

The First Fifteen Years: a Personal View of the Early History of the WFSF (1967-1982)

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The early years

The decision to found the World Futures Studies Federation was taken at a futures studies conference in Bucharest 1972, but naturally this event had a prehistory dating back to the 'future research inaugural (!) conference' as it called itself, held in Oslo, 1967 under the auspices of 'Mankind 2000, the 'Institut fuer Zukunftsfragen' in Vienna and Johan Galtung's International Peace Research Institute in Oslo.

Looking back, the end of the sixties and the early seventies were clearly a boom period for this new field of 'future studies' as we generally call it nowadays, although at that time the precise name for this field or discipline was still a matter of debate. Future research, futurism, futurology, future studies, futuribles (a contraction of the words future and possible) were all used simultaneously. In those days new journals, institutions and tools to 'tackle the future' emerged rapidly and the new discipline even passed the gates of our universities, albeit often in disguised form. Moreover some influential books on the study of the future were published in that period. Herman Kahn's 'The Year 2000' and Erich Jantsch's 'Technological Forecasting' were the most well known.

From its very beginning Futures Studies was seen as different from an ordinary academic discipline. Its scientific status was disputed, but what was more important, Future Studies was seen as closely linked to international political and economic developments. It all began in the US after the Second World War with the foundation of large future oriented so called think tanks that, in most cases, had close ties with what President Eisenhower had called 'the military-industrial complex'. In many ways the first meeting in Oslo was meant as a critique and alternative to that close link of future studies with the powers that be. As Robert Jungk phrased it:

In calling a conference dedicated to peace and development in the next decades, the organisers pointed to a new and urgent direction of future research. Could the new intellectual tools of information technology, systems analysis, operational research, forecasting, anticipating, scenario writing and 'futures creation' be used on civilian problems? These new powerful tools should not be restricted to a technocratic elite, for the future belongs to all of us and for that reason it is absolutely essential that future research is internationalised and democratised as quickly as possible. (Jungk 1969 10)

With this plea the tone was set for the future WFSF, which in many ways had the features of an international social movement more than of a strictly professional and academic

organisation.

The conference in Japan

The second conference, and the first one I attended, was held in Kyoto (Japan) april 1970. With its more than 200 participants this one was already three times the size of the Oslo meeting. In 1970 Japan was 'celebrating' (if that expression is at all appropriate) the 25th anniversary of the end of World War II with among other things a world exhibition.

It was a good idea of the 'Japan Society of Futurology' to launch this explicitly forward looking conference with 150 'foreigners' from 32 countries, who from their side were very curious in what direction this first NIC (newly industrialized country) in Asia was developing. The Japanese futurists presented themselves with what they called 'Perspectives on multi-channel society', which was primarily a vision of a high-tech society, to which the existing societal institutions should adapt. It seemed to me that the 'cultural revolution', which at that time was taking place in the Western world, had not yet reached Japan. There was however a small extra parliamentary opposition in that country and I had the opportunity to contact some of its spokesmen. But they were isolated from mainstream society and tended to be somewhat violent in their demonstrations.

I may be exaggerating, but the approach of the Japanese at this conference reminded me of the request of a prominent Chinese scholar in my working group at the WFSF-conference in Beijing (1988): give us your science and technology, but leave your democracy at home. More important for our history was that here already ideas were developed for a World Future Research Federation as Galtung called it at that time (Galtung 1970, 103). There was full agreement that it should be a genuine international organisation and not one dominated by the Western world. It seems to me that this is a strong point of the later WFSF. On other issues there was less agreement and more debate.

Should the emphasis be more on forecasting and prediction or on prescription and normative visions of the future? Should it primarily be an organisation of professional futurists working or one for everybody interested in the future? Should Futures Studies have close links with policy making and for that matter with the policy makers (an idea strongly supported by Yehezkel Dror (Dror in Jungk 1969, 338) or should we focus more on the public at large and/or the concerned citizen? Should our meetings and conferences be of a more traditional academic nature with plenary- and working group sessions, prepared papers, speeches, discussions etc, or should new forms of communication between participants be developed? The outcome of these debates in Japan was that a Continuing Committee was nominated (in which I was invited by Johan Galtung as the representative of youth) which had as its primary task to prepare the next conference, which took place in Bucharest (Romania) in 1972.

