron curtain before anyone else did and interacted freely with

colleagues in the former Soviet Union. She was also the first one to establish contacts with people in the Mediterranean region, building a network there. Her scope has never been reduced to the Western world - as the young feminist claim - she's been living in a larger world.

I like to think that I also live in a larger world. For me the future means being conscious of the limitation of the future of the West, an awareness of the role of colonialism. For some reason, feminism doesn't give me this larger perspective very often. To me this is a consequence of the division within feminism, at least in the United States. There's 'equity feminism', and 'social feminism'. Equity feminism says that women have to have equal rights and opportunities to men, the same range of jobs, etc., which I agree with. But it seems that its project is summed up in the vision that women should be able to do everything that men do. Social feminism has to do with a vision of the whole of society, and what needs to happen to make the world better; what needs to happen to bridge the North South gap; what needs to happen to empower the Third World in its own way and traditions. It's a totally different kind of feminism, but both need each other.

Feminism in the Nineteenth Century was a social movement, social feminism. They saw several problems: child prostitution, alcoholism, families destroyed, etc. and they considered them social evils and wanted to reconstruct society as a whole, which also meant educating women and equal labour opportunities for women. They knew that, but they were mostly concerned with the larger perspective of the society. This century, equity feminism has been predominant, although part of the previous social feminism continues to work like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom which cares about the situation of women but also cares about the situation of the whole of society. To me the present feminist criticism misses this larger context in which feminism was born, this concern for the total world that isn't always present today in feminist critiques.

PP: Would you say that one of the biggest problems of indigenous people, and the third world by extension, is the lack of robust images of the future?

EB: First we have to be precise with the concepts we are using here. We can talk of Third World people who are tribal people but not indigenous. 'Indigenous' is a specific category of people who have a special relation to their land, to the sacred. What has been happening in the past two decades, and it's increasing every year, is an awareness amongst indigenous people everywhere that they have a very precious and special heritage that needs to be carefully cultivated, that they have what humankind needs to survive in the future. I've been following publications by indigenous people from different parts of the world (not as extensively as I would like) and I see a real vision of the future emerging. These people who were so severely battered and bruised are now coming up with an image not only for themselves but for the whole of humanity.

The other kind, the tribal people, from the third world - but I don't like third world; I prefer two thirds of the world - the mix of problems they face, largely due to colonialism - successively French, German, English, Portuguese, etc. - from the destruction of their traditional ways of life and cultures to every kind of environmental problem have been destroying them. It's one of the greatest tragedies of modernisation. What's happening to them? I don't spend a lot of time in the two thirds world, so I have to use - shall I say -

‘imaginative empathy’ and all the publications I can read. I’ve been focusing on Islamic writing. What we see as a mere rejection of the West is an effort to save the best of their own culture and to rebuild it, to recreate it. On the whole, I have a very positive feeling about the future of Islam. There’s hope that the extremists (and it’s understandable that there should be extremists) could be taken care of in the process of development.

In other parts of the World, like Central Africa, after having been successively colonised by the French, the German, the English, etc., not much was left of the traditional heritage, and now they have to try to recover it. So what we can do, and what the WFSF has been doing, is simply to support Africa’s revisioning of her own future using her own tradition and knowledge and taking what it is useful from the industrial West. This becomes extremely difficult because of the tactics and the power of the mega-corporations. The pressures are enormous, especially because these people usually have very low political and economic power, but the decline of the West is certain and that may ease the pressure on them, specially as their way of living will become increasingly clear as a more viable option because of their special relation to the land and the environment.

Let me put it this way: how long could Barcelona last? How long could Boulder, Colorado, last without a big shift? Not very long. My feeling is that only some electronic capabilities will survive in the future. This electronic world we have created is self destructive, as it makes people lose the ability to relate to one another.

PP: To end our interviews we always ask our guests to tell us what they consider is the most important challenge for humanity or the future event that will most change our life in the future. What do you think?

EB: The long term development I see is the rise of civil society through the NGOs and all the networks which are problem-solving oriented. Parallel to this I see the state being able to do less and less and the UN crippled, as it’s a creature of the states. My image of the future is of a gradual decline of the state and the evolution of new kinds of constituted order other than the state, maybe as autonomous regions like Catalonia. I see this level of localism - not merely local, but local regions - rising and developing their own capacity for handling problems.

Then, the challenge in this context is how to get from the current heavily armed nation-states to this kind of future. We are so heavily armed that we cannot assume that weapons will just fade away; there is serious work to be done. The one thing that worries me more than anything else isn’t nuclear weapons: it’s land mines. When I think about them I just can’t bear it; there are children, women and men losing limbs, dying. Some of those mines go back to World War I and they are still killing people in several countries. The more we talk in the United States and Europe about less wars and reducing our military capability, the more we export weapons to the two thirds world.

So, how is the civil society going to handle the control and gradual dismantling of the nation state system? This is going to be very difficult and tricky. It will happen, but it’s uncertain how. One of the reasons I spend so much time studying the capabilities of NGOs is because I don’t see any other instrument to do it. Right now there are 20,000 of them and they are incredibly diverse. I see them as a special resource for the future. In

particular, the ethnic and religious NGOs doubled in number between 1970 and 1994; all sorts of ethnicities are organising in positive ways to create viable alternative lifestyles.

I also see two other trends in the direction of this change I'm talking about. One is the increasing participation of women, contributing with all their social inventiveness and social creativity. The other is children, their creativity is so underestimated that we are missing a great richness. To finish, I would say that the key to the question of how to arrive at this new civil society lies in the strengthening of the NGO network plus the addition of women's and children's creativity. These can be the clues to find out how to achieve the rise of civil society.

Centre Catala de Prospectiva, Barcelona, Spain, 1998