



Reflections Time for new social technologies?

Tony Stevenson *

World Futures Studies Federation, PO Box 188 Noosa Heads, Queensland 4567, Australia

Social technologies are too seldom the deliberate result of research and development. Most R&D money and talent go into tangible technologies such as microprocessors, telecommunications and other hardware; or into manufacturing processes and construction. More recently nanotechnology and biotechnology are the fashion.

Australian environmental scientist and futurist, Doug Cocks [1] believes social technologies are a powerful idea. Just over ten years ago he asked whether we could deliberately create successful social technologies, particularly to help Australia learn how to reach its goals for natural-resource management. He believes “flowering social technologies are the marks of a learning society”.

To Cocks, social technologies are a recipe for increasing the effectiveness of a class of interactions or transactions among people. The alphabet, democracy, taxation and the system of credit cards would all qualify as social technologies. Trading of carbon credits would be a newer one. So, too, would be the International Tribunal for the Prosecution of Persons Responsible for Serious Violation of International Humanitarian Law.

Cocks had borrowed from John R. Platt [2], a visionary molecular biologist who had suggested that the solution of social problems lags behind (hard) technology because society has not organised the same sharp search for ideas to deal with them.

Perhaps social processes are not as easily commercialised as hardware. Mainly it is the potentially profitable social technologies, such as the credit-card system, that attract commercial attention?

Similarly, it is not surprising that relatively little R&D funding explores and delivers new forms of social infrastructure, including what now may be called social capital, after Robert Putnam [3]. Scientific, interpretative and critical research sometimes informs policy making, but the social technologies for inventing and

* Tel.: +61-7-5447-4394; fax +61-7-5448-0776.

E-mail address: LagunaBay@bigpond.com (T. Stevenson).

implementing new policy are seldom put to rigorous scrutiny. And they too often lack vision, mired as they are in traditional ideological or political imperative.

Today's research dollar is still aimed primarily at patentable objects and processes, with clear commercial potential. We see an infatuation with intellectual property, mainly constituted from knowledge for applying the fruits of investment in biotechnology and lasting mainstream hardware technologies.

1. Technology of dominance

As the new, young century and millennium dawned, the world was being repoliticised. There was the September 11 violence against New York and Washington. Then we saw a well televised, aggravated high-tech assault on Afghanistan and Iraq, allegedly in retaliation.

Little had been learned from the human horrors of the last century. War, relying on very hard technology, was enlisted yet again for resolving conflict, some would say potential conflict. With Iraq, there was little will for softer diplomatic negotiation, most notably on one side of the argument. Social technologies used to contend with imperialism during the Cold War—deterrence and containment—were dispatched to the dust bin when dealing with the newest celebrity rogues, Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein.

Meanwhile in the background of the West, an obscenity of greed and incompetence was oozing through cracks in the casino economy and in the predatory capitalism seeking to privatise and corporatise the globe. The social technology of self-regulation, or deregulation, was being compromised by an omission of ethics in some of the more celebrated corners of the financial sector.

Was this truly the end of history—an idea certainly threatening to futures studies? Is Francis Fukuyama's [4] faith in neoliberalism faulty after all? It certainly is time to question whether the free-market system, with its military guard, is still the most just and the only social technology for coordinating human society?

It is no surprise that Fukuyama is a signatory to the statement of principles for the Project for the New American Century, launched in 1997 for fear the Clinton presidency was undermining the supremacy of the world's single superpower. The Project seeks to retain this supremacy by modernising US weaponry with bigger military budgets, in order for the US "to carry forward its global responsibilities". The US, it asserts, must build on successes of the past century "to ensure security and our greatness" in the next.

The Project's principles have found their way into the current US National Security Strategy. This lauds America's unprecedented power while declaring the American way to be the "single sustainable model for national success" that is "right and true for every person, in every society".