Future Studies in the former communist countries

Futures Studies has always played an interesting and important role in the former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where it mostly was called prognostics or something like that and where it had close links with planning. To some extent it was a free zone, a 'haven in a heartless world' for independent or critical scholars, many of who played an important role in the post-communist transition period in that region. To give one example, I remember very well that at a WFSF conference in Sofia in the beginning of the nineties, I had a night-long conversation in my hotel room with Milos Zeman, the founder of the Czechoslovak Futurological Society (in 1968) who later became the prime minister of the Czech Republic. According to Frantisek Petrasek, at present director of the Center for Social and Economic Strategies at the Charles University in Prague, there is no doubt that the recent interest of the Czech government, in Futures Studies, was stimulated by Zeman and surprisingly also by President Havel.

Given that context it was interesting, but also to some extent logical, that after Kyoto the next conference took place in Eastern Europe, to be precise in Bucharest (Romania), where in a plenary session the decision was taken to found the WFSF, with only one vote against: my fellow countryman Michel van Hulten, who gave an impassioned speech full of what I remember as valid arguments why we should not take this step. Unluckily I cannot remember what his arguments were and, when I called Michel about that, he could not either.

Romania in those days had a positive image in the West, primarily because it behaved rather independently vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Internally however it was still in many ways a Stalinist country. Around 1970 Futures Studies enjoyed flourishing period in that country, but when our conference took place in September 1972 the decline was already visible. One of the initiators was Mircea Malitza. He was Minister of Education at the time but soon after the conference, Ceausescu was forced to resign. Whereas the Romanian organisers tried to make the conference pass smoothly, although they had to make a number of compromises, the environment became more and more hostile. The main ideological issue was the notion of a plural future, which was and is so basic for the WFSF that it even has the word 'futures' (plural) in its name. For the host country, however, as Malitza phrased it, there was only one possible future, desirable and necessary too, because of the implacable laws of history and the Party's iron strong will (Malitza).

Concerning the precise form the newly founded Federation should take; there were two types of debate. The first one dealt with the question whether it should primarily be a federation of (national) institutes and organisations for Future Studies with only limited room for individual members, or mainly an organisation of individual futurists with some possibility for collective membership. I remember that Peter Mencke Gluekert, the new Secretary-General was strongly in favour of the first model, but it seems to me that the second model 'won' in the end. The second debate in Bucharest concerned the question of whether the Federation should focus on being an international or even a global organisation, with a strong emphasis on representation from all countries and regions and with close links to UN-related organizations; or claim that it is primarily an academic, professional and scientific organization for which quality is more important than equal representation.

The role of the courses in future studies

It should be emphasised that the organisation of global (and later on regional) conferences was not the only activity of the WFSF. Almost from its beginning courses for (graduate) students in Futures Studies and related subjects have played a major role as breeding ground for future Futurists and for that matter for new members. I do think that quite a few present members of the WFSF have started their 'career' as participant in one of the courses in future studies. Crucial in that respect was the Inter-University Center of Post-graduate Studies in Dubrovnik (nowadays Croatia) where in the seventies Johan Galtung was Director. In 1975 I attended a course there on Futures Studies with seven of my students. This course lasted for four weeks (from mid February to mid March when it was still cold and dark in Northern Europe). My students could afford to stay that long, because the course was embedded in a future studies program of the Utrecht University. Many well-known Futurists also took the plane to Dubrovnik to teach there. Johan Galtung naturally, who gave no less than six lectures, but also Jim Dator, Eleonora Masini, Ossip Flechtheim, Yehezkel Dror, Rolf Schwendter, Danilo Dolci, Yona Friedman, Gerhart Bruckmann and Tony Judge.

For 1976 Johan invited me to become Director of a new course 'Models for the Future', which lasted 'only' for two weeks. But during the third week the students could participate in the global conference of the WFSF that took place in the same IUC-building in Dubrovnik. This was a unique situation where course and conference were integrated. My most vivid memory of that course/conference was that Aurelio Peccei, President of the Club of Rome, approached me once with a mild complaint that he always had to talk for 'old' and established people and that he would prefer to discuss with the younger generation. The outcome of that 'complaint' was a fascinating evening in my fully packed hotel room, where he had a vivid, often critical and even sharp discussion with my students, who just had learned about all these models for the future Peccei was talking about.

