

FROM CRITICAL TO TRANSFORMATIVE FUTURES: My Journey in Futures Studies

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Raised in Lahore and Islamabad, Pakistan; Bloomington, Indiana; Flushing, New York; Geneva, Switzerland; Honolulu, Hawaii, and now Mooloolaba, Australia, my vision of the future is, as one might expect, committed to cultural diversity and civilisational transformation in the context of the creation of a planetary society.

Village pasts

At the same time I am not particularly romantic about life in the past, about tradition uncritically offered as the solution to the hyper-futurism of modernity and postmodernity. True, one of my most precious memories remains falling asleep on the rooftop of our mud brick home in a Punjabi village and waking up, with the entire community, at sunrise. The intimacy of the night stars, the morning smell of fried *paratas* and the sound of the call to prayer, the *azhan* are cellular memories.

But I did not do the cooking nor gather the cow dung fuel. The gendered base of work, the hardships of those without land, the oppressive climate of mullah contoured religion are limitations to freedom that I did not have to experience, unlike my many relatives, who remain in rural history. For them, as they have told me the future is about retaining community but with luxury. The price of individual freedom should not be the commercialization of the village; it should not be about the loss of values such as trust, honesty, and the most important one - taking care of others. The future is also about increased access to power and justice: to not be at the mercy of rapacious landlords, corrupt politicians and lewd mullahs. Modernizing along Western lines is not a desired future for them or for me. The challenge remains how to retain traditional values centered on spirituality and ecology and become connected with others throughout the planet, and doing so in the context of increasing inner and outer wealth.

Finding a metaphor

Clearly sustainability is not the appropriate metaphor since there is much of tradition to be transformed. For me, it is the spiral, recovering history but moving into uncharted culturally invented futures that is more attractive. The spiral includes the pattern of the cycle - of the rise and fall of power - and the idea of progress, of increased inclusiveness of others and of new physical and social technologies that can reduce misery. The spiral assumes that the future is created by endogenous factors, by a dialectic. Whether this is the Chinese yin-yang or the Indian *vidya/avidya* or the Western good/evil matters not. What matters is that the future cannot be understood merely by reference to technological forces. It cannot be envisioned as such, or even planned for.

Our efforts to plan, to socially engineer a future for ourselves, or for others, the complex nature of the future comes back to sting us, reminding us that a strategic orientation will fail. Planning assumes a

world of rational and intellectual egoist individuals. It forgets that who we are is far more profound than intellect. The intellect is nested in intuition which is nested in deeper layers of mind and consciousness, the deepest of which cease to be contained by our own self but rather become liminal, where many selves intersect. Ultimately the boundaries of self disappear, allowing for a collective consciousness, a universal mind engulfed in a cosmic consciousness. Given this ecology of mind – a dance of multiple selves - it would be quite stunning if national social engineering or if technocratic forecasting was successful. This is more than an appeal for the inclusion of luck into our forecasting efforts. It is also an appreciation of the uncontrollable and the mysterious.

This is not to say we should not plan nor forecast the future. Clearly these are necessary functions for getting around in the world. However, it is to argue that our thinking of the future is often limited by narrow rationality, by intellect-led strategy. We assume universalities even as we speak from our narrow traditions. In this sense, the post-structural sensibility of deconstruction, of challenging our own knowledge base, our own assumptions must be a central starting point for our studies of the future. To say something meaningful about the future, we first need to unpack how we mythologize the future, how stories live us. We need to lay bare the tools in which we speak of the future.

Thus the importance of speaking our personal histories. By exposing our value positions, we allow a visioning and a forecasting that is naked and thus even as we explode from post-modern relativities, the possibility of an authenticity is created, at the very least, we are epistemologically clean. This said, let us return to the personal story.

Diversity

As a Pakistani boy growing up in many places, and experiencing all sorts of racism, I learned that learning the language of “the other” is central, both in terms of the words one uses and the outer signs (such as playing basketball and soccer). While this survival strategy was personally successful, for others, whether from Rwanda or Bosnia, it has been tragic. The future for them might be less enchanted with diversity and more with security: ethnic, national and economic.

