"GREAT ISSUES OF THE NEW CENTURY"

Prof. Sohail Inayatullah

Notes from HT 106, University of Queensland taught by Professor Tom Poole. February 14/17, 2000

INTRODUCTION TO FUTURES: My task is daunting - to map the last 3000 and the next 1000 years. Everyone has an unconscious map of the future, but my job is to make explicit the implicit (or reveal the 'deep code'). For years I have studied macro-history and macro-historians: the study of long-term trends in history. Now I work with the Foundation for the Future (Seattle), which also is thinking in terms of thousands of years. On a more modest level, I have just talked to general practitioners in Newcastle about what their profession will be like in the next 10-20 years, and what jobs will be available in medicine.

It's impossible to 'engineer' the future, or predict specific developments, but the *goals* of Futurists include: 1) revealing *broad trends*; 2) depicting *alternative Futures*, often using the technique of scenarios; and 3) to determine what are the *chief factors* creating the Future, or Futures. In this regard we consider *the pull of the future*, or the power of an image of the future to change our behaviour. We also probe *the push of the future* - those factors, such as technology, demographics, and globalisation, that are driving future developments. In addition, we have to give due consideration to *the weight of history and social structure* (wealth, race, class, caste, gender) which limits our alternatives. For instance, a Liberal might contend that if you work hard, you can achieve anything in life, even become Prime Minister of Australia, but a Feminist might raise the limiting factor of gender and question whether any woman could ever become Prime Minister. We also pose critical questions that often go unasked, such as 'who is writing the future' and 'what is missing in the future'.

Future paths are open, but they can also close quickly. We have to be alert to avoid taking the wrong path, remembering the old Confucian saying, 'It is here that you take a half step wrong and wake up a thousand miles away'. So . . . we tread warily. Attitude towards change are also important. If you are a pessimist (a cynic), your prophecy tends to be self-fulfilling, and if you are an optimist (a cheerleader type), your body even functions differently. Attitudes, in other words, can be determining factors in constructing personal futures.

DECOLONISATION OF TIME AND THE FUTURE: A crucial component of the future, of course, is time, but it resists easy analysis and means different things to different peoples. Time can be linear or cyclical, western or traditional, industrial or seasonal, fixed or relative. But there appears to be a strong trend away from the organic sense of time associated with a slow, lunar, agricultural society towards a faster, harder, more efficient and mechanical concept of time linked to urban, industrial and post-industrial society. New technologies, such as e-mail and mobile phones, have intruded on our available time and created ever more stressful lives, a result of '*The Speeding Up of Everything*'. We need to free ourselves from such control devices, and 'decolonise' time. But time can't be escaped. Time is implicit in everything we do. Time forms the structure of the future. *Time, in fact, creates us.* .

SCENARIOS OF THE FUTURE: Scenarios - stories or images of the future -can be very revealing. We absolutely need concepts of the future, as we can't create what we can't imagine. When asked, people often come up with variants of the same basic scenarios for the future. In the first place, there is the concept of an *Artificial Society*, one where genetics and nano-technology (molecular construction) dominate our lives, making it difficult to distinguish between the real and artificial. The question here is whether we can tame technology, or whether it will control us.   This scenario has been described as 'soft fascism' (Disneyland). A more comforting thought is a *Transformed Multicultural Society* which is inclusive, communal, organic and cooperative, firmly rejecting patrimony, dogmatism, materialism and individualism. But resistance to the above concept comes in the form of *Back to an Imaginary Past*, an exclusive social order which celebrates ethnicity and localism against 'Others'. Of course, there could be a *Huge Collapse*, the return of Mad Max, with human society crumbling in the face of nature's revenge.   And there are many other possible scenarios.

ALLEGORIES OF THE FUTURE: It's sometimes valuable to close your eyes and picture an allegory of the future. In the examples before you, the *Roller Coaster* can bring to mind the terrifying speed of change in the future, everything topsy-turvy, out of human control. The depiction of the *Tree*, however, suggests a very different world - simple, organic, cyclical, with relationships, not technology at the heart of life. As for the picture entitled *'Cosmic Evolution'*, here is a quick, linear, inorganic, exclusive concept of future society, one in which males (American?) and technology dominate, and there is little human interaction with 'Others'. Finally there is the picture of *Moon, Pilgrim, Sky*, in which the Shaman looks through the door of time. It's very soothing. As P.R. Sarkar has observed, "You are never alone or helpless. The force that guides the stars guides you."

METAPHORS OF THE FUTURE: Besides scenarios and allegories, metaphors can provide insight into our personal philosophies of life and help us understand questions that are more cosmic in nature, such as what is the most apt metaphor for the so-called 'Lucky Country' and what is an unconscious metaphor for the Future itself? Some common metaphors which help give insight into seeds of the future are: *dice* (the randomness of chance); *fork in the road* (the need to make rational choices); *ocean* (unbounded choice); *onion* (at the core of the layers of reality is nothing); *blind-folded passenger in a car* (helplessness); *snakes and ladders* (necessity to cheat to survive life's ups and downs); *spider web* (everything is interconnected); and a *curtain* (it ripples in the breeze and gives a glimpse of the future). There are endless numbers of metaphors that offer a deep analysis of collective archetypes and sacred myths.

SOME OF THE BIG ISSUES OF THE LONG-TERM FUTURE: Different futurists stress different issues that require deep analysis, but here are some of the key issues of the next 1000 years:

1) **Nature** (Evolution) **-** Instead of random selection, Humanity will be able to direct evolution along pre-determined paths, with the aid of genetics, and produce humans who enjoy greater intelligence and longevity than can be imagined at present. But critics fear that this bias towards 'perfectionism' will result in people or races with any unwanted imperfection being marginalised, or discarded - a new form of eugenics. A contrary approach is to attempt to unify the physical and spiritual through the healing properties of organic *'microvita'* (microscopic pockets of energy and ideas).

2) **Man** - The human species of the last 100,000 years may be transformed, through nano-technology and artificial intelligence, into a hybrid machine-man, or even into a different species altogether, beginning the post-human phase of history. (See the film *Bladerunner*).

3) **Reality** - Instead of being a given, reality is created. We make it to suit ourselves.   But where does the real end, and the virtual begin? In this vein, *Matrix* is more than entertainment, but a trenchant criticism of the world in waiting.

4) **Truth** - After the onslaught of post-modernists and others, the concept of 'truth' lies in tatters, de-constructed beyond repair. Are there any ways of knowing?

5) **Sovereignty** - Not only has national sovereignty suffered mighty blows through globalism, creating new power structures, but the sovereignty of the self has been undermined, with many of us having multiple identities, jobs, cultures, responsibilities . The 'Self' is no longer unitary.

LIKELY GLOBAL STRUCTURES OF THE FUTURE:

The unrelenting pressures of globalism are driving us together, raising the question of what kind of governance will be likely in the future. From a macro-historical perspective, there are four plausible structures. First, a *world empire* run by one nation or civilisation. Second, a *world church* where power resides in a single faith. Third, a *world economy* where the accumulation of capital and flow of wealth are far more important and politics is located in nation-states. Fourth, *self-reliant mini-cultural systems* may be possible, but only within the context of a world government. The third possibility is most likely, but nation-states are losing their grip, so in the mid-term the fourth possibility (world government with mini-cultural systems) may win out.