Chapter 2

Youth Dissent: Multiple Perspectives on Youth Futures

Sohail Inayatullah

Youth is about renewal, fresh ideas challenging old traditions and yearning for the untried. Youth finds change inebriating, not intimidating. Youth is also impetuous, unpredictable: with the promise of a better future comes a veiled threat to tear down the past. . . . Youth breaks all the rules. Youth is colorful, irreverent, entertaining, sometimes shocking, almost always rebellious. Youth is on the vanguard of fashion, music, literature and popular culture. But the young are also the first to hurl stones, to lob bombs, to rush to the barricades. Youth is, in a word, energy.¹

IDEALISM

In the 1999 movie Dick, about the life of Richard Nixon as seen through the eyes of two fifteen-year-olds, Nixon uses the famous line, “Young people are the voice of the future” to end the war in Vietnam. In the scene, Henry Kissinger walks into a meeting between the president and two young girls (who had stumbled on to accounts of the Watergate affair). He asks the president what to do about the war. One of the girls says, “War is not healthy to children and all living beings.” While Kissinger and others debate who started the war, Nixon says that we should listen to the girls, since they represent the “voice of the future of America.”

Through a series of amusing circumstances, we discover that the two girls are in fact “Deep Throat,” the person who brought down the Nixon administration. The movie, while hilarious, shows the power and idealism of youth and utterly mocks them. They are in love with Nixon until they find out that he mistreats his dog, Checkers. All other issues escape them—corruption, bribery—but mistreatment of the dog transforms their perspective of the
president. The movie ends with Nixon resigning and flying home by helicopter, only to see the girls unfurling a banner from their rooftop that reads, “You suck, Dick.”

In the recently released German movie *Sonnenallee*, about life in East Berlin during the communist era, we see a similar approach to how young people construct politics.

First, it is essentially about fun and self-destruction—endless alcohol, drugs, and sex. However, these are not shown to us in neutral terms but in politicized language, that is, these practices are used as resistance against an evil regime. To win the heart of a lovely neighbor girl, the main actor invents a diary. In the diary he writes lengthy entries of his desire to rebel against East Germany’s tyranny. He makes sure to mention that from an early age he was not a socialist. Rebellion against the State means music and drugs. Near the end of the movie, border guards shot a fifteen-year-old boy, thinking that he is attempting to scale the wall. Fortunately for him, the Rolling Stones album he has just purchased—*Exile on Main Street*—saves his life. But he can only lament the album’s (a double one) destruction by the bullet. Freedom—meaning purchasing goods that revile the staleness of communism—means more than life.

The movie concludes with the young people leading a neighborhood party by the Wall. Soon, older East Germans join in. The police do nothing but watch the testament to a different future the youth wish for.

It is this different future that has been the heart of the failed revolution in Afghanistan. The Taliban, young men between the ages of fifteen and twenty, were schooled in madrasses, religious schools in Pakistan, to destroy the triple evils of communism, secularism, and tribal feudalism that had claimed Afghanistan. Unfortunately, they forgot the even greater evil of patriarchy. It remains remarkable that a group of young people (trained and armed by the Pakistani Army and the American CIA) can defeat a much stronger military force. Their unity and determination, as well as desire for a moral polity, has seen them to victory. The costs of that victory—their intolerance for all other perspectives—have been overwhelming and unforgivable. Still, they have shown what youth can do by exhibiting creative transformative and chaotic destructive power.

Equally powerful have been youth revolutions in Serbia. When President Slobodan Milosevic annulled local elections in 1997 and gave city power to opposition leaders, the students turned out in mass to protest. It was the final straw. Milosevic was mocked as 500,000 took to the streets. Eventually, after three months of nonviolent protest, the students were victorious. Most recently, it was the students (with the miners and professionals) who brought down Milosevic himself. As they marched the streets, many feared for the lives. They knew the tanks would be among them, in any second, butchering every last protester (as Milosevic’s wife and other
associates had requested the ruler to do in the 1997 revolution). But the army did not intervene and history was made that day in Belgrade.

