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# **THE FUTURES OF DEVELOPMENT**

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## **THE FUTURES OF CULTURES: PRESENT IMAGES, PAST VISIONS, AND FUTURE HOPES**

By: Sohail Inayatullah

### **PRESENT AND PAST**

Culture, like a running stream of water is ever changing, ever moving. This is not to say that it is one continuous motion. Rather, like almost everything else in this universe, it moves in cycles, it pulsates. There are times of rapid cultural change and there are times when the speed and the resultant shock of the future, force various pasts to return. This return for some is a desire for a permanent home, for others it is the hope of including some features of the past in the present, and finally for some it is a short pause in the stream's onward movement.

This tension between the present and the desire to recreate alternative pasts is a major unifying theme among the many development oriented social, political and economic discourses of today. In general, it is groups who have found that their choices have been narrowed by the onrush of modernity, of dominant hegemonic cultural forms, that yearn for the past. These groups are often those in the periphery, the third world; as well as, women, the poor, the elderly and ethnic cultures within the first world.

However, although sympathetic, I find attempts to recreate the past, reactionary, as the ancient polities and economies that individuals yearn for are no longer relevant, and, in fact, are incredibly romanticized. I am sympathetic because their, our, choices for the future have been robbed, because their values have been cannibalized by the dominant civilization and culture such that all that is left is the past. Hawaiians, for example, long for the days of their beloved Queen Liliokalani or their King Kalakaua. The image is of a time when hula was performed to the Gods of nature, where agriculture satisfied basic needs, and where all in all people were believed to be happy. It is a time before the forces of modernity created a division of labor, before natives lost their dignity and eroticism, and finally before they lost their lands.

But things did not always go so well in ancient cultures. As in the present world, then too there was hierarchy, poverty, disease, violence, and then too there were the rightless and the weak. Of course, the wielders of power were different. Instead of present day national and transnational capitalists (and intellectuals to legitimize their world) in previous eras they were the kings and warriors; that is, those who dominated others through force and the ideology of valor. Some in this world did very well, others not so well.

### **CONTINUED GROWTH**

This discourse between the vision of modernity and the vision of a calmer, quieter and more simple past has been elegantly captured in the alternative futures work of James Dator. For Dator, there are a variety of cultural, political and economic future images that present themselves to us. The dominant global vision is that of "Continued Growth"; the goal

is more goods and services and a better material life for all, especially the wealthy. In the US, the latest form has been trickle down theory, where the poor have been told that it does not matter if they lose their jobs, as corporate America must restructure itself so it can profitably compete in the world economy. That "modernity" has robbed these same unemployed of the cushions of the past, namely, the family, a local community, connection with nature, and a sense of the cosmos—is not relevant to the trickle down theorists. The blame of failure is laid on the individual, thus hiding the dark side of modernity, of capitalist development.

On the Pacific Rim front, the Continued Growth vision is ever present, but as Johan Galtung has written, a twist has occurred. Instead of America doing the growing, it is the Pacific Rim that is rapidly growing and changing. Thus, the global division of labor is now shifting in favor of the Rim region, particularly Japan, and creating the possibility of a new global culture (perhaps an Earth Inc. similar to Japan Inc.) within the context of capitalism a new formula for government/business, labor/capital, individual/collective, and religion/life. Yet the goal in this Pacific Shift, this Pacific Era, remain the same: the production of goods to satisfy the eternal hunger of the mind and heart.

But what will their culture be like once they are on the top of the world, once they see the rest of the world emulating the way they walk, the way they talk; once Chinese and Japanese females become the sexual fantasies of men all over the world (when the blond has become part of an old era, not bad, but not the real thing). Once (can we remember?) the dream was to walk the golden streets of London or New York—streets paved with gold, lined with opportunity and freedom: money and sex. How will the "Pacific Rim" react once Tokyo, Beijing or Singapore evoke dreams of gold? Will movements develop there that long for the good old days before the Japan and other assumed responsibility for the maintenance of the world system, before they believed it was their duty to educate the world as to the East Asia system? What will be the available visions of the future for those groups who no longer accept the vision, the legitimacy of the Pacific Century?

