

FUTURES RESEARCH: A SECOND *LOOK* AND *YET* ANOTHER LOOK AGAIN
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I wish to take this opportunity to announce a conversion. I have been converted. Those of you who remember the old “Jim Dator” know that at earlier meetings of futurists--in Kyoto, in Washington, in Rome, in Honolulu--I used to criticize “futurists” for being so unfuturistic in their research methods, in the substantive concern of their work, and especially in their own personal lifestyles. Except for the fact that they used the word “future” so much in their speech and writing, I could never notice any significant difference between “futurists” and ordinary people according to the way they behaved, the things they studied, their images of the future, and even their techniques for apprehending the future. Futurists and non-futurists alike seemed to be much more concerned with the present than with the future. Both seemed to be overwhelmingly captivated with nightmares from the past rather than with images from the future. And I (very self-righteously I now see, as though I were how were free from the same limitations) I used to chastise futurists for the incredibly stodgy and present-oriented manner of their proceedings. “Why can’t the meetings of futurists be futuristic themselves,” I used to complain, “instead of such creaking remnants from the past? Our gatherings are about as futuristic as the assemblies of archeologists--or the proceedings of legislators.”

Well, may all of you present be my witnesses, I will never utter that complaint again. I am converted. I have been converted by the overwhelming weight and experience of the past eight days of the Third World Futures Research Conference.

First of all, there is this Assembly Hall, with its wooden benches firmly fixed forward, facing a heroic mural that has forced us to contemplate daily an image of the history of this place--from agrarian origins to industrial might--without the slightest hint that there might even be a future, much less that the future might be startlingly different from any of the past experiences figured on the walls.

No matter how we might have wished it to be otherwise, this

FUTURES RESEARCH: A SECOND *LOOK* AND *YET* ANOTHER LOOK AGAIN
amphitheatrical hall has encouraged us to carry on our proceedings as though we were apprentice medieval medical doctors viewing autopsies on the cadaver of the Future. Except for the polyglot tower of babble from the unsoundproofed translators to *our* right, and the creak and protest of resisting wood floors as we have tried to move about, we have sat in hushed silence, listening to each speaker instruct as on the pathologies of the past as projected into the future.

Apart from this hall, how remembrances of long-past battles, and illusions of present differences, have generally colored our actions and reactions here! So often, like feuding feudal warriors, we have tried cunningly to identify, then ensnare, and finally to demolish the enemy camp. Indeed, if we in any way have embodied in our presences here the world which is to come, then it is such an incredibly gloomy and humorless and self-righteous place--such an incredible projection into "then" of much that is inhuman 'now"--that I have no eagerness for it!

But I forget--I mean to show that I have been converted by my participation in these rites of passage here. Never again will I complain. I hereby affirm that futures research should proceed forever with the same conservative posture that it has shown both here and before. Our eyes must never be raised from the "realities of the present." Cautious, careful, thoroughly politic, never attempting anything new, never daring, never, never, challenging what is with what may be, we do well to aspire to become safe, respectable, organized, and established. No more the anxieties of imagination: we will have frozen the future in the mold of present forms. No more the idle dreams of hope and freedom: we will bind ourselves with enthusiasm to the conventions and programs of those in power now. This is only being realistic! Thus will we gain respectability. Thus will we gain recognition. Thus will we gain protection. And since this posture actually much better reflects the cautious-frightened spirit that lurks behind our futuristic facade, thus will we be more content with ourselves, and attractive to possible sources of funds.

So, Let it be. Let it be.

But, just because I have been converted from the errors of the future to the wisdom of the past does not mean that you all should be, so if there remain among you one or two who still, somehow, urge to turn their beings towards the future, then I pass along to you these fragmentary

notes of what I used to feel should be the components of any futuristic activity, knowing that any particular individual or any specific program in futures research might emphasize one and de-emphasize another. But it used to be my contention--before my conversion--that every individual futurist and every futures research group should try to embody all four of these components into their being and into their work. Note, however, that I have not listed them in any particular order. Number one is not more or less important than number four. Nor am I suggesting that they are listed in temporal order. Number one need not occur before number three. All should be integral parts of our aiglatson--our yearning for the future.

1. Research. Each individual involved in futuristics, and each futures research organization, should be actively and creatively engaged in futures research: in developing and expanding our abilities to forecast and design alternative futures. While some individuals may be able to content themselves with engaging in idiosyncratic and intuitive feeling about the future, I would think it much preferable for each futurist to be positively engaged in furthering the techniques, methods, and theories upon which we can base a science of the future. For this, plainly, intuition is not enough. Yet, equally plainly, our current techniques of forecasting are inadequate too. Thus it is imperative that each individual try to develop sufficient facility in scientific theory-building so that the necessary hard-science component of futures research can be more firmly established, and that the exclusively impressionistic and non-productive element of what often passes for futures research now can find a congenial location somewhere else.

