“Any useful idea about the futures should appear to be ridiculous” (Datour, 1996). In one of his three axioms, Futurist Jim Datour establishes criteria for how the process of future visioning must be ongoing and changing, with feedback loops that continually introduce new challenges that restart and revise the process. “The future cannot be predicted,” he continues, “because the future does not exist” (ibid.).

A subfield of Futures Studies explores the contemporary circumstance, which they describe as “Postnormal Times,” or PNT (CPPFS). Ziauddin Sardar writes, “We have entered postnormal times, the in-between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have not yet emerged, and nothing really makes sense. To have any notion of a viable future, we must grasp the significance of this period of transition which is characterized by three c’s: complexity, chaos, and contradictions” (Sardar, 2010).

PNT require that future craft (Ratti and Claudel, 2016: 5) move away from linearity and explore more deeply the interconnections between the three c’s. PNT require that “all stories we tell about the future(s) ought to emphasize their dynamic and mind-bogglingly diverse nature, chaotic potential, contradictory possibilities, and invoke imagination and creativity” (Sardar and Sweeney, 2016: 3).

The postnormal condition is also a process; one that can be partial and transitioned into. “The present is complex, pluralistic and partly postnormal” (ibid.: 5). Suffice it to say the current global pandemic has accelerated this condition for many sectors. For supply chains, logistics, and ports in particular. Dramatically.

Time is the currency of ports. Time standardization dates back to the railroad, (Mattelart, 1996) and, of course, pre-COVID-19 international trade time employed “just-in-time” strategies made possible through technology and precise international coordination. And now time is postnormal. Will there be a new COVID-19 time? Fast and slow. Nimble and responsive. With more feedback loops throughout the global supply chain and across multiple legal/policy frameworks that will need to be coordinated continuously. Here we begin to see the continually revisioning of the future that postnormal policy calls for.

Postnormal policy moves beyond mere risk management, forecasting, and scenario modeling strategies, which describe the “extended present,” rather than unknown future (Sardar and Sweeney, 2016: 5). In a future where even change is changing, PNT researchers ask, “do our stories about the future(s) tell us something meaningful that can generate policies and strategies to cope with complexity, uncertainty and chaotic behavior?” (ibid.:2) They go on to recommend a “three tomorrows” exercise that parts from a present that is “dynamic, networked, pluralistic, and complex,” (ibid.:5) which all work as useful descriptors for ports and international trade.

Sardar emphasizes, “The way forward must be based on virtues of humility, modesty and accountability, the indispensable requirement of living with uncertainty, complexity and ignorance. We will have to imagine ourselves out of postnormal times and into a new age of normalcy—with an ethical compass and a broad spectrum of imaginations from the rich diversity of human cultures” (Sardar, 2010: 435).

These futures are subjective. Datour refers to them as “images of the future,” and they will differ according to any number of multiple subject identity axes. Constant and clear communication becomes all the more important among these subjective future images, and the linking of these images to strategic planning and administration (Datour, 1996).

Port operations are deeply imbedded in local, regional, and international political, social, economic, and ecological systems. Postnormal times require that port-city coordination understand and respect the mutual constitution and contingencies generated by the inter-relationships of these systems. The challenges of the three c’s, complexity, chaos, and contradictions, are now applicable to all of these systems, and increase exponentially when considered in concert. These are the challenges port cities face as times become postnormal.

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Head image: Aerial view of terminal. Port of Savannah. (Georgia Ports Authority – GPA, https://gaports.com/).