Earlier it was the action of the Otpor (Resistance) movement that had struck fear into the hearts of government officials. Concerned not with debating Milosevic but with tearing down his system—using disobedience in every possible way, from Web anarchy to pouring sugar into the government-owned vehicles—the students had made a clear statement: We want change and we will risk everything for it. They have also made it clear to the new government that unless the last vestiges of Milosevic’s regime are cleansed, they will renew their resistance.

We have seen similar student protests against the inequities of globalization, against particular dictators such as Marcos (and now the corrupt Estrada), or the cruel Mahathir, or “wanna-be” tyrants such as Hanson of Australia, or against the destruction of nature, or against permanent refugee status as in Israel/Palestine. The images of young Intifada Palestinian youth throwing stones against the heavily armed Israeli forces tell us in no uncertain terms that youth are more than shopping mall consumers. At the same time, even as David versus Goliath is the operating metaphor, the futility and their resultant destruction shows the paradox youth find themselves in. The Israeli army attacks them and the Palestinian political authority uses them for symbolic media purposes. Youth have agency to create a different future and, simultaneously, their vigor is used by others.

Still, this idealism is at the heart of young people’s visions of the future. It is essentially the desire to create a world that works for everyone—all humans, plants, and animals. Idealism means the unwillingness to accept adult reasons for why the world cannot change or should not change—the deep structures of history. Idealism, like utopianism, expresses “impulses and aspirations which have been blocked by the existing society.”

However, while “the enemy” is easy to see when the forces of oppression are direct, and thus action and inspiration are far more available and accessible, transformation is far more problematic when the problems are associated with the worldview of postindustrialism (advanced and hypercapitalism)—the deeper patterns of thought, of epistemes that organize what constitutes the real.

This becomes the great source of malaise. What to do when the entire system is a lie, when the foundations of civilization, of adult civilization, claim universalism but in fact are the victories of particular politics? How should youth react? How do they react? They show anger when governments express concern for human rights but continue supporting killing animals for food. They are angry when states and corporations express concern for the environment and peace but make no investment in public transport or continue to be part of the global military machine. They
express anger at traditional religions when religious leaders profess a love for god but tolerate pedophilia.

When they are unable to find ways to express their bright visions of the future in positive, life-enhancing ways, the same expression comes out as destruction against others (after all, it is youth who do most of the killing) and against themselves through suicide and long-term suicidal behavior (for example, drug and alcohol abuse).

POSTINDUSTRIAL FATIGUE

Based on the massive ten-nation study of how individuals envisioned the year 2000, Johan Galtung writes that the most pessimistic respondents came from the richest nations. Young people expressed a development fatigue. They had seen the limits of technology, and understood that social transformation, inner transformation was required. But instead they received more technologies.

As a result, the young experience cognitive dissonance when they hear talk of fairness but see actions that discriminate against the poor, the indigenous. This brings a range of responses. At one extreme is the rush to join the MBA set, to globalize, to work hard to ensure that one’s own future is bright. The second is the global backlash of the right—to resist multiculturalism and the “other” through a return to extreme forms of one’s identity. This is the Islamic right wing or the Christian right wing and localist/nationalistic movements throughout the world. In more respectable forms, this is scientism, wherein science (like god) is seen outside of history, the truth for all who convert to the open inquiry of the scientific method. As famed physicist Michio Kaku said in reference to the new world being created by the technologies of genetic engineering, nanotechnology and space research: get on the train or forever be left behind.

A third alternative is common in nations belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), that of suicide, especially suicide among males. They end their physical life partly because they see no future, they are missing moral male role models and the only rituals left are those of consumption—the shopping mall as the great savior. The fourth alternative is violence against others.