At the same time, while we are presently doing rather good research into the theory and techniques of forecasting the future, we have paid inadequate attention to the methods necessary for designing the future. In large-scale social system design, the empirical techniques and theories of the social sciences and the design methods of architecture and engineering must somehow be combined with the rare human talent of extraordinary creativity and imagination. There is an enormous amount of research needed to develop the design aspect of futures- research, and it is very much tied into the other components of a well-rounded futures research enterprise which I list below, especially to component three, citizen participation.

FUTURES RESEARCH: A SECOND *LOOK* AND *YET* ANOTHER LOOK AGAIN

The very idea that humans could--much less should--try radically to modify their societies is really quite new in the overall human experience. Indeed, in many societies and for many humans still, the idea of purposely directing the social system is viewed a subversive or inhuman. In America, there is a popular slogan which expresses the idea that citizens must emotionally embrace the extant social system and not try consciously to alter it: "America, love it or leave it."

These are not sentiments unique to America. They are, I believe, widespread throughout all societies--even socialist ones--and are remnants of the tremendously long human experience of social impotence. For most of human history, since any given social system was so fragile, and since no one really understood why the system operated at all, a conservative posture, defensive of the fragile *status quo*, probably had some merit.

But now, modern social science is helping us better to understand the pragmatic, adaptive function of human institutions and values, and forecasting techniques are helping us see that we can no longer plunge blindly into the future. What remains to be demonstrated is whether or not we can devise techniques of large-scale social system design which will enable us to invent individually-freer, more humanly-livable, and more ecologically-sound societies than any we have now or have known before.

It is research aimed at developing democratic techniques for social system design that I believe is the major immediate challenge to the research portion of futuristics. There is every indication that we will fail to meet this challenge--as this Third World Futures Research Conference itself has shown: the social conventions and political structures of the 18th Century, and the political ideologies of the 19th Century, tend to prevail over imaginative concern with the 21st Century- -or even with the remaining decades of the 20th Century, it seems to me.

2. Teaching. The second major component of any futures research activity, I believe, should be teaching. The "future" should become an area of formal academic concern at least as important as courses devoted to the present or the past.

If university departments of "History" or "Archeology" or "Sociology" have their places--and I suppose they do--then so also does a Department of Futures Studies. Moreover, if the School of Medicine, for

FUTURES RESEARCH: A SECOND *LOOK* AND *YET* ANOTHER LOOK AGAIN
example, teaches a course on “The History of Medicine,” as I suppose it should and does, then so also should the School of Medicine (or Engineering, or Law, or anything else) offer courses on “Alternative Futures for Medicine” (or Engineering, or Law, or anything else).

If there is any justification for teaching the past--and there are many justifications--there are even more for teaching the future, and the justifications for each are amazingly similar: for instance, if an image of what you have been influences your present actions, even more so does your image of what you may become. It is at least as important to clarify your images of the future as it is to clarify your images of the past, and one function of the academic study of the future is to clarify these images, I believe.

But I also think that our teaching of the future should be as “futuristic” as its subject matter. Dull teaching can render boring the most exciting topics. In the United States, for example, there has been a great furor over teaching sex education in the public schools. Some critics feel that such classes will encourage greater sexual promiscuity among teenagers. Perceptive supporters of the program, however, have tried to calm these critics by pointing out that our public school teachers can make anything boring, even sex, so our teenagers can be expected to become less interested in sex, as a consequence of their study, rather than more. If our teachers can make sex uninteresting, imagine what they can do to the future! Indeed, I have heard some people say that the Third World Futures Research Conference has already made the future an irredeemably boring place, but I am only repeating hearsay, not expressing my own opinion

Nonetheless, I would hope that courses in futuristics would try to be as experimental as possible in instructional techniques. Beyond that, I would hope that instruction in futuristics would not be confined to the classroom or to the ordinary structures of academia. Television and other media, advertising campaigns, street rallies, festivals and fairs--in short, wherever people are being reached, there should “instruction” in futuristics occur.

At the same time, in my opinion, great care should be taken to avoid teaching a narrow, dogmatic view of the future. Much “official” interest in the future, unfortunately, may be to enable currently-advantaged classes,

ethnic groups, or persons to retain or even expand their area of control. I have no interest in encouraging this brand of futuristics₁, and personally do what I can to prevent it. To the contrary, instruction in futuristics should emphasize the openness of the future--the future as a place of personal concern and action, not as a place to which the individual must learn to “adjust”. Citizens should be encouraged to act creatively in designing and achieving the future as they wish it to be. This should be the instructional goal of futures research. But this statement leads me to the third component that I think should be present in all futures research.

3. Citizen Participation. While “experts” are most certainly necessary in futures research--as they are in any area of human life--greatest care should be taken to assure that experts, who even with the best of intentions can only see what they can see, do not design a future to their own narrow liking only.

