

Sweet memories of the Future: a personal history of the World Futures Studies Federation

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I remember well the first time I heard of the World Futures Studies federation. It was in the late 1970s. I was a student in James Dator's undergraduate course in Futures Studies at the University of Hawaii. In his unique theatrical style, he told us stories about this strange association of academics who could not decide if their organization was to be called the World Future Studies Federation or the World Futures Studies Federation. The western Europeans wanted it called Futures. The Russians insisted there was only one future, the communist one. As it has turned out they were both a bit right and dramatically wrong. The communist future fell and we certainly do not live in a world of alternative futures. Rather wars, environmental decay and continued USA hegemony appear certain. Even though there are signals of the possibility of a more utopian future of gender partnership, ecological sustainability, planetary governance and deeper spiritual values, the capitalist materialistic ethos pervades. This is so at the visible litany level, the interconnected economic systemic level, the worldview, and the grander story about how we organize our lives.

But it does remain the mission of the Federation to create the possibility of dissent, to create pedagogy of alternative futures. It was at the WFSF 1984 Conference – Hawaii in the Global Futures – that I met face-to-face many of the grand futurists that Dator spoke so fondly of. I had finished by MA in Political Science with a focus on Alternative Futures and was working at the Hawaii Judiciary as a futurist/planner. As well, I was helping with some of the details of the conference. The particular detail I focused on was picking Uvais Ahmed, Ashis Nandy and Herb Addo from the airport, and then a week later returning them. For many years later, I kept the Ceylon tea that Ahmed left for me. This was not because I was enamored by tea but rather touched by his gift.

Meeting these luminaries was a high point for me. And even though attending my first World Futures Studies Federation Executive Council meeting illustrated that even utopians were not immune from petty politics – still watching Magda McHale and others was a joy. Contradictions were not only apparent at the level of organizational politics but as well in the tension between practice and speeches. Mihailo Markovic gave a brilliant speech on the need for universal human rights, (acknowledging but moving through cultural relativity) on challenging tyranny and the need for super-ordinate governance. Where this courageousness disappeared to during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s I know not. However, I do believe it was historical trauma that led to the change in his politics. In my meeting with him afterwards – in Tenri, Japan (1988) at a meeting on the futures of cultures and in Beijing at a World Futures Studies Conference, he told me horror stories of Croat butchery against Serbs. It was this memory, I believe, that would later lead him to defend Serb Nationalism. For me, the message was that even if we agree on the generality of the future, it is in the details that the problems lie.

But at the Beijing meeting, the details did not matter so much. Everyone was thrilled to just be in the grandness of China. The highlights were, for me, the Council debate between Yehezkel Dror and Madhi Elmandjra. The polemics were brilliant. But it would be in Budapest in 1990 that I found out that behind polemics was also friendship. I heard Elmandjra speak out against UNESCO – he had given up his leadership position in the organization to pursue his politics – and then later go out for coffee with UNESCO representatives.

Galtung, as always, was brilliant in Beijing. I do not remember what he said, but I do remember sharing a taxi with him. He stood out as he moved away from being trapped in Chinese and Western essentialisms; rather, he focused on deeper civilizational codes that underlay our mutual pathologies. And, while he used scenarios as a way to challenge univocal futures, the key was always in the prescription, the way out of the current predicament.

All this time I remained living in Hawaii, and was not only blessed with stunning weather and beautiful smells but a train of futurists visiting Dator. Of course, many may have visited so as to declare the meeting a business trip and receive a tax deduction. But irrespective of their true purpose, I learned from each visit. The two most significant in adding value to my futures thinking were certainly Immanuel Wallerstein and William Irwin Thompson. But there were many others: Tom Mandel of SRI, the educational futurist Kathleen Redd, and the crime futures expert Gene Stephens, for example. Of course, it was in Hawaii as well that I met Rick Slaughter. He treated us to a splendid methodological lecture on the T-cycle (transformation cycle). Slaughter had just published a piece titled ‘Toward Critical Futurism’ in the WFS Futures Bulletin. All we could say – those of us who were part of the Manoa School of Critical Futures Studies – was, that is the piece we wanted to write.

But my favorite memory was having dinner with Dator and Masini. Indeed, the 1980s should be seen as the as their era, flawlessly guiding the Federation from a European organization to a Global resource. They did this not only through strong futures work but the generosity of their spirit. I am not sure what we ate, but they both ensured to include myself and Wayne Yasutomi (also one of Dator's students) in all conversations. This was the paradigm of the Federation, then, authentic inclusion.