At heart then is a crisis in worldview. Much of the earlier youth futures research presented data as to whether young people are optimistic or pessimistic about the future. Causes of suicide were blamed on unemployment and other social and economic problems. But these causes, to be sensible, must be nested in the limits of the industrial and postindustrial worldview, wherein reality is segmented into work (profit-making) followed by years of retirement. An analysis of worldview must as well speak to an even deeper sense of myth and metaphor. At this level of analysis, the issue
is, what stories do young people tell themselves and others? For young people, the foundational problem is a story of the universe in which they are expected to behave in certain ways (become a worker, rational human being) and a reality that denies this possibility (unemployment) and is utterly divorced from their world (the limits of the European enlightenment with respect to accessing other ways of knowing). There is thus a contrast between the world of globalization and secularization and the realities of emotions and identity creation.

Nor is postmodernism the solution for young people. It gives them endless choices—virtuality—but with no foundation. Without this foundation, the result is a reality with too many selves—the swift Teflon vision of the future, in which identity is about speed and the collection of a multitude of experiences, not about understanding the “other.” Moreover, the terms remain within the confines of the Western limitless worldview of accumulation. This is at a time in their lives where at least two forces are operating: hormonal expression of the body and idealism of the mind. Virtuality merely creates the illusion of endless choice but not the fulfillment of having met and responded to a challenge. Nature, conditions of inequity, and authentic alternatives to the postmodern are lost in this discourse.

However, as Galtung argues, it is too simplistic to say that the problématique is of the Western worldview, of the crises of the West because the West is ubiquitous and even closed societies exhibit similar problems. In Libya, the problems of heroin, atheism, drugs, and hallucinogens prompted Qaddafi to say: “We have lost our youth.” And, third, it is a conceptual mistake to argue that the West is in crisis because this is a tautological statement. The West by definition exists in this way (indeed, as do youth, that is, being young is about a crisis in life, the transformation from a child to an adult). That has been the West’s success in expanding the last 500 years. The West is not just linear in its evolution, it is also dramatic, apocalyptic. The West by definition searches for the latest breakthrough, the victory, the challenge that can propel it onwards. But the other side of the West is its alter ego focused not on expansion but on human rights, not on the businessman but on the shaman, not on the mature adult ready to live and retire from the company (or kingdom or church) but on the youth that contests reality. Not on domination-focused masculine principles but on partnership-focused feminine principles.

The challenge to official reality comes also from the outside, the periphery, such as the Bedouins not vested in the normative and coercive power of the state, as Ibn Khaldun argues. Indeed, youth are the periphery. Even as many are part of the ego of the West (I shop, therefore I am), many are of the alter-ego (I love, therefore I am and I protest, therefore I am). This ability of the West to appropriate counter movements and to use youth and other cultures to transform itself from within; is how the
West has made itself universal. In this sense, the youth crisis in the West (the youth movements of the last thirty years) is not new, it is merely the alter-ego expressing the alternative West.

This is easier when the oppressor is clearer—whether it is in the form of a tyrant or a multinational such as General Motors (or more recently Microsoft) or a world organization such as the World Bank. It is more difficult when it is the worldview that must be challenged and transformed.

The challenge to worldview thus comes across in a multitude of movements, each touching some dimension of the critique of what has come to be called globalization. These are expressed through spiritual movements, vegetarian movements, cults, green movements, grunge, rap, rock and roll as well as through the south Asian diaspora, bhangra rap. All these movements are supported by youth as cadres, even if managed by aging hippies.

The hypothesis then is that the crisis of youth is part of the West’s own renewal and clearly part of the fatigue of development. This fatigue has been delayed quite a bit the Internet revolution. Screenagers, as Douglas Rushkoff accurately calls them, have found a different way to express individuality. It is quick time, quick communication, and a chance to immediately lead instead of follow. This will likely be delayed even more by revolutions in genetics and nanotechnology. While at one level delayed, at another level, the dot-com revolution is a youth explosion. Many small start-ups are multicultural and gender partnership-based, and they challenge traditional notions of working nine-to-five and wearing black suits. They also offer a network vision of work and organizational structure. In this sense, they renew even as they delay more basic (needed) changes to globalization.

