

Molitor: Pattern the Future You Wish to See

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Abstract

This essay is a personal narrative of meetings with Graham Molitor, both as person and as text. His contribution is not just his invention of emerging issues analysis but his graciousness as a scholar and practitioner.

Keywords

emerging issues, public policy, futures studies methods, Molitor

I met Graham Molitor, first as text. This was in the late 1970s. As an undergraduate taking classes at the University of Hawaii, Jim Dator introduced me, and others, to the field of Futures Studies. Along with luminaries such as Alvin Toffler and Johan Galtung, we read an article by Graham Molitor (1977) on public policy anticipation. The article articulated Molitor's emerging issues analysis methodology particularly focusing on his s-curve. Molitor argued that most policymakers focus on current problems. Some are able to address trends, but few are able to really anticipate the future. Molitor's emerging issues analysis provides one such medium to that. For this, we are all eternally grateful to Molitor.

In the 1980s after graduating with a master's in political science, with a concentration in alternative futures, I interned at the Hawaii Judiciary. I stayed there for ten years, tending the futures research program there. Our core method was emerging issues analysis. We provided regular research reports to the director of the courts on what might be emerging. These issues were consolidated into a publication titled *Justice Horizons*. We researched issues such as the legal rights of robots, mediation in the courts, the end of attorneys, Hawaii seceding from the union, a Federal Constitutional Convention, the rise of personalized brain

drugs, and more. Some of these issues landed us in hot water, with one politician from the U.S. Congress asking why the Hawaii Judiciary was investigating sovereignty for the island of Hawaii. The backbone of our work was Molitor's twenty-two-step methodology.

Later, over thirty-two state commissions followed the Hawaii judicial foresight model, with eventually even the city-state of Singapore following suit.

Emerging issues analysis was brilliant in that it allowed us to structure discussions on the future, not just state idiosyncratic observations. It disciplined analysis and observation. Of course, what was challenging in the 1980s became easy twenty years later through Google, and companies such as Shapingtomorrow.com and FuturesPlatform.com.

Many have forgotten that this innovation comes from the work of Molitor, and, of course, Dator's championing of this approach.

I would not meet Molitor, however, until 2001. I had been invited to serve as a board

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member for the Humanity 3000 project led by the Foundation for the Future. Meeting Molitor in Seattle was truly a pleasure. What stood out for me most was his humility. He did not defend his positions, only inquired how he could learn more. In a room full of some of the world's best scholars, Molitor could have lectured, but rather he put his head down and took notes. Life was clearly a learning journey for him. I had numerous conversations with Molitor but two stood out. First, when I queried why he thought that extra-sensory perception was an emerging issue, along with the citations for this type of research, he reminded me of his years working with the law enforcement, that is, it was lived evidence for him. We also spoke of his family, the challenges of raising children. These were highly personal conversations. What touched me was his willingness to share.

In the years that followed, we had long discussions on macrohistory—grand patterns of change—in the context of emerging issues analysis. Molitor, a pattern junkie had just read my 1997 book with Galtung on *Macro-history and Macrohistorians* (Galtung and Inayatullah, 1997). He commented how this approach augmented his own s-curve as a pattern in history. Analysis must be historical, focused on plotting the traces of current events.

After Seattle, I met Graham again a number of times. We invited him to keynote along with Hazel Henderson at the New Futures conference in Taiwan. Molitor, ever the positive positivist, argued for a bright future for humanity because of technological ruptures, while Henderson focused on power—political—and the rise of solar. This was a stunning debate as it highlighted the contrast in the futures community—technological optimism versus political skepticism. But for Molitor, this was, using Polak's (1961) works, essential optimism. He was committed to this future—he wished for a bright future for humanity. The keynotes set the tone for the rest of the conference—complimentary opposites.

Tamkang University invited Molitor to become a board member of the new *Journal of Futures Studies*. He refereed papers for the journal and published a brilliant series on the long-term future. But the long term was always historically contextualized. He reminded us to

be careful of what we think of as novelty (Molitor 1998, 664):

Taxes that plague us today, date back to 3000 BC. Codification of written laws that grow longer and more complex with each passing day. [This can be plotted back to 21000 BC.] Price regulation to 1300 BC. Illegal parking (chariots, carts) to 45BC. Free food for the poor to 58BC. Smoke abatement laws to 1273 AD. Air pollution controls to 1280 AD. Asbestos worker “lung sickness” to 79 AD. State control of education to 500 BC. Teacher licensing to 362 AD. Systematized civil service to 221 BC. Competitive written civil service exams to 200 BC. Divorce laws to 1800 BC. Prostitution controls to 1950 BC. Compensation for bodily injuries to 2100 BC.

For Molitor (2003a, 69),

Things rarely “just happen” randomly and without coherent direction. Organizations and institutions provide a rallying point, a central place to collect data, ensure continuity, and provide a responsible cadre to manage and lead further development of ideas or issues.

But for me, the highlight of Molitor's contribution to the *Journal* was the symposium on questioning scenarios. Molitor (2009) believed that scenarios were a waste of time. They did not provide a structure to the future, they were merely fanciful. Having worked in policy and strategy for over forty years, he argued they were not even useful. Defenders took an alternative position. But it took someone of Molitor's stature to challenge one of the core methods in Futures Studies. The conclusion was that if we are to use scenarios, we need to be very cautious in our assumption that they make a difference.

Molitor's (2003b) life work was compiled in a stunning book titled, *The Power to Change the World: The Art of Forecasting*. I share this book with all I professionally meet, suggesting this provides a powerful framework to thinking about the future.

Through email and phone conversations, I had the opportunity to stay connected with Molitor in his final years.

For me, his contribution to the field is foundational—that is, Futures Studies needs

core methods. Emerging issues analysis is and will remain one of the core methods of the field. As Galtung once said, “you know you have done well, when they use your ideas but no longer quote you.” Whether it is black swans or disruptions, the structure of thinking goes back to the world of Molitor.

I use Molitor’s approach in every workshop, every speech I give. In the six pillars of futures process I use, it is the foundational method (along with Jerome Glenn’s futures wheel) in the second pillar: anticipating the future (Inayatullah 2008). Although we need scenarios, depth through Causal layered analysis (Inayatullah, 2004), visioning, and back-casting, the field could not exist without the contributions of Molitor.

Although many futurists are precious about their work and politics, Molitor focused instead on learning and kindness. At the Brisbane Ideas festival, Molitor defended the American president of the time, George W. Bush, indeed, even justifying the war in Iraq. When challenged, he understood that perhaps he had it wrong. He was open to contrasting opinions.

At every meeting, he was gracious, accepting critique, laughing, mentoring younger futurists—ever the gentleman. I am grateful for professional advice he gave me, his methodological contributions, and for framing the field of Futures Studies, indeed, and for being the future he wished for.

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