Still I find myself in a cross-cultural marriage with a little boy and girl, who are part Punjabi, Serbian, Slovenian and Russian. Of the languages they are learning, and will learn, I will only be able to understand a few. Now in 2013, this has turned out to be the case. As they are now teenagers: Dutch, Spanish, Catalan and Serbian, are all foreign to me. In the longer term, I am sure that they will continue to translate to me the fantastic worlds that our spiritual, cultural and physical technologies will create in the years ahead. I do hope they too will be able to have children the old-fashioned way. Genetic advancements and its ultimate control by the State will probably mean that their children will grow up in far safer and more culturally sanitized surroundings than my parents grew up in. Thus while my parents were born in the 1930's in little mud brick rooms in a village, my children's children will be born with genetic doctors intimately involved in every phase of procreation. While I do not fear this future – the Nanny State, I do not necessarily welcome it either.

It is diversity - a world populated with individuals such as him and her that becomes an inviting place. But as important as a cross-cultural collage is the need to find authenticity, especially as we geneticize ourselves and create carbon copies of today's most beautiful models. Creating authentic futures does not mean destroying genetic labs but it does mean that the grand project of one science, of one way of knowing must be undone. Differences become violent when they are systematically and historically suppressed, when individuals and communities are not allowed their voices. Once found, I can well imagine a world as a flower garden or a planetary tree with many civilisational branches (and some bionic, some virtual, some perhaps alien, and some angelic, or spiritual). However, until we begin to find and celebrate or ecologically and culturally diversity, I fear the future will be increasingly violent.

Beyond the cultural framed through travel and interactions with the other, my work in futures has also

been influenced by spiritual ways of knowing; from my muslim/sufi mother but also from Indian tantra, particularly the words and life of activist P.R. Sarkar. This interest led to my active involvement in numerous NGO's committed to a global *ohana*, as the Hawaiians would say, or a pluralistic Ummah, as muslims write.

Professional work

My professional work has consisted of first working for the Hawaii Judiciary, where I coordinated the futures research program. Along with colleagues, Anna Wilson-Yue and Phil McNally, we undertook both conventional trend research but also longer range emerging issues analysis of issues such as the rights of robotics, genetic futures, brain drugs in prison, community mediation, and Hawaiian sovereignty. These issues forced us to begin to deconstruct the basis of modernity (particularly modern Hawaii), asking what is natural, what is created, what can be transformed by individuals, what needs structural design change, and what requires the deeper epistemic transformation. The Judiciary funded us, not because of our interest in transformation, but because our forecasts provided justification for gaining new judgeships. When we finally held a system-wide conference that integrated visions with trends with strategies for transformation, the Chief Justice was stunned at the applicability of futures. Adopted mostly as a way to represent to others that the future as technological efficiency had arrived, once concrete recommendations for transformation had been articulated, many were surprised at the day to day utility of the long term. In any case, the futures program was closed once futures moved from technical or idiosyncratic visionary uses to its transformative nature. It is not that we were ignorant of bureaucratic politics, but that leadership ultimately lacked courage. Moreover, returning to our earlier theme that the future is created by other than rational forces, the linear rhetoric being created by these words should not confuse my belief that destiny operates in our lives.

Macrohistory and Tantra

From the politics of forecasting in the Justice system, I managed to undo the jaws of bureaucracy by returning to my interest a decade earlier and finishing a Ph.D. in political science investigating the macrohistory and Tantric philosophy of P.R. Sarkar. In my deconstruction of Sarkar (asking what the civilisational frame of his Tantra was) I moved into grand theory. The final chapters were inquiries into how exemplary thinkers from Sinic, Islamic and Western thinkers constructed space and time, concluding with an analysis of the nature of social laws. This interest has led to a series of authored and edited books on Sarkar and on macrohistory.

In addition to splendid guidance by my father and Jim Dator, other profound influences came from Johan Galtung, who gave me the broad civilisational approaches to the future, as well as the need to focus the future on the particular, peace studies for him. Michael Shapiro gave me a theoretical frame for alternative futures, seeing each future as a discourse, as a language, as a way of constituting the real. Futures for me then has been an overall framework.

And although I am committed to the process nature of the field, particularly how visioning workshops can help deconstruct the present and create alternative desired futures, without clear value and theoretical commitments, futures is much too fuzzy for me. Sarkar's political movement, PROUT as well as my childhood Muslim influence, has been the anchor of my futures studies. There are particular futures I would like to see come about. In my work I do not hide from these political commitments. Indeed, I believe they enrich the general paradigm of futures that inform me.