SCENARIOS OF THE FUTURE

This ego and alter-ego come across in foundational scenarios of the future. These can be seen in popular and academic images of the future and have certainly come across in visioning workshops with young people (explored in Chapter 19 on case studies). The first is the globalized artificial future and the second is the communicative-inclusive future.

The globalized scenario is high technology and economy-driven. Features include the right to plastic surgery and an airplane for each person. Generally, the vision is of endless travel and shopping, and of a global society that meets all our desires, where we all have fun. The underlying ethos is that technology can solve every problem and lead to genuine human progress.

In contrast is the communicative-inclusive society, which is values-driven. Consumption in this scenario is far less important than communication. It is learning from another that is crucial. While technology is
important, the morality of those inventing and using it is far more important. Instead of solving the world’s food problem through the genetic engineering of food, the reorganization of society and softer, more nature-oriented alternatives such as organic foods are far more important. The goal is not to create a world that leads to the fulfillment of desire but one wherein desire is reduced (the Gandhian sentiment) or channeled to spiritual and cultural pursuits.

The underlying perspective is that of a global ethics with a deep commitment to the belief that communication and consciousness transformation can solve all our problems.

MACROHISTORY AND DEPTH

The argument made so far is that there are generally two foundational futures. Of course, the specter of total collapse remains, because of either the exploitation of nature or overconcentration of power and wealth. But this image is used more as a call to action, to either join the technology revolution or the consciousness revolution. The scenario of muddling through is also important but generally rejected by youth.

The basic perspective of the globalization/technologization scenario is that things rise—more progress, more technology, more development, more wealth, more individuality. This is generally the view of older age cohorts and those in the center of power. The underlying perspective of the communicative-inclusive scenario is that of transformation, whether because of green or spiritual values or because of the wise and moral use of technology. This tends to be more the vision of youth. It is idealistic and not beholden to the values of the market. In contrast to the exponential curve of the first scenario, this scenario has a spiral curve (a return to traditional values but in far more inclusive terms).

This pattern oscillates in the West. The West needs the latter, its alter-ego, to refresh itself. Collapse remains the fear (technology gone wrong or overpopulation from the South) that spurs the West to constantly create new futures.

We have also argued that the West is by definition in crisis, and that is how it refreshes itself. Without these two pillars it would have fallen to the wayside, and other civilizations would have reigned.

Youth and the idealistic futures they imagine are central to this oscillation. Macrosociologist Pitirim Sorokin writes of this in terms of sensate (materialistic) civilization and ideational (mental) civilization. He argues that we are in a phase shift. Eisler writes of this in terms of dominator and partnership society. The first is based on rank ordering a hierarchy system with the goal of moving up. The second is based on different values, on sharing futures, on not winning. This transformation is based on stages of crisis, catharsis, charisma, and then transformation. Youth are foundationally
engaged in the first two—in noticing the crisis. As among the most vulnerable, they can see the negative implications of globalization far before elders. Also, as they are less vested in the economic basis and power politics, they are free to protest and to work to create alternatives. However, many youth do not succeed. Others imagine a time with no change when they were not the most vulnerable—when borders protected them against others. This latter is the plea of every sovereignty movement: youth would have jobs if the others (illegal immigrants and large corporations) did not enter the nation and take away employment and other opportunities.

Youth futures (defined as how young people envision possible, probable, preferred, and transformational futures, and how these futures are empirically studied, interpreted, and critically understood) must thus be understood in the context of the code and cosmology of civilization and the patterns of macrohistory.

They must also be understood in the context of layers of reality. At the most superficial (litany level), youth futures are defined by the problematic of unemployment, crime, and family breakdown. At the deeper level of worldview, youth futures express the transition of industrial to postindustrial/postmodern (end of full employment, loss of meaning, breakdown of the nation-state). At the deepest level of metaphor, the crisis of identity is central: do youth have one self, multicultural, many selves, or virtual fragmented selves? In this sense, whether youths are optimistic or pessimistic matters less than their vision of the future, the idealism embedded in it, and whether they believe they have the capacity to realize that vision.