However, it is through problems that we often learn the most. Especially instructive for me was the 1990 Budapest World Conference. The tension between the democratic aspirations of the federation and conference structure resulted in the world conference being speech heavy. I remember endless long and generally boring speeches. It was terrible. Some of the Chairs appeared to be megalomaniacs (I still remember the chair in the politics and policy section clinging on to every scrap of power, there more for the joy of authority than for creating a learning space) others had forgotten that the purpose of the conference was communication. Among the most eventful moments was Galtung's speech. He went after W.W.Rostow, I believe, making the case that Eastern Europe could disintegrate in front of us moving from the worst of state socialism to the worst of market capitalism. But more than the speech, were his packed bags next to the lectern. Galtung

was every ready for an escape, having predicted correctly that the technocrats would next present irrelevant speeches on market reform in the former second world.

But alongside the drivel was brilliance. The moment of true inspiration of the conference was Allen Tough's 'New Ideas' workshop. These were stunning short, ten piece presentations. Rick Slaughter's slide presentation on levels of futures work – the move toward depth - remained the highlight of the conference. We all oohed and ahed, and the future did appear to have arrived. And with delicious cakes served in an old Hungarian castle the future of the WFSF indeed looked bright.

Barcelona was equally interesting, punctuated by Alvin Toffler's defense of the USA war on Iraq. And while Felix Marti and Jordi Serra were wonderful hosts, the hours spent on buses left one less than satisfied. Still Barcelona was a beautiful city. But conference design, I realized, could not be taken lightly. Food, trips, content, all had to be planned meticulously.

I did my best to utilize these learnings for the Finland conference, as I was placed on the International Organizing Committee.

But along with organizing the conference, another issue had become central – the identity of the Federation. Was it a social movement, focused on green, democratic, gender partnership values? Was it an apolitical professional association of academics? Was it an international lobbying organization focused on the future in general? Or was it a family, a group of friends who met regularly and enjoyed each other's company? Was it all these?

The Finland WFSF conference focused directly on these issues. From my view, the Finland meeting began the glory days of the WFSF. Of course, others who write Federation history will point to different eras, but for me, from 1992-1997 was the peak. The glory days have an objective definition to them – real Federation activities – but as well a subjective dimension, what actions one was engaged in. From the beginning, I understood the Federation in itself did, could, not do anything. Rather it was a vehicle for members. As a member, one could groan that the Federation did nothing, or, one could actually do something.

But why was this period golden?

First, an excellent world conference with more than adequate funding, the organization was stellar. The content was diverse, authentically focused on the future, instead of the usual restatement of social theory. Second, a new partnership of Pentti Malaska as President and Tony Stevenson as Secretary-General was beginning. This led to the Andorra Futures Course – in itself a highlight in Federation history. For two years, young futurists romped in the mountains, enjoying great wine and scholarship. The Asia-Pacific futures course was also initiated, and continued for many years in Bangkok for two years and then other Asian cities. I had the opportunity to teach at the Andorra and Bangkok courses (and in the 1990 Dubrovnik course), and these remain some of my most enjoyable teaching experiences. The Asia-Pacific course was a major step forward for the

Federation. While the earlier Dubrovnik courses were global in scope, essentially this was a conversation between Western and Eastern Europe. This is not only in terms of the content but how the courses were taught, focused on professor as expert and student as empty vessel. It was in the Asia-Pacific course that the participatory action learning became the guiding framework. True, there was strong content (focused on development futures the first year and ecological futures the second), but the framework and the pedagogy were devised with the students. Of course, this was as per the Federation tradition. As with the Andorra courses, professors were seen as resource persons and not as experts of the future.

For me, from these courses, I learned how to teach futures. Second, I moved away from the content of futures studies to developing learning processes. Third, the cross-cultural context of the courses became as important as the course itself. The course mimicked global issues, with tensions in terms of academic style and process to details about diet and smoking. I remember in Andorra trying hard to work with colleagues on developing alternative educational futures for Andorra. But the cigarette smoke made it all but impossible to have a conversation. Eventually we developed smoke-free zones but this was regularly violated since the distinction between smoke-full and smoke-free was often lost on some participants.

All in all, the mixture of new President Pentti Malaska's northern European formality and Tony Stevenson's action learning Aussie approach blended well. For a while, that is. As well during this time, Zia Sardar played an important role in the Federation, not only in widening the cultural dimensions of the future (by challenging the American colonization of the future) but also in ensuring fairer representation. After the dismay of slate voting (it was all or none for executive council members previously) at the Finland meeting, Sardar and Sharon Rodgers began the process of creating a new constitution.

Sardar also played an important role in other areas as well. A course was held in Penang for Malaysian policy makers. The deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia took an interest in the Federation, leading to the Global Visions educational project. This project developed futures-oriented curriculum across a dozen sites/nations. The net and mail linked them, creating the beginning of a Glo-Cal education model. The Asia-Pacific course continued in Malaysia and then to the Philippines.