This, of course, would be nothing new. Elites typically try to manipulate societies for their own advantages, and as futures research becomes “respectable,” we can expect dominant elites to wish to coopt it for their own purposes. This is why futurists interested in genuine popular control over the future should include massive attempts to achieve true citizen participation in their work from the very beginning. In my opinion, too many futures research efforts have already neglected this component, either purposely or unconsciously. In fact, while some “futurists” appear to the public to be little more than quasi-religious astrological freaks, most--at least many of the ones who show up at futures research conferences--seem to be bureaucratic powerbrokers who apparently want to gain control over the future before “the enemy” does.

There is a pretty “chicken and egg” problem here, however, which confounds even the most sincere advocate of citizen participation in the forecasting and design of alternative futures. Since the average person has seldom been encouraged to think of the future as a place of reasonable concern to guide his daily actions, most ordinary persons have what I call “dwarfed” images of the future--incomplete, partial, clouded, and unreal. Hence the necessity of education in futuristics as a vital component of the total futures research enterprise. But can you educate without indoctrinating? Can you “unlock” images of the future without emplanting your own visions there? A fine dilemma!

I believe that a person's images of the future are mainly the consequence of what he has been taught to expect in the future in interaction with what he has actually experienced over time as his own "futures" have become the present and then the past. If this is the case, then the futures envisioned by most people will be but modified images of the past, which are at best "impoverished", and at worst even more dismal than their own actual experiences or remembrances.

Hence, when people are first "turned on" to the future, we can expect to find "unreal" reactions. Generally, this will be either a feeling that the future can (more or less) become utopian (perfect) or, more typically, a revulsion and fear--a true "reaction" from dystopia and an attempt to retreat to an imagined idyllic past.

Perhaps in saying this I am only displaying my own prejudices and inadequacies. I freely admit this possibility. In fact, I acknowledged it as the primary dilemma in the "citizen participation" component. But I do believe that futures research should incorporate ordinary people with their dreams, hopes, and fears into its daily work, and try honestly to deal realistically--but neither patronizingly or manipulatively--with them.

4. Present Relevance. The primary function of futures research is to forecast and design alternative futures so that individuals and societies can guide their present activities and achieve their desired futures. That is to say, futures research should be made relevant to present concerns.

This does not mean that futures research must be concerned with current problems in the way they are currently defined and conceived. In fact, this is one temptation which futures research should seek to avoid. Currently, the structure and operation of political structures often forces decision-makers to seek solutions today to yesterday's problems with day-before-yesterday's ideas and technologies. If futures research seeks only to be "relevant" in these terms, it will actually be irrelevant to the more pressing issues of the present, and unable to discover truly effective and innovative solutions to the issues of the moment when those solutions lie in newly-developing or diffusing technologies or ideas (For example, the "biological revolution" is now entering public--and official--consciousness as a frightening "problem," but it is seldom seen as a possible solution to the "population problem." At the same time, current "solutions" to the population problem are almost all quite old and

FUTURES RESEARCH: A SECOND *LOOK* AND *YET* ANOTHER LOOK AGAIN
probably futile).

Thus, being relevant means something else in this context. It means:

- 1) Finding solutions from the future (rather than from the past) to our problems of the present.
- 2) Identifying impending problems with enough lead time so that solutions can be sought and mere “crisis-management” cease being our dominant decision-making mode.
- 3) Finding ways to convey the sense of the future to decision-makers and the general public so that they will not “freak out” on either utopian or dystopian images of the future.

Futures research can seek also to be relevant to more than these broad concerns of society, it seems to me. The future should be relevant to the futurist personally, I believe. The future, with its challenges to the ways of the present and the past should challenge the lifestyles and ideas of the individual futurist as well.

It is this aspect of futures research that I have found so lacking in our meetings here and elsewhere. Most futurists seem to be about as excited about the future as a prostitute is about sex or a jaded priest about religion.

I guess the conversion that I announced at the beginning of the paper hasn't “stuck” after all. I guess I really do have aiglatson rather than nostalgia, and I really do believe it should be a mark of all future researchers.

But I have learned at least one thing in my eight days here: what it means to be “futuristic” in one's own life varies from individual to individual, and maybe many of the people I accused of being “unfuturistic” in their lives and thoughts actually were being very futuristic for their own personalities and social situation. Futuristics is relative, and none of us need think he has a hot line to the future.

I want to close by offering my deepest and most sincere thanks to Professor Pavel Apostol and the Romanian Organizing Committee. I would

FUTURES RESEARCH: A SECOND *LOOK* AND *YET* ANOTHER LOOK AGAIN
also especially like to thank the citizens of Bucharest--the professors, the technicians (especially Mr. Alex Redes and his group), to the translators, to the ordinary people I have met. You have given me a very pleasant present, and I know I will have a most fondly remembered past. I hope that all of you will continue to create for yourselves a bright and open future.

(*) Delivered before the final plenary session of the Third World Futures Research Conference, Bucharest, Romania, September 9, 1972.