

Imagining the future: Ideas for change

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It is hard to explain the overwhelming euphoria – and the ensuing eutopia – that buoyed the heart and extended the purview of this incurable idealist on discovering futures studies thirty years ago, via the medium of the remarkable Jim Dator, at the University of Hawaii. It is particularly hard to share this experience with friends who call themselves realists: they are too wedded to the can-do of instrumentalism, accepting their circumstances without curiosity, and shrugging off the promise of new ideas. Personally, having become a mature-age student, weary of the poor ethics and the trivia of a truncated, traditional business career, futures thinking offered hope of a fairer, more interesting way forward. Jim Dator introduced his graduate students to the futures of John McHale and Robert Junk, among many others. Their visionary worlds augmented the excitement of my having already found renaissance thinkers such as the Austrian astrophysicist, Erich Jantsch, and his *Design for evolution: Self-organization and planning in the life of human systems* [1]. Then there were *Tools for thought* [2] by pioneering (co-)evolutionary biologist, Conrad H. Waddington, and *Evolution and consciousness: Human systems in transition* [3], co-edited by Jantsch and Waddington. The future lay there.

In those heady days I found the journal, *Futures*. But only recently did I realise that Jantsch, Jungk and McHale each had been contributors to Volume 1 of *Futures*, 40 years ago, in 1968–1969. (Jungk and McHale were in the very first issue.) Jantsch [4] had reviewed *The Chasm Ahead* [5], by Aurelio Peccei, who had wanted to resolve the Cold-War stand-off, along with a dedicated band of futurists, by suggesting bridges be built for sharing the futures of North America, Europe, the Soviet Union and Japan, as an integral way of dealing with a global problem. Peccei, a founder of the Club of Rome, had been a friend of Eleonora Masini, mother of the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF). I was to invite Masini and Dator to a conference, *The Futures of Communication*, in Australia's bicentennial year, 1988, just before I was to join the federation myself, to discover a new global village of the future lying before me.

From its very beginning, *Futures* enjoyed the excitement and the optimism of the futurists of the day. And, in discussing the future of the Eskimo in its first volume, for example, it sought to redress the white middle-class focus on alternative ways of thinking and living. The journal supported meetings of technological forecasters, as well as WFSF world conferences, and from the very first, spoke about “when the oil wells of the world run dry”. It has, since, swung between the worlds of ideas and of practical futuring. By the end of the 20th century it had well recognised the global problematique in a postmodern world. More recently still, it acknowledged the popular gaze on the transition to a new Western century in the year 2000 (it should have been 2001). For me, this transition begged the question: Would the passing of 2000 see a decline in popular interest in futures studies and long-term anticipatory thinking? The question remains somewhat open.

1. Questioning futures

Whether rigorous, systematic interest in the future has declined is still not clear. But there is a continuing debate about the viability and usefulness of the field. The antagonists who have most upset many people calling themselves futurists, or similar, voiced their concerns in various print media. At the end of 2007, *The Economist* [6] declared that “futurology as we knew it 30 or 40 years ago – the heyday of Alvin Toffler's ‘Future Shock’, the most popular work of prophecy since Nostradamus – is all but dead.” The word, “futurologist”, it said, had almost disappeared from the business and academic world. There are plenty of them about – they prefer to call themselves “futurists” – but they have stopped being famous and are known mainly to their own world or to those booking corporate speakers.

In a scathing declaration that “futurism” is dead, *Wired* [7] magazine claims to have wised up to the fact that, as a discipline, “it is something of a con.” Futurists do not have a crystal ball. They examine trends and play out what-if scenarios. “Any hausfrau [sic] with gumption and a dialup connection can do it.” Earlier, according to *Newsweek* [8], they had the ear of presidents. Now those who practice “future studies” as a kind of faith struggle to have their voices heard.

Certain futurists reacted: the critics had got them wrong. There were competent futurists, they claimed, and I agree. And not all futurists set out to predict the future. To do so was dangerous; forecasting longer term was not difficult, it was impossible, given the complex cross-currents of change. Given the challenges ahead, they were convinced that it was creativity in thinking about the future that was important. However, the criticisms do raise the issue of whether futurists, in general, may have failed to explain themselves and their methods to media, decision-makers and the wider public. This failure can be seen in the decades-long lag between identifying climate change and water scarcity as issues and their acceptance by businesses and governments.