For the past few years, however, the Asia-Pacific has been moribund. Hopefully, a new course will begin in Taiwan. Finally when funding ran out in Andorra, the Budapest futures group quickly took responsibility, keeping futures pedagogy going. Along with courses was a focus on research. The Federation won a grant through UNESCO to conduct research on Information and Communication Technologies and appropriate economic development in Africa and the Asia-Pacific Region.

It was certainly an incredibly energetic period. Critical futures research was being developed through the efforts of Sardar and Slaughter and others, continuing the tradition started in the early 1970s by Steenbergen and Galtung. In every possible way, Stevenson had taken the Federation to a new level. The Bulletin, once published a little scruffy

handbook, became a real publication. Of course many missed Dator's personal style – always connected, always on-line - but each leadership group needs to create its own cultural framework.

For me, it was a great period, as I moved from Hawaii to Brisbane, and as a post-doc had time to teach classes, co-edit the Bulletin, and play a guiding role at the Secretariat.

However, what started out as a marriage in heaven eventually turned sour. Europe and Australia were unable to meet, and eventually the glory days ended. The Brisbane World Conference moved the Federation away from a meeting of academics to a social movement, focused on future generations. In the final session, balloons filled the auditorium, and there was endless hugging. Of course, those not into hugging, stared at their personal computers. For some it was all too much (the inefficiencies of the meeting – not being able to find lecture rooms did not help much either). The formalism of Europe – the Finland meeting after all was on the science based chaos theory – had given way to the counter culture of Australia, to a focus on community green futures and the needs of future generations. Some were happy at the rejuvenated Federation and others longed for more PhDs.

By the time the Federation Secretariat had moved to the Philippines, the informal approach had taken over. Cesar Villeneuve's moral leadership, focused on peace and social movements, took the Federation clearly into anti-colonial politics. The Asian sensibility became dominant. I saw this as positive but as funding began to take too much of the leadership's efforts, inspiration slowly begun to dry up.

My own involvement began to shrink. In the 1990s I was very active, starting from the Budapest meeting when I was elected on the Executive Council. But by early 2000, the endless and often meaningless discussion on the executive board became too much. No decisions were ever reached. Every attempt to create a new idea was shot down, and the Federation slipped away, slowly into oblivion, at least for me.

Creating new action seemed impossible. But fortunately, there was a change on the board. Old timers such as Dator, Sardar, myself and others stepped down, and the mantle was passed to a new leadership.

Of course, I look back fondly at the 1990s. The courses especially were highpoints. Watching young futurists become inspired was truly wonderful. The endless saunas and spas in Finland, and Andorra, the delicious Thai meals in Bangkok, the tense discussions with Malay technocrats, with European futurists on methodology – all were great times. I savor each and every memory - whether it was students trying to run away without paying the room mini-bar tab, or Tony Stevenson creating spaces for Asian students to design the course themselves, real action learning, or developing and testing methods such as causal layered analysis, or long editorial discussions with Annie Elliot, Leanne Holman and Levi Obijiofor as to what the next issue of the Bulletin should focus on. Or having spaghetti with Anita Rubin while discussing the distinctions between chaos and complexity theory, and even the long bus rides in Barcelona...

For me, the Federation is certainly a family of friends – thus the listing of names in this short essay - but it is also a professional academic organization. I've enjoyed both dimensions of the Federation and am indebted to it. It has certainly been my family. And it has been my education. Should it be a movement? It should encourage movements but the Federation needs to stay open, pluralistic, focused on alternatives and thus not part of any particular party or indeed epistemic politics. Of course the latter is impossible but still the effort should be to always have the seeds of change within the structure and culture of the Federation. One of my favorite quotes about the European Renaissance was that it was not solely about a new vision for Europe and the world, but an awakening to new visions.

It is this quest for unending pluralism while grounded in certain human (and non-human, and even post-human) universals that is unique to the Federation. Its global framework has embedded in it the tensions of various cultures and of various historical ages. There is no simple uni-cultural or uni-temporal hegemony, not even by the Future! However, the Federation should continue to play a strong gatekeeper role in helping individuals and associations better judge what is futures rubbish (marketing promotional material), what is futures propaganda, and what is uni-methodological and uni-epistemological work, and what is effective, deep, multi-methodological and multi-epistemological. That is, the Federation must envision visions but not be overly excited by the latest futures fad and use its intellectual authority to help global citizens sort through the gems from the junk.

But where should it go in the future? The Federation has been my teacher and thus my hope is that it becomes part of the emerging world knowledge economy, an open university, intellectually rigorous but with a heart, a multiversity for all ages, for all of our futures.

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Note

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