

ALTERNATIVE FUTURES OF EUROPE:
Visions from Young People at the University of Trier, Germany

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What will Europe look like in the next 50 years? What are the plausible scenarios? Which are the preferred? A seminar held on June 23, 1999 at the University of Trier at the Centre for European Studies explored these and other questions. Facilitated by political scientist and Unesco Chair, Sohail Inayatullah, the seminar intended to help participants gain a sense of power over their own personal and collective futures.

Participants were students at the university finalizing their thesis and had undertaken the seminar, titled "Europe in an International Perspective", to enlarge their perspective of Europe, particularly by seeing Europe through the eyes of other civilizations.

Participants spent three weeks discussing trends impacting the future of Europe. These trends included the aging of Europe, and long term population decline (unless immigration dramatically increased) as well as other trends such as the development of the knowledge economy, genetics and artificial intelligence and the possibility of the collapse of capitalism. Following discussions of these trends – the knowledge base of the future - participants articulated their own visions for the future of Europe.

Scenarios

Four scenarios emerged. The first was *Community/Organic*. In this scenario, young people moved away from the chemical corporate way of life and searched for community-oriented alternatives. Local currency networks, organic farming, shared housing and other values and programs favored by the counter-culture were favored. The current scare of Dioxin in Belgium (with similar scares in the future even more likely) argued Eric Rieger could lead to quite dramatic changes away from artificial, pesticide and genetic foods, in the longer run, he believed.

They imagined a community household system where goods and services were shared. However, one participant, Sabina Frerichs imagined Europe not within the urban/community dichotomy but saw the entire of Europe as becoming community-oriented. This meant a clear move away from the view *that I shop therefore I am* to *I relate therefore I am*.

This focus on relationship was also central for other participants. Indeed, it was the return to a strong family life that was pivotal in terms of how they