Perhaps there is a second issue. Futures studies has produced yet another set of arcane jargon that yields commercial opportunities for consultants, with new products such as the “what-if scenario”, helpful as it is, but not automatically conducive to wider understanding. Admittedly the idea of alternative “futures” (plural) has been a helpful addition to

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common usage, whether or not the notion is fully understood. But, following the example of managerialism, futures jargon has often been co-opted by shallow politicians, hijacking terms such as “sustainability”, to green-wash their denial and inaction in face of ecological devastation.

The very futures of the field of futures studies itself has been the subject of ongoing demands from within, including inside the WFSF. Such introspection and anticipation are common in other professional pursuits. But futures is not a profession, according to the generally accepted criteria: it has no explicit code of conduct and standards, nor does it have a qualifying body, although WFSF has introduced a membership grade of Fellow. But no formal course is necessary for accreditation despite several attempts to draft standards for membership of WFSF. Nor does futures enjoy the real hallmark of professionalisation, as do accountants, lawyers and medical practitioners, to apply their expertise to satisfy statutory requirements.

It has not helped that WFSF has found difficulty getting general agreement on its own purpose. It was set up in the 1970s as a global network for futurists – mainly academics – for sharing information, especially across global political divisions. Is it a learned body, a network or a professional association?

2. Friend of the field

So it is not surprising that futures has been dissected by outsiders when the field has not done enough of its own housekeeping. The journal, *Futures*, has been a perfect antidote to some of these difficulties, helping by example to counter popularized practice as well as the misunderstandings unfairly attributed to the more serious in the field. In its 40 years, *Futures* has done much to integrate futures thinking into the functions of policy formation, planning and planning. In this way, the present editor, Ziauddin Sardar, and Colin Blackman before him, have helped widen the definition of futures practice for its readers. But its readership does not reach widely into the field of policy formation.

Futures covers the functional and the utilitarian aspects of anticipatory practice, from scenario planning to prediction, and readily welcomes theory and analysis. It has been afraid of neither the scientific nor the critical readings that inquire into studies of the future, the field itself and generally into human attitudes and imaginings about the future. It published an issue on the futures of dissent in March 1999.

From a viewpoint in the developing world, Rakesh Kapoor offered an assessment of futures studies somewhat different in scope from that of the Western critics. Early in the present century, at a conference in Turku, Finland, he argued that futures had little relevance to most of the world's people. He also saw a huge gap in the insights and consciousness of futurists, on one hand, and on the consciousness and actions of ordinary people, as well as the powerful decision-makers. [9, p. 669] Not long afterwards, Sardar appointed Kapoor to the editorial board.

So, if the popular critics are reflecting the shortcomings argued by Kapoor – and I think they must be heeded – the future field has a case to answer. This is not the responsibility of *Futures*. Rightly, the journal informs largely the field and those employing futurists. The challenge is one for the futurists to take on their own shoulders.

3. The present context

Such a challenge emerges at a time the world is in stress. A quick scan of today's media says it all: crisis in finance and economics; businesses, boards and executives in trouble; ice shelves caving in. Western industrialized societies are choking on their own greed. Ever since the 1980s of Wall Street's caricature, Gordon Gecko, we have seen, at least in the West, a return to the top-heavy inequality of the era of the robber barons prior to the 1929 depression. This is supported by US economist, Paul Krugman, who goes on to argue that the excessive economic and social inequality in his country, such as witnessed before the big depression, led to the financial meltdown. In the more modern era, now ending in a similar crisis, inequality has led to climate disaster as well [10].

While egregious greed has been prosecuted by top-line executives and financial analysts, attaining new celebrity status and unaccountable power, it has been politically-led, according to Krugman. So, are we about to find a new political imagination and will to redress both inequality (in wealth and knowledge) and loss of bio-diversity? Or will a modern-day Bob Dylan emerge with his prescience in *A hard rain's a-gonna fall* when he took his enthusiastic 1960s' fans into the middle of seven sad forests and beside a dozen dead oceans? Curiously, many of these fans went on to become the gold diggers.