The most frightening arsenal of weapons of mass destruction is protecting and prosecuting the futures of an individualistic free-market imperium. We get swash-buckling mercantilism, and geo-political, economic and cultural control from the turret of a tank and through the cross-hairs of a stealth fighter.

2. Beware anti-Americanism

But, critique of Washington's present extremist politics should not necessarily represent anti-American sentiment. There are plenty of Americans who would like a regime change in Washington. While the US, with its top-heavy military might, is a lead agency in building an economic and cultural hegemony, the Australian government of Prime Minister, John Howard, shares a similar mindscape. So too, may the Spanish and Italian leadership, at the very least.

Rather than ramp up anti-Americanism, it may be time to challenge the coalescing of a new-style of Orwellian politics. The fundamentalist intransigence shown over Iraq threatens national and cultural diversity, globally. And if diversity of culture is as dynamic and essential as biological diversity for our diminishing rain forests, as can well be argued, then cultural uniformity threatens human imagination.

If we value diversity, and democracy, this may well be a time when human imagination is badly needed for ideas that eventuate in refreshingly new social technologies. Imaginative non-violent social technologies could well replace the weight of brute force and egregious hard technology. Compared with weapons development, a feeble trickle of funding flows into peace studies and into creating harmonious human relationships, from school and family to international diplomacy. Meanwhile income gaps widen. Poverty persists. Democracy is paid lip service by powers eager to forcibly export it to the Middle East, while they still cannot, or do not, apply it truthfully at home. Corporate governance has ignored the thoughtful and humane organisational theories developing in the 1970s to suffer indigestion from its rampant greed. The investment analyst has usurped the role of the organisational specialist. The stock market has gorged on the hyperbole of a dot-com illusion while it stamperdes to privatise the mysteries of nature's genetic design.

3. Cope or create?

Do we cave in and accept globalised bullying as inevitable? Or do we develop creative responses to what could be a more nurturing, inclusive globalism? Appropriate opportunities are presented by a new-found realisation of our common heritage on the blue planet swirling through space—an orb that seems peaceful through astronaut's eyes, but hardly seems so to the earthbound media consumer.

People protest in the streets. Pockets of citizens quietly work away in the suburbs and villages. Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson [5] claim a quarter of Americans, the *cultural creatives*, are building an alternative world. They point to similar movements in Europe. Australia, too, has its band of alternative faithfuls.

Yet, Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg [6] argue that the era of the citizen is coming to an end. Today, Western governments have found ways of almost entirely replacing citizens as soldiers, tax collectors and administrators. Citizens have become customers—individual recipients of government services. They are no longer encouraged to be part of a group in the process of politics and government.

As Crenson and Ginsberg point out, it was once thought that citizens owned demo-

cratic governments. As customers, they are merely expected to receive pleasant service from it. Citizens enjoy a collective existence for public purposes as members of a political community. Customers are individual consumers seeking to meet their private needs in a market. The declining role of the American citizen became more evident in the aftermath of the 2000 presidential election.

4. And what of the futurists?

Certain futurists have long been critical of the failure of representative democracy. And it does not account well enough for the minorities. Jim Dator, at the University of Hawaii, has been regularly challenging his audiences to conceive of a form of governance for Mars. What would we invent starting with a clean slate? A quarter of a century ago, Clem Bezold edited *Anticipatory Democracy* [7]. The World Futures Studies Federation devoted its 1991 conference in Barcelona to investigating and visioning participatory democracy [8].

An interest in alternative social processes generally—social technologies—continues among committed futurists. Endless scenarios, now part of a ubiquitous futures methodology, suggest what we should take up, or avoid, on the way to the future. Descriptions, analyses and criticisms abound. Many are creative, if not always using long-term horizons, such as one hundred years, or much more.

Too few scenarios, however, suggest how to get to the preferred future—what social technologies to use. *Backcasting* often ends only in a report. There is relatively too thin a record of actual experimentation or other attempts to put the good ideas into practice, as if identifying the ideas is enough. Methodologies for integrating thought and action have been described, such as *anticipatory action-learning* [9]. They are seldom applied and tested.

