

Civilization, Peace and the Future:
An interview with Johan Galtung

by Sohail Inayatullah for Renaissance Universal (RU)
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Johan Galtung



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Johan Galtung, fluent in nine languages and author of hundreds of articles and numerous books including *Theories and Methods of Social Research*, *The True Worlds*, *Essays in Peace Research*, v.1-5, founded the International Peace Research Center in Oslo and the *Journal of Peace Research*. He has taught at numerous universities throughout the world and was Director of the United Nations University's "Goals, Processes and Indicators of Development" Project. He was recently awarded the Right Livelihood award--"The Alternative Nobel"--for his humanitarian work. He is presently teaching Peace Studies at the University of Hawaii. He has been aware of PROUT and specifically Sarkar's theory of social cycles for many years now. Recently, he was asked to referee an article titled "Sarkar's Spiritual Dialectics," for the international journal *Futures* and commented "Sarkar will probably stand out as one of the truly great in this century, so much deeper and more imaginative than most of Western narrow efforts to look into the future." For these reasons, Renaissance Universal decided to interview Galtung to gain insight into his

vision of the future as well his perspectives on PROUT.

Sohail Inayatullah is a political scientist/futurist in Hawaii. He works for the Judicial system and various think tanks. He has been involved with Renaissance Universal for 12 years and has written extensively on futuristics as well as PROUT.

In 2009, Renaissance Universal is now at www.ru.org, Galtung at www.transcend.org and Inayatullah at www.metafuture.org,

While conducted in 1988, this interview – focused on human rights and ecological balance – remains relevant today.

RU: We are interested in your views on the present crises facing humanity, your vision of the future and on your interpretation of PROUT especially as related to your work on social cycles.

Galtung: Let us first start with some of the basic issues facing the world. To answer this question, one should start as a point of departure two simple points: one is **basic human needs** and the other is **ecological balance**.

Now human needs can be divided into four categories: survival, well being, freedom and identity. Survival is a question of avoiding big wars. This means that the basic issue is the struggle against weapons of mass destruction, specifically against Star Wars, which has now taken over nuclear war and nuclear weapons as the primary global threat to peace... the struggle against nuclear weapons has in a sense been ended as nuclear weapons are now bad (inefficient) weapons.

When it comes to well being it is essentially a question of starvation, and that is basically a question of economics for the people; local people not being penetrated by economies from outside.

When it comes to freedom, it is a question of human rights. This is going to be an increasingly important issue as the struggle for survival and well being is going to, if you will, make the conflicts with the elites even sharper. The elites will then clamp down on the people as they (the oppressed people) try to improve their conditions - so the human rights issue will become even worse.

The fourth, identity, is the one that we are least accustomed to talk about is the spiritual death of considerable millions around the world and fundamentalism is an answer to this; and unfortunately this fundamentalism, whether it is Christian or Muslim very often carries in its wake so much belligerence and so much infraction of human rights that I would hope we find some better answers.

Finally, ecological balance, the second point of departure, which I think will take on much

more disastrous consequences in the 1990's.

RU: Do you think that it is possible to design a society with those five attributes, positively put.

JG: I think it is even easy. I think it is even easy.

In the past few weeks, I have had a personal experience which tells more than anything else. I am changing diets towards becoming a vegetarian.

RU: Your son is vegetarian, isn't he?

JG: My son and my daughter are vegetarian. They have greatly influenced me in this direction.

I have not the slightest doubt that because of this change I will probably live ten to fifteen years longer. Not a doubt about it. Most of the data point in that direction.

So what one does in this culture is feasting. Then one hopes to find a remedy so when problem emerge we can somehow take care of the problem, in other words, a therapy cure, rather than prevention.

What it takes is a little bit of self-restraint. You see as with issues of peace and development a little bit of self-restraint and we are amply rewarded. And the, if you will, the capacity, particularly of western countries in terms of self-restraint is very limited.

RU: Two points. First, have you tried fasting? In terms of a method to learn self-restraint. Not one or two weeks fast. But more... I find myself fasting twice a month on the full moon and new moon or a few days before. Just to see how my mind acts. Do I run to the fridge, for example.

JG: How long do you fast?

RU: Just 24 hours, with or without water, just for the day. Sometimes one's mind gets more energy, sometimes less energy.

JG: That is very interesting. The whole thing is fascinating.

RU: If you try to have people practice self-restraint, then you need some principles or laws that control the accumulation of wealth, then, right? And the whole western sense goes against such a basic right.

JG: Surely. But not the whole western sense. It is the American Western, in particular. In the social democratic countries, we do have that. And it is a well respected principle of society...in PROUT terms, there is a ceiling and there is a floor. And we can discuss the how far the ceiling is from the floor. And there is also the problem do you permit

individuals to have more than one job, and accumulate riches around certain dimensions at the same time.

I think that the one answer is not only through legislation but also by having so many other things to do. That is what the socialist countries had hoped to do, and they have done it much more than people are aware of.