But greed and pollution have not been the only fall-out from the hardline conservatism that may be waning. It has been disrespectful of democracy while touting for freedom – an individualism that means free to get away with what one can – freedom without responsibility. We have seen the authoritarian government of George W Bush invade Iraq, with Tony Blair and John Howard, under the mantra of bringing freedom and democracy to the Middle East. This while, at home, Bush has torn down the social institutions, such as social security, that have helped Americans share in economic and social equity. And savings have plunged close to zero for the first time since the 1929 depression.

Are ordinary people hostages to the hubris, greed and incompetence of predatory capital – not to mention the lack of prudence and the tricky dealings of the high rollers – that turns its back on social justice while pursuing efficiency for the owners of capital rather than their client-consumers. Is this the genesis of a top-heavy, tiered society that cares nothing for the integrity and esprit of community?

Capitalism craves to be efficient, but the efficiencies gush straight to the top while the inefficiencies are out-sourced to the bottom of the social economy. Take the ubiquitous call centre. Consumers, once kings [sic], were served by the market, not its servants. They must twiddle thumbs through inane messages, usually unsolicited advertising, and listen to clichéd music. They

must endure system outages, then suffer commands that they refer to frequently asked questions, often irrelevant, or demands to buy products that often do not fix things. Once they get a live customer service operator, they rarely get the same person next try and have to go through a whole messy explanation of the problem for the *n*th time. Efficiency seems intended only for the investor-owners. Inefficiencies cost customers time, higher interest rates, dearer fuel, reductions in pension income and lost job opportunities. With globalised capital, the spoils and losses are shifted among nations, as well as among social strata.

The market can be hard-hearted. Recently, an American chief executive working for a Scottish boss who represents a Hong Kong private equity fund closed an Australian institution with a 128-year-old publishing history. *The Bulletin* had "...brayed, bellowed, cajoled and caressed Australian life and literature since colonial times. [11] Welcome to the brave, but soulless, new world." [12].

Krugman, for one, hopes fairness will return. Perhaps he can take heart from the research of an interdisciplinary team, which included US economists [13]. They found that people cooperate until they realise others are not bothering and are taking advantage of the system. Perhaps the conditions for co-operation are ripening in the way the markets have behaved recently. Investment banks have shown imagination by turning into hedge funds, using synthetic financial instruments to avoid banking regulation, and the attending responsibility and accountability. It is surely taking advantage of the system when their lack of transparency and short-selling cream off big profits in a risky market.

How long before regular investors and the ordinary public stand by and see tax-payers' funds, to which they have contributed, used to bail out these river-boat gamblers? A casino economy has encouraged speculation instead of genuine investment? If only the same imagination could be applied to solving problems such as alleviating poverty and ending war.

4. Futures of imagination?

Scottish novelist, Andrew O'Hagan [14] thinks it is a failure of imagination to allow famine and terror to reign. Someone who throws out uneaten food, while so many others are starving, fails to imagine that whole villages in Eritrea have children gasping for a droplet of milk. Similarly, imagination is failing whenever we harm, betray or destroy life, he said. My view is that such failures happen when perfectly practical people cannot, or will not, understand that the consequences of their actions ripple out through society, as a dropped pebble makes concentric waves in a pool. Why do so few even fail to see the fallout for their own children. Maybe this is as much a failure of imagination as a lack of ethics. Or is it both?

At a time of crisis in human imagination, do we need to rejuvenate the integration of imagination into futures studies and futures practice? How can we redirect the imagination of those who feed off other's disabilities and misfortune for accumulating wealth and power? Some fellow futurists advocate a stop to seeing the glass half empty and to employ hopeful visions of the future for moving towards workable solutions. But beware the pathological optimism which often travels with the denial that we are messing things up.

5. Ideas into action

Optimism is needed to imagine – reimagine – positive visions of a fairer future, but it should be plausible. And it must be followed by creative strategies to enact the new ideas which emerge. Traditionally, those who work with ideas – artists, academics in the humanities and thoughtful people generally – are not always well engaged with the disciplines that inform practice – the sciences and social sciences, particularly the former. A fiercely interdisciplinary partnership may be needed to break down the silos in which single disciplines cossets themselves.

