

BEARING WITNESS TO THE FUTURE

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I came to futures studies in the mid-1970s, by which time most pioneering first-generation futurists, the ones who founded the discipline as we know it today, had done their major work. I had been working for more than a decade with a small group of gifted researchers in politics at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. I was already exposed to work going on in the broad area of alternatives and feeling cramped by the well-honed professional identities offered by the two disciplines in which I was trained: clinical psychology and sociology. In the mid-1970s, also, came the Emergency, when civil rights were suspended in India by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and the Centre quickly became a hub of dissenting intellectuals, journalists and civil rights activists. That experience made me doubly sceptical about received, state-sponsored wisdom in the matters of public life and, like many others similarly troubled, I began looking for other ways of assaying mainstream politics and public consciousness.

Participation in creating futures

The person who virtually pushed me into futures studies was Rajni Kothari. My work in the area still reflects his influence. Both of us see in futures studies a chance to deepen and enrich democratic principles. We believe that ordinary citizens have been given political rights mechanically, even in open societies. They are neither allowed to participate in defining the goals of a society nor are their visions of desirable societies taken seriously by the ruling elite, except as a part of electoral calculations. Both of us believe that futures studies is a means of criticism of the dominant social consciousness and institutional structures. By silencing other people's visions, you ensure the hegemony of yours and can sell, even to some of the oldest civilizations of the world, your culturally limited social and political ideals as some of the immutable of our times. By avoiding thinking about the future you hand over the future, as a prisoner, to the presently dominant political economy and to unthinking, docile professionals and academic bureaucrats. Futures studies seek to subvert such status quo. They help to keep options open in an institutionally closed world where the 'rational' ends of all human societies seem given once and for all.

Over the years, I have become aware that futures studies span a wide range, from

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technically sophisticated trend analyses and statistical projections to highly qualitative constructions of possible scenarios of the future, from the local to the global, and from techno-institutional to the cultural-psychological. And some of these types have nothing in common with each other; they cannot be even made to converse.

For me, futures studies are basically a game of dissenting visions. They are an attempt to widen human choices, by reconceptualizing political, social and cultural ends; by identifying emerging or previously ignored social pathologies that have to be understood, contained or transcended; by linking up the fates of different polities and societies through envisioning their common fears and hopes. That is why some of us are always tempted to classify as futurists writers and thinkers whom others, fearful of jeopardizing their scientific status, will not dream of calling futurists. Personally, I suspect that all sensitive persons have a touch of the futurist in them, although most would not own up to that and a few would positively disown such 'utopianism'. Rabindranath Tagore and Leo Tolstoy, according to me, were futurists; so was William Blake.

Explorations of the future as dissent

Explorations in the future, I also passionately believe, have to be specifically statements of dissent from the existing ideas of normality, sanity and objectivity. As in the case of the visions of the great 'seers' of the past, such explorations have to flout, or at least stretch, the canons of conventionality to be worthwhile. It is for other disciplines to tease out the practical, applicable elements in such visions. Perspective planning in economics or technological forecasting in engineering are not futures studies, although they may be useful to futurists. Such disciplines might even take over where futures studies end.

My mention of seers is not accidental, though it might not be exactly the right expression. I believe that futurists at their best are collectively a prophetic voice. As the space for individual prophetic voices diminishes in modern societies, the futurists as a collectivity remain one of the few purveyors of visions that combine the critical, the transcultural and the normative. Futurists change the future by talking about the future in the present. That is why the most interesting futurists of our times, I sometimes suspect, are not the famous technicians like Herman Kahn, or even gifted technological visionaries like Buckminster Fuller, but those trying to bend the existing patterns of human subjectivity by confronting human potentialities. They may do so by entering the domain of the future directly, like Richard Falk, Johan Galtung and Jim Dator have done; they may do so by re-entering the past through the future in the style of Ali Mazrui, Ziauddin Sardar, Barbara Duden, Frederique and Stephen Marglin; or they may indirectly enter the future through the present in the fashion of Gustavo Esteva, Vandana Shiva, Claude Alvares, Shiv Visvanathan and Edward Goldsmith. The examples I give are random, but they illustrate my argument that the future is mainly a state of awareness. Hence, also, probably the unpredictability of futures studies. Sometimes they can be highly challenging, sometimes tame. Sometimes they can move thousands; sometimes none. But they are always radically provocative. As if the futurists were aware that their failures were cushioned, that the most successful futurists were the ones who failed in their predictions. Futurists change the future by changing human consciousness and, thus, the actualized future. Their very ability, to envision the future on behalf of the rest of us, sabotages their predictions. They succeed by failing. It is that kind of company that I have found exciting in my life as a futurist.