Thus at one level, the discussion of youth futures is an exercise in banality. “The future is the youth” and similar statements are generally symbolic politics used to create an appearance that something for the future is being done—that vitality and innovation are just around the corner. It is code for deep oppressive structures that mitigate against change.

**OPPRESSION AND CHANGE**

The future of no change, or muddling through, is, however, the reality for most in the world. In the West, this is the scenario of liberal government, of increasing wealth, of all problems solved through the democratic scenario, of not rocking the boat lest the entire project capsize.

In the non-West, “muddling through” is dealing with colonialism and neocolonialism. It means the continued centralization of power in the military and feudal lords. Shifts in power are merely shifts rulers, not transformations of culture and society.

This is especially so in traditional societies, such as Pakistan. Youth futures there are focused on a fatigue not with development but with feudalism and state corruption. While initially the ways out of this oppres-
sion were marches against the government or the university vice-chancellor, eventually military dictatorships and violent suppression by right-wing parties engendered a deep fatigue. The result of this deep fatigue has been a desire to escape to high-income areas, either Middle Eastern countries or OECD. Youth who could not escape have generally had to make the best of it. Of course, the “best of it” tends to mean high heroin addiction.21

An emerging new factor is the Internet. This has allowed the hundreds of thousands of youths who cannot emigrate to the United States to connect with youth all over the world, and for some, to find ways to earn income (or create viruses). They are dramatically changing the economic and political landscape of regions, especially south Asia and China.

However, while global, these young people are not postmodern in the Western sense, as are Douglas Rushkoff’s postmodern youth (who can quickly and swiftly adapt). This is because Pakistan and other third-world nations do not exist in advanced knowledge economies. The day-to-day realities of power surges, blackouts, coup d’états do not allow the victory of life as mediated through the modem. Third-world youth live in conditions of pre-agricultural, agricultural, industrial, modern, and postmodern. It is this authentic diversity of worldviews and commitments to these perspectives that makes Rushkoff’s hypothesis problematic. Far more resonating are the images of community/green/sustainability, as well as images of national success, wherein economic development is realized and poverty is escaped. Another image and alternative, mentioned earlier, has been joining the madrasses and recognizing Islam as the vehicle to create a purer world. India and other third-world nations are undergoing similar processes. While some take strict anti-West or anti-“other” definitions of their religious sensitivities (and are captured by movements of the right), others, following Ashis Nandy’s vision of a Gaia of civilizations, understand that no culture is complete in itself—all cultures exist in fields that make up humanity.22 When constructive alternatives are not possible, then the result is violence, either against the self, or, as in Pakistan in the last generation, against the other sect of Islam (for example, Sunnis attack Shia and visa versa, and all attack Ahmedis).

YOUTH FUTURES AROUND THE WORLD

What then can we say about youth futures around the world? First, there are clear differences among the futures youth practice around the world. This is partly because of the structures of history. The future is created by three factors. The first is the push of the future—technology (the net, genomics) and demographics (the aging population living in the West and the global teenager living in the third world), for example. The second is deep structures that are difficult, nearly impossible, to change—
feudalism in Pakistan, tribalism in Africa, Confucianism in East Asia, imperialism and colonialism in the OECD, and patriarchy in various forms throughout the world. Third is the image of the future. This is the pull of the future, the vision that transforms. It transforms either because it creates a new pattern of ideas that aids in human social evolution (Sarkar’s Microvita, Sheldrake’s morphogenetic fields) or it is a point of coherence for practical actions.

In the non-West third world, traditions are stronger: Islam and Confucianism (which cohere) as well as feudalism and patriarchy (which create strong hierarchies). In OECD nations, the problems are associated with a loss of meaning, a loss of a clear vision of the future—except in the banal forms of consumption—the problem of hyper-wealth for a few, a middle class for most (with a strong underclass of others including youth), and the ecological problematique. We see this in the underlying imperialistic nature of the West, for example, in its lack of institutional capacity to apologize to Aboriginals in Australia.