RU: Art, literature, sports

JG: Precisely, leisure, free time. The amount of time the Soviet citizen spends on playing chess, reading excellent books, playing music ... where the corresponding American citizen is simply in a world running after money.

RU: One you enter the money game than you are caught in it.

JG: Then you are somehow caught.

RU: What do you think are the actual prospects for peace and justice for the short and long term?

JG: Now I mentioned the need for survival, the need for freedom, and the need for well being and for peace and justice. I don't know. I was much more optimistic in the 1970's then now. I am almost surprised by the extent which the reactionary right-wing forces, extremist forces...a specific example of this is Reagan; fighting every hour of the day to get more money to kill pregnant women and children in Nicaragua. And totally absolutely ignorant like most of the American people of the real issues...so not too optimistic, on the other hand, I have a feeling that the U.S. is on a losing track and is being beaten and that will help tremendously. I am so encouraged by seeing in so many parts of the world what it means for a formal colonial territory to become free, in terms of releasing creativity; some of the creativity is not for the good but that is their problem.

RU: You must be optimistic. Most of your work is trying to find ways to deconstruct the present system and reconstruct alternatives societies. How do you stay inspired personally?

JG: Surely. Well you can stay optimistic with your heart and pessimistic with your brain. You can stay that the peace forces will win out in the longer run, but we must be very much aware of the negative forces.

RU: Do you take a world systems perspective, or a larger historical – cyclical - view to keep your optimism, intellectually speaking, even when the short term trends seem negative.

JG: Yes it is a world systems perspective, it certainly is. I have just completed a book from a world systems perspective that looks at cyclical patterns. I think one can only have a world systems analysis, it must be global. I think one can only have a holistic one that

tries to make sense of quite a lot of variables at the same time.

RU: What are the key driving forces that cause social change?

JG: But as to what are the key driving forces that cause social change. I must say that I think Sarkar in a sense is touching very real things. I think his theory can be improved. But what he essentially sees is a kind of circulation of elites. I would see it as a change of paradigms: one elite comes into power, has a certain paradigm, ...it exaggerates and drives itself out of power. The next one is knocking at the door. And in this there are brief interludes where people matter and that is important. So in that sense there are cyclical elements as well as other elements. Now the elites select the technology that fits into their worldview. Thus, if it is military elite, you can easily predict what type of technology they would use. Economic elites, for example, would be interested in computers and banking technology.

RU: So technology is part of the system but it is not the key driving force. Some futurists argue that if you look at technology you can find out what is really happening in a culture.

JG: I would never say that. Because you have to look beyond technology. You have to look at the cultural and structural forces shaping technology. Society always has a wide range of technology available; however, it selects only a minor portion. That selection is crucial. And some stage there, if you know the choice of technology, you can predict what comes later...you can then predict the range of technology from the social cycle.

RU: The other thing that Sarkar talks about in addition to physical clash and mental clash--the conflict between paradigms - is the deep attraction of the Great, the perennial inspiration. He sees that as the long term driving force - humans constantly striving to achieve their highest potential which leads to some type of spiritual union.

JG: I see it as the same way. However, Sarkar has a couple of problems in his theory. The problem that comes out has something to do with Indian aesthetics/intellectual craftsmanship. He makes the world a little bit more orderly than it is in the sense that it always come in the same order--the rotation of the elites. I don't think he needs that. He needs the idea of the elite running out of power because they runs out of ideas and because they exaggerate their perspective, their power but he doesn't need the idea that it should always come in the same order. He also has the tendency to make their rule about equally long and also he puts it in terms of personality that you have the labor type, the brainy type, the acquisitive type, and the heroic type. Good and well, but these are organized into very concrete political groups and political structures and I think he should rather base it on those groups. But these are just minor things. On the whole I am very very positive about the basics. In the course that I will teach next spring in the History Department (of the University of Hawaii) I am going to compare the big macro-theoreticians and of course Sarkar is one of them.

I look forward to making that comparison.

RU: But you know he also talks about - I don't know if this was in the articles that you read - that the rotation doesn't always go into the next cycle. Sometimes there is a reverse in the cycle although it usually short term; there is counter revolution, counter evolution.

JG: Yes. Yes. These are just minor points that I am critiquing.

RU: But the general thrust is fine. Do you think that there are real possibilities, real alternatives or is the future simply the continuation of world capitalist system?

JG: No, no certainly not. That does not mean that it so obvious that the future is what Sarkar and others would like it to be. Nothing continues. Everything comes to an end. What goes up comes down. What goes down, come up. So that doesn't trouble me. But the steering of the dialectic in the direction that will take care of basic human needs and ecological balance is the key. I insist on that. Those are the absolutes. Basic human needs and ecological balance. The rest are abstractions. Then in a sense it is an empirical question, whether the nation-state system or some other system is better or some mix; whether capitalist or socialist or some mix, or other alternatives. That we can discuss. But we cannot quarrel about basic needs and ecological balance.

RU: Those values are much more important.