My work on the future can be read as a political preface to the inevitable process of democratization, linking up with the language and categories of those who constitute a majority of the world. However, I am also aware that this could be a severe threat to those who want to be the voice of the voiceless and the intellectual spokespersons for the oppressed of the world. For we live in a world where the obvious has to be justified in ornate, almost baroque language of scientized social analysis or packaged in the esoteric textual analyses to be legitimate to the intellectual community. I suspect that the main reason for this is the subtle but exceedingly well organized efforts that go on in the metropolitan centres of knowledge to locate not merely the capitals of the global political economy in the West but also the capitals of dissent in the fashionable universities, think tanks and other intellectual centres of the First World. No hegemony is complete unless the predictability of dissent is ensured, and that cannot be done unless powerful criteria are set up to decide what is authentic, sane, rational dissent and, then, these criteria are systematically institutionalized through the university system. This is the process that we are witnessing in the burgeoning intellectual fashion industry, inundated these days with such powerful brand names as post-modernism, post-coloniality and post-structuralism.

Plurality

The challenge of futures studies, thus, is to keep open the option of a plurality of dissent, too, partly by articulating it in a language that will not be fully comprehensible on the other side of the global fence of academic respectability.

To the growth of my sensitivity to this idea of plurality and multivocality of dissent, some of my friends have contributed handsomely. It was Eleonora Masini's generosity and breadth of vision which exposed me to some of the most exciting thinkers in futures studies, who have consistently tried to shift the locus of scholarly interest to the peripheries of the world where, to use my favourite expression borrowed from Fiodor Dostoevsky, the subjects of anthropology, as opposed to the anthropologists, live.

The confidence I gained from thinkers and activists from Latin America, Africa, East Europe and Asia, who had bypassed the standard academic concerns of the standard universities of the First World, gave me the feeling that, while I might be technically in a dissenting minority among dissenters, it was, however, a dissent more congruent with the dignity and cultural survival of the victims of the present global system. I was to remain ever grateful for that sense of fraternity without which intellectual work cannot be anything but professionalized technicism.

This exposure also gradually convinced me that categories and systems of knowledge underwrote dominance more successfully than naked political and economic power, that the game of categories ensured that dissent remained not only tamed and manageable but became an ornament of the system, a compliment to its democratic spirit. Such an understanding also explained to me some of my earlier disappointments with Western dissenters, particularly from the left. Many of them are not only eminent scholars in their own right but have brought up, with paternal concern, at least three generations of non-Western dissenting scholars, teaching them with loving care the meaning of 'true' dissent and the technology of 'authentic' radicalism. But copious tears shed for the Third World and its exploited masses, I was gradually to find out, rarely went with any respect for the Third World's own understanding of its own plight (as if that understanding had to be hidden like a family scandal from the outside world).

The theft of distinctive futures

The standard response to this imperiousness is often Third World nationalism and its sabre-toothed cousin, Third World statism. The enthusiasm of Third World intellectuals, hovering in the name of nationalism around their states for recognition and patronage, and their willingness to endorse any despot who models himself or herself a radical dissenter in the global system, I have always found pathetic. Living with Europe's history rather than with their own pasts, these intellectuals have usually worked with concepts of futures no different from the present condition of Europe and North America. They, too, have colluded with the theft of the distinctive futures of their own societies. They, too, help to ensure that futures studies become another form of technicism or social engineering to which the future of humankind is known, and another adjunct to the state apparatus and law-and-order machinery. Futures studies, for them, is another, broader version of perspective planning, a more fashionable, innovative 'sociometry'. For instance, in India, futures studies are now more 'official' and institutionally a part of the Ministry of Science and Technology; the future, one may say, has been leased out to the bureaucrats of the Ministry. Futures studies will have to be protected from such house-broken respectability and retained as a more daring adventure of visions where human imagination, moral codes and politics intersect.

Local despots and petty bureaucrats are not the only problems that serious futurists face, as many problems are posed by the dominating academic culture trying to take over 'disciplines' that have started as attempts to break out of the straitjacket of conventional knowledge systems. This has happened with ecology and feminism already; both have been successfully professionalized and become two new specializations in the knowledge industry. Students of futures and of alternatives have avoided this fate to some extent, but I am not sure they will be able to resist the career and market pressures for all times to come. One of the two main organizations of futurists is already an extremely fashionable, high-tech, mediagenic enterprise; the other, the one with which I am associated, is sometimes accused of being a closed club of lotus-eating, left-wing, snooty European scholars, unreasonably refusing to fall in line. But I have also met young Third World scholars who feel that this organization gives them what its New World counterpart can never do, a certain disorganized, fuzzy, yet culturally plural ambience where you do not have to learn the niceties, social or professional, of disciplinary performance, where all visions have not been professionalized out of recognition by a set of dedicated technojunkies. Probably, futures studies will survive on the enthusiasm of these young Third World scholars, who know that such studies can be the vehicle of their self-expression, individual and cultural.