Does futures studies need more implementation to go with its knowledge base—not just more content and structure, but process too?

Wendell Bell's life-long study has addressed the practical and ethical application of futures studies [10]. He clearly sees futures studies as “action science”. And he supports activism provided it is well grounded in critical realism. Bell likes the ideas of thinkers such as Donald Campbell where planned social change is considered an experiment, outcomes are assessed, and feedback for decision-making is used to plan still more effective, efficient and equitable action in an unending experimental effort to tune and retune plans, policies and implementations. “Sound knowledge and good practice inform and correct each other” (p. 289).

However, is such change considered no more than manipulative, utilitarian social engineering? Perhaps, unless we resort to an ethical framework, as Bell and others demand. And long-term vision is linked to today's decisions. And, further, unless we resort to participatory processes of inquiry linked directly to action.

Participative processes such as anticipatory action learning integrate inquiry, reflection (including critique), decision, action and evaluation. Client users of the new social technologies are actively partnered with those who have the specialist competencies, in order to co-create their futures. The workshops of the late Robert Jungk were forerunners to such democratic futuring.

Participation may be an idealistic notion. The global posturing of power and wealth prefers passive, dependent citizens, except when they are consuming. Collective action for social benefit frightens political conservatives. Community, as a social support system, is nothing more than a nostalgic collective noun. Too many people have relinquished their responsibility to power politics and big business.

It can be equally idealistic, and perhaps unjust, that capital may continue moving freely around the globe while a similar freedom is denied to people, including asylum seekers, and to factual information, especially in wartime.

What are today's futurists doing to challenge this orthodoxy by putting their ideas into practice? What alternative actions devised through anticipatory research are submitted to social development, through social learning and social experimentation? Most importantly, how can we embed ethics into human agency? It would be a pity if some of the creative ideas generated by futures studies remained hanging in the rarified air of the academy.

There are corporate and social institutions that could well claim to be linking visionary thought and action. Futurists such as Jim Dator and Clem Bezold have worked in the fields of government and health. Hazel Henderson has a trust fund that encourages ethical investment. Activists in the peace movement and in community futures, such as Cesar Villanueva in the Philippines, are grounding their ideas by negotiating local peace zones and developing new livelihoods.

Hopefully this challenge will flush many more examples out of the closet. The futures literature could well command the practical attention and public respect it deserves if it reports as well as it invents, analyses and deconstructs visionary new ideas. What new pathways and actions hold promise of tomorrow's social technologies for ethical, practical governance, organisation, relieving poverty, community development, urban and social planning, and peace-making at all social scales?

References

- [1] D. Cocks, *Use with Care: Managing Australia's Natural Resources in the 21st Century*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1992.
- [2] J.R. Platt, *The Step to Man*, Wiley, New York, 1966.
- [3] R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2001.
- [4] F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, New York, 1992.
- [5] P.H. Ray, S.R. Anderson, *Cultural creatives: How 50 Million People are Changing the World*, Harmony Books, New York, 2000.
- [6] M.A. Crenson, B. Ginsberg, *Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined its Citizens and Privatised its Public*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002.
- [7] C. Bezold (Ed.), *Anticipatory Democracy*, Random, New York, 1978.
- [8] B. Van Steenberg, R. Martí Nakamara, J. Dator, *Advancing democracy and participation: challenges for the future. Selections from the XII World Conference of the World Futures Studies federation*, Barcelona, 17–21 September 1991. Barcelona: Centre Català de Prospectiva & Centre UNESCO de Catalunya, 1992.
- [9] T. Stevenson, *Anticipatory action learning: conversations about the future*, *Futures* 34 (2002) 417–425.
- [10] W. Bell, T. Stevenson, *Biography: Wendell Bell: critical realism in studying the future*, *Futures* 35 (2003) 283–295.