Methods in futures

After finishing in Hawaii, through meetings with Tony Stevenson, first in Dubrovnik and later in Turku, Finland, I moved to Australia. Australia has served as a base for teaching futures courses and workshops throughout the world. Through these workshops – in Thailand, the Philippines, Taiwan and New Zealand

– I have attempted to refine methods such as backcasting and causal layered analysis. Backcasting assumes that the desired future has already occurred and the task now is to merely imagine what had happened to create it. This allows for more creativity and honesty breaking the framework of neo-realism.

Causal layered analysis develops a depth dimension to the horizontal approach of scenarios. Focused on going from the litany (or the popular fear-based representations of the future), to the level of policy analysis (the think-tank trends dimension) to that of worldviews (of religion, economic systems, of the grander paradigms), it concludes with an examination of the myths and metaphors that support current social and personal structures. By moving up and down layers, the hope is to see how solutions are derived from particularly problem framing and that each solution frame leads to different levels of how we will solve the problem. I find that this method takes futures studies out of the banal and moves it to social inquiry. But this is not to say there is no instrumental gain. A forecast or vision that comes out of such a method is enriched by other levels and layers. By being multi-dimensional, it has a greater efficacious value. Causal layered analysis can be applied not just to external issues but as well used to unpack the futures of our multi-selves, helping individuals transform their life narratives and ensure that their new life story is linked to behavioral shifts.

Future generations

The greatest influence on how I imagine the future now comes from the day-to-day; from nappie changes to playing with my children. These moments become the future. This concern has led me to greater appreciate the idea of future generations; that the future must be grounded in the metaphor of family; that we are all a caravan of families striving towards a destination, toward a better future. Even as we examine the many paradigms that make up this journey, we need to retain our sight that we are a family, that we must be every more inclusive. Seeing the terrible costs of exclusivity, whether in my own national history from south Asia, or from my wife's in the former Yugoslavia, is enough to convince me that evil does exist in our world today. And while it might never disappear from our minds and actions, we can certainly minimize it. Perfect societies can only exist if "the other" is eliminated. Thus it is not perfection - or the linear march of history or its end, its *endzustand* - that I yearn for, but a good society with contradictions. I believe we can and will create a much better society in the short-term future. It will be global, economically dynamic, ecological sensitive, gender cooperative, and inspiringly spiritual.

Thus to the question: Is there a future for those like us? I believe so but obviously not in the present, in a world dominated by predatory capitalism, ravenous nation-states, and insidious mono-culturalism. Not in post-modernity either as it merely reacts to the current crisis without offering what has been called the "True Worlds" - a planetary civilisation.

Making it real

My work in the past decade, as my children have grown up, becoming young adults, has not only been ensuring a better world for future generations by being a good father and husband, but taking the ideas of futures studies and Sarkar's PROUT that I studied in the 1980s and 1990s and – as much as possible – making them real.

This has meant translating sophisticated theoretical schemes into language that can be understood by those new to English, as with my students at Tamkang University, Taiwan as well as to the senior executives I teach at Mt Eliza Executive Education, Melbourne Business School and the dozens of foresight courses I run with colleagues throughout the Asia-Pacific region. My teachers in this part of my journey have been scholar practitioners/leaders like Kuo-hua Chen, Tan Sri Dzul, Dato Yusuf, Clement Chang, Peter Black, Nikki Ellis, Jan Archer, Jan Lee Martin, and many others.

The challenge has been not only translating the work but ensuring that those with whom I am working with “own” the work, that we use categories that make sense to them. Indeed, that they construct their own categories of the future by questioning business-as-usual and used futures. This has meant leaving the “ivory tower” of research to the fields of “planting seeds” and nurturing “young trees” of global and local foresight projects. This has been a rewarding task, watching foresight take off at the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, the International Pearls in Policing Program and throughout Malaysian universities (in Penang, Melaka and with the Higher Education Ministry), for example. Working on Rockefeller Foundation projects to bring pro-poor foresight programs in Bangladesh and elsewhere in Asia has too been exciting. And being part of foresight courses in my original home of Pakistan has been rewarding as well. I have enjoyed these projects as participants have appreciated moving away from the “expert” model of pedagogy to the “advisor” and facilitated model of learning. Participants articulate their alternative and preferred futures and unpack the worldviews and myths that underlie them. They work to challenge their old story and construct their new story. The methods and tools offered aid in the process. I help ensure that the workshop process is both rigorous and relevant.

I am hopeful these contributions can help shape better worlds for future generations. They certainly deepen my understandings of how we construct reality and how mythologies create “us.”