Regional conferences

As already indicated, in addition to the global conferences, the WFSF had regional ones, mostly in cooperation with a national organization for future studies and sometimes related to research projects. I remember a few of them in that early period, which showed how active the WFSF was already from the very beginning.

In September 1973 we had an interesting meeting in Frascati near Rome where Eleonora Masini played a central role, her first in what was to be her long history as 'mother of the federation'. Memorable from that conference was the audience we had with the Pope in St Peter's Rome. He gave a speech on the similarities and differences between the Church of Rome and the world of Futurists. Both are interested in the future, but whereas Futurists are exclusively interested in the future of humankind in this world, the Catholic Church is primarily (but certainly not exclusively) interested in the future of humankind in the next one.

In January 1977, (same story, as with regard to Dubrovnik, when it still was cold and dark in most of Europe and North America) Mahdi Elmandjra, at that time WFSF President, invited a number of Futurists to a meeting in Marakesh, in his home country Morocco. I knew about the meeting but had no plans (or rather, no money) to go there. Then a few days beforehand I received a phone call from Moroccan Air in Amsterdam: why I had not yet picked up my ticket for Casablanca? I cancelled all my appointments and classes, jumped into the plane and had a most memorable meeting, not the least because of the fascinating location: the famous hotel Mamounia.

Stories like this one might give the wrong impression that the Federation is a sort of 'fun club'. Well, there is no doubt that we had much fun together, that over the years we became a club of friends, and that we met at interesting and nice places, but it mostly was hard work, long sessions, many paper presentations and long debates. Moreover from the very beginning it was considered important that the outcomes of our deliberations were made public. There often was some media coverage and I remember especially that Bob Jungk was very good at 'meeting the press'. Moreover and more important is that the results were published in books, sometimes as complete proceedings, but mostly in the form of a selection of the best papers. The Japanese especially did a good job in that respect by publishing the total proceedings of the 1970 conference in no less than four volumes. The latter were called 'Challenges from the Future' and consisted of approximately 1500 pages in total. The renowned publisher Allen & Unwin, in a volume titled 'Mankind 2000', published over 30 papers from the 1967 conference. Although as a Futurist I tend to be more forward, than backward looking, I still regularly use these books from the early (or even pre-) period of our Federation.

The role of research

Sometimes meetings of the WFSF were part of a research project mostly in cooperation with other institutions. A good example of that was the meeting of some 25 futurists on 'Visions of alternative Societies' which took place in Mexico 1978 and which was a joint venture of the WFSF, the Mexican CESTEEM, (the Center for the Social and Economic Studies of the Third World) and the United Nations University in which Eleonora was so active. It was part of the Human and Social Development program of the UNU, of which the aim was to investigate new ways and new ideas on development that would involve the whole human being. The results were published, first in Spanish, 'Visiones de Sociedades Deseables' (15 contributions, 450 pages) within one year after the conference (the translation must have been a hell of a job) and a few years later in English by Pergamon Press under the title: 'Visions of desirable Societies'. The more neutral 'alternative' in the original title of the project had made place for the more positive and normative 'desirable'. As Eleonora Masini and I wrote in the introduction: 'Visions are no longer to be considered a luxury.....they are the stimulus to change the present. The vision itself is an expression of the possibility of change, of building a future which is different from the present'. (Masini 1983, 3)

If we take a look at the regions where in that first period the WFSF was active, we really can say that the world was covered. It started in northern Europe (Norway), moved to Asia (Japan) and from there to the so-called Second World (Eastern Europe), to southern Europe

(Italy), Northern Africa (Morocco) and Latin America (Mexico). Even black Africa was not forgotten, for in the beginning of the eighties the WFSF was co-responsible (together with Futuribles and UNDP) for the publication of 'Reclaiming the Future, a Manual on Future Studies for African Planners', the outcome of a research project coordinated by Michel van Hulten, the same one who voted against the foundation of the WFSF in 1972. Besides Australia, the only region that was fully absent in the early history of the WFSF was North America. This partly had to do with the anti-think-tank-attitude of the founding fathers that I mentioned in the beginning. It was not before 1988 that the first WFSF-conference took place there, to be precise in Hawaii (an American state) but as far away from the power centers of the US (Washington and New York) as possible. In a way that seems to me typical for the history of the WFSF: the distance from the powers that be.

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Note

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