Most likely the emergent antithesis to this future will be structurally similar to the present attempts of Americans searching for their past, although the content may be vastly different. Certainly, we can expect a rerun of militarism, fundamentalism, "back to nature" and a fear of technology. In addition, there will be a longing for a fixed past, one of discipline, hard work, and primary concern for the collective good, that is, to values that were believed to have been central in the economic and cultural rise of the Pacific Rim in the first place.

In the West, this desire for a predictable past has already emerged; it is still nascent in the East. Specifically, this vision evokes a time and space when the family was important, when there was a sense of community, before air travel took away one's friends who one had hoped to know forever (death of course has perennially destroyed that hope!) and before capital from the core nations destroyed local economies.

## **TRADITIONAL POWER STRUCTURES**

Of course, this image forgets the landlords. Pakistanis in their new cities, with their new wealth from the Middle-East, do not want to return to the village. They remember village culture very well. I, having spend most of my life in American, European and Asian cities, see village life differently, romantically. It is my 90 year old grandmother telling me about the love of Allah. It is she blessing me. It is fried bread in the morning, tea with milk in the evening, the sun gently setting, the stars rising, sleeping on the roof, and waking up together

in the early morning, and feeling quietly, gently, unified with all their other villagers, with the environment, with my people. And it is my cousins who still live there telling me: but you have luxury; you have sewage-free streets; you have air-conditioners; you have food in abundance; and you have travel, a life ripe with choices. It is also my father reminding me that when they grew up in the village, they had no doctors nor food. They did have a landlord who routinely would go into the fields and rape any female he wanted. The police, judge and local council were all in the landlord's pockets. This was the village culture that I knew little of; for me, the village was simply a symbol of the womb. For the rest, who have lived there village, life is something to leave behind, albeit hopefully without the loss of Allah and family.

Thus the tension between the present, the Continued Growth vision and the search for the past. Yet there is a possibility of a future that dialectically transcends the image of modernity and of the village past; it would have to be a dialectical development of those two cultural myths: the myth of continued growth, of technological progress, of travel, of choice—oral choice, in who one speaks to, who one kisses, what one eats—of a life with physical needs met. And the myth of a time when things were peaceful, when peripheries still had their own culture, their own categories of thought, before they were robbed in every way by the up and coming capitalists, when families still worked together and when God provided a certainty over the future. To me, both are incomplete stories, they both have their dark sides, neither one has been successful in creating a just world; neither the city nor village has sufficed.

## CREATING NEW CULTURES

So far we have looked at the vision of modernity and its various contradictions; exploitation of nature, workers, women, minority cultures, in general, the exploitation of the periphery within and without. We have also looked at its reactions: the search for a predictable past, with its dark side of fundamentalism and its light side of community and interconnectedness.

What then are the possibilities of a new future? It is not clear yet, but there are numerous movements and groups working to create just and authentic futures. These movements are not fixated in the past, nor are they solely concerned with capturing state power at the national level, rather they are primarily concerned with creating new discourses embedded in the values of ecological, spiritual and gender balance.

To become new stories, mythologies, these new movements must be able to deal with the desire for community and the need for personal choice and freedom of movement; with the desire for material goods and with the need to be connected to the infinite, an infinity that like the Zen moon is ever ancient and ever future utopian. The new mythologies must include the need to connect to nature and the need to be around the conveniences of modernity, the quick, the clean, and the efficient—bathrooms and computers! Moreover, these new visions of the future must also recognize the need to contribute to others and the need to be left alone, to not participate.

New visions of the future must empower without power becoming oppressive. And finally new visions must articulate their own dark side, must construct polities that incorporate their own contradictions, that is, they must develop structures to counter what cultural historian William Irwin Thompson calls enantiodromia, the tendency for institutions and structures to become their opposite, to become what they are fighting against. To do this, these movements need to be aware that oppression exists in every age, and that while intellectual