JG: They are not even values. They are simply basics. Because values imply that one can choose them; not to choose in favor of basic human needs is to me fascist. And not to choose in favor of ecological balance is some type of nature-fascism. So we are up against very important things. I think the world consciousness about these things is increasing. And that the world movements fighting for these things are also increasing, so that is a very optimistic sign.

RU: How do you see the role of the return of the mythic, of the spiritual today?

JG: I am in doubt. I really don't know. It is very much in the U.S. as you might expect as the problems are much worse here. You see in other countries we still see our structures as to some extent changeable. Whereas ...in this country. We know perfectly well that if there is something threatening a basic change in the U.S. there would be some murders and killings by the State. In other words, change is much less feasible in this country. And given that, I see the return of the mythic, the mystical and the spiritual as in a sense natural. The Green movement in the U.S. is more spiritual. In Europe it is a concrete political movement. It writes up proposals in the shape of legislation, works in Parliament in addition to other things. However, I must say basically I see it as escapism.

However, there is so much spirituality lost in our civilization.

RU: Maybe people are trying to get in touch with that. It just comes out in perhaps strange forms sometimes as we have seen the past few years, but everyone is searching for that deep connection.

JG: Maybe if some of those military individuals ...businessmen in this country became more spiritual and the Green people more political that would be better. The green political energy gets lost in some of that mysticism.

RU: Well the BWL (Bourgeois Way of Life) keeps the structure of their life, they try to adopt the AWL (Alternative Way of Life) - they practice a twenty minute meditation then go out and continue to exploit. The meditation serves as a way to feel better about their actions instead looking at the root of their ideology.

JG: Yes it is something like that. Again that makes me sad...it makes me modest in my expectations. I don't expect elections to change much.

RU: When Sarkar talks about spirituality, he talks about an inner awakening, but it doesn't become real until one deals with suffering. Otherwise it is just a good feeling. Real spirituality is actually working with people and dealing with human suffering and that is part of one's inner change. Otherwise one is simply having a good experience, whether in a cave or in some church. Spirituality only comes through, loving humanity.

JG: I can certainly agree with that.

RU: That is almost the test of it. It is more than a technique.

JG: That would be the American way (a technique). We should make a distinction between changing the world and changing America. The latter is more difficult. Changing the Soviet Union may be a relatively easy task than changing America. America is saturated with self-righteousness; it has the inability to see its own problems.

So given that, America may end going to a type of isolation. This will continue as America steadily declines economically and culturally. So maybe I would be more optimistic about the rest of the world than about America. However, we could see an American military withdrawal, something corresponding to the British East of Suez policy.

RU: But the basic American ideology is expansion.

JG: They can't beat their basic enemy Japan, the one that they are on a real collision course with. They run a considerable risk.

RU: Wallerstein argues that world socialism is 100 or 150 years, one or two more long waves ahead; while Batra argues that we are in the midst of a transition which may lead to a new system within 20 or 25 years. What is your own sense of it?

JG: Wallerstein believes that socialism must follow capitalism. I do not believe that. Also, it depends on what you mean by socialism. What is much more likely is some type of Green emphasis. I have a feeling that the fatigue with socialism in terms of big government is found all over the world. No one is very enchanted, very impressed with

this type of system. I doubt very much if that will be the future in 50 or 100 years. However, we are in the midst of a world society, not in the stupid sense that one stock exchange follows another, that the stock exchanges are connected which is obvious since they are buying and selling the same goods, as it would be very strange that they are not connected. But more in the sense that the basic needs of one person are related to the basic needs of another, that an ecological balance here means that there is an ecological balance there. At the basics we find integration.

RU: The socialism that I am talking about is self-reliance, cooperatives; it refers to a people's economy, not a state or capitalist economy.

JG: Yes self reliance on national, local and regional levels. We will also see much more mixed forms of economy. The American way of thinking is capitalist or socialism, most of the world has left that type of dichotomy behind. The Green emphasis is on neither one nor the other. The social democrats are 50/50 and the Japanese is on both ends.

RU: PROUT talks about extra-cyclical leadership. Leadership that is spiritual in the deeper sense of the world, trying to move the social cycle onwards.

What is your sense of leadership? I know it sounds interesting to have leadership that has aspects of all classes, but there is a negative side to it.

JG: I never liked the word leadership. I don't like the word. It is only in this country that leadership is used so much. The thing to discuss is not leadership, but accountability. How do you set up a system so that those who are the executors, the CEO are accountable? The way it is set up in this country is so primitive, accountable to the board of trustees, to the stockholders. But in way it is set up in Yugoslavia, accountable to the workers is also primitive. No capitalist economy has managed the problem of accountability. The idea that people vote with their money, with what they buy is also a very crude concept of democracy. The consumer union movement is an effort in that direction.

But we need to see that any leader is impermanent. The leader has to have some qualifications, to be foresighted and compassionate. More importantly, real dialog with the people is crucial for leadership.

Again, the most important thing is to construct a society where basic human needs and ecological balance are primary.