The trends affecting youth are also different. Technological transformations are far more prevalent in the West, as is the aging of society. In the third world, the trend is for huge numbers of teenagers moving to the city to escape the tyranny of community and poverty in the village (while in the West, there is movement away from the tyranny of individuality in the city and a desperate search for community).

The differences are also explained by different expectations. In the third-world context, the expectation is to continue the family tradition, to earn income to support the family. In the West, independence and carving out a life autonomously are far more important.

In both cases, youth are pressured to either conform to structures not of their making or rebel against them. This must be placed in the context of changing hormonal patterns and an idealism to create a better world.

Thus, generally the manner in which youth express their concerns is based on the social and cultural conditions they find themselves in. Australian youth rebel through the green movement and the “dope and dole” culture (drugs and government handouts). Malaysian youth rebel via rock and roll (Western music and clothes) and a return to Islam (challenging state secularism and Westernization). Chinese youth rebel through the symbols of Western democracy, spiritual practices, and the Internet. German youth rebel via the green anti-nuke movement and as well through the neo-nazi movement.

This leads back to the movie, _Dick_. Youth, of course, are the future, more so in the West as they become a scarce demographic commodity (with an aging population, there will be less of them).

Youth revolutions and rebellions have an instrumental in challenging strong state structures, most recently in Belgrade and in Israel/Palestine with the intifada. Now, throughout the world they challenge globalization and the more extreme forms of corporate capitalism.
These movements emerged in the 1960s and have evolved in various forms (green movement, nongovernmental movements, spiritual movements, ethical business movements). They continue to hold an important antisystemic view of transforming the capitalism system. This is not a surprise, as they are part of the West’s alter-ego.

The non-West is, of course, mirroring the West. While the official discourse is religion, the unofficial is escape from religion and the chase for all things Western (T-shirts, cigarettes, and rock music). However, if the wealthier East Asian nations are a sign of the future, then a shift to a communicative-inclusive or partnership future is a possibility, since these nation’s youth are already tiring of endless development.

Youth are one element of the creation of a different future. What role they will play in either solidifying global capitalism (muddling through) and creating the Artificial Society or in helping transform the world to a communicative-inclusive future is not clear. Certainly they are playing dramatic roles in all these scenarios, from street protests against globalization to working with environmental and spiritual social movements. Through their actions and their visions they are creating a different future. Whether they do it through dance or music, student rebellion, or the latest Web site, they should not be ignored. The periphery, after all, was once the center. And if this generation of youth age, normalize, and naturalize themselves in the prevailing paradigm—muddling through—there is always the next generation to come.

NOTES

4. The UNDP annual report tells us that in 1999 the combined wealth of the world’s 200 richest individuals hit 1 trillion US$ while the combined incomes of the 582 million people living in the forty-three least developed countries was 146 billion US$; Jeff Gates, *Democracy at Risk: Rescuing Main Street from Wall Street—A Populist Vision for the 21st Century* (Boulder, CO: Perseus Books, 2000). He writes that in the United States, the financial wealth of the top 1 percent of households exceeds the combined wealth of the bottom 95 percent.


10. The unemployment figures for youth are generally hovering around the forty to fifty percent mark throughout the world, worse in poorer nations. In most areas, minority groups are hit the hardest. See: www.jobsletter.org.nz.


15. These include visioning workshops in Thailand, Malaysia, New Zealand, Australia, Germany, Austria, Taiwan, Pakistan, Yugoslavia and the United States. Workshop reports available from <s.inayatullah@qut.edu.au> See, for example, Samar Ihsan, Sohail Inayatullah, and Levi Obijiofor, “The Futures of Communication,” *Futures* 27, 8 (October 1995): 897–904.


19. For the methodology behind this, see “Layered Methodology,” Sohail Inayatullah, ed., *Futures* special issue (2002).


21. Pakistan has 1.5 million heroin addicts of a population of 150 million. Karachi alone has 600,000 addicts. http://www.unfoundation.org/unwire/archives/UNWIRE000421.cfm#17