I think *Futures* already accepts a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, but single articles often originate in, and address, a single framework, rather than take a true interdisciplinary perspective.

And we may need a new understanding of how imagination, in the form of creative ideas, is applied. The theories and practice of social change become critically important for the field. For example, we need to address the question: why does it take so long for a critical mass of public opinion to swing behind such issues as global warming which has long been on the distant warning system of many futurists?

Then, how do we engender a new optimism like that which nourished the enthusiasm for global change, back four decades, when *Futures* was founded?

Finally, if Krugman is right, as I suspect, that inequality (and conversely equality) has a political genesis, then futurists of conscience would be rewarded to spend time on the futures of governance and particularly the role of politics in governance. The problems of inequality and pollution are not so much the result of a breakdown in technology, but lie in the relationship between people and their tools – the social technologies. But let us not forget the ethics necessary for public policy and governance.

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Futures at forty: A time to democratise and rejuvenate the FS enterprise

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Futures is a great journal. It is remarkable because of its plural, planetary, humanising, futuristic vision, because it seeks to build bridges across and to blur boundaries, because it has been around with its quiet but important presence for forty years, and because if ever we come close to creating a 'world brain' then *Futures* would in all likelihood have played some role in the process leading up to it.

It passes with flying colours the most important test to judge the importance of something – the 'if not' test: what would happen if the journal *Futures* did not exist? Well, it would be very badly needed indeed and we would have to create one! So during the tumultuous last four decades it has served an important function and played a tremendous role.

My association with *Futures* is less than a decade old, beginning in 2000 when I contributed a hard-hitting critique of popular futures studies (FS) discourse, in the form of nine propositions on the state of FS [1]. I then co-edited a special issue, *Impaling the Future* [2], that was based on the WFSF world conference of 2001 on the theme 'Many cultures, one world: local development and globalisation'. My association with *Futures* became much stronger when Zia Sardar asked me to join the editorial board in 2001 and subsequently, to become one of the consulting editors in 2003. However, I have had occasion to read a number of papers written prior to 2000. My comments on *Futures*, therefore, are about its overall character, contribution and role in all its years of existence, and not restricted only to the last decade.

I will first comment on what makes *Futures* such a salient and remarkable journal, before looking at issues that the journal needs to address in order to accomplish its own potential.

1. The salience of *Futures*

For all those concerned with the future of humanity, the planet and of human life, the stupendous vision and mandate of *Futures* is quite amazing: "*Futures*[®] is an international, refereed, multidisciplinary journal concerned with medium and long-term futures of cultures and societies, science and technology, economics and politics, environment and the planet and individuals and humanity. Covering methods and practices of futures studies, the journal seeks to examine possible and alternative futures of all human endeavours. *Futures*[®] seeks to promote divergent and pluralistic visions, ideas and opinions about the future."

True to this vision, the journal has carried papers on this whole range of subjects and futuristic concerns, often multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary in nature, written by people from diverse perspectives and discipline backgrounds, and promoting divergent ideas and visions about the future. This kind of openness and plurality of perspectives is rare in the world of knowledge.

Thanks to this approach, the journal has been able to significantly overcome the rigid and stultifying boundaries of academic disciplines. Additionally, this has helped the journal to address real, pragmatic and policy concerns, and reach out to policy-makers and practitioners, rather than being merely an academic journal. The energy crisis, environmental destruction, sustainable development, the consequences of globalisation, the future of specific countries and regions, war and peace, education for the future, democracy, governance, the economy, the impact of advanced technologies, religion and spirituality, all of these and more real-life concerns have been addressed by the contributions appearing in *Futures*. The discussions on epistemologies, new ways of knowing and methodologies to study the future have also been a significant part of the *Futures* discourse.

Equally remarkable, perhaps, is the fact that *Futures* has been able to sustain this discourse for forty years, and during these years the journal has managed to attract writers and contributors from different corners of the world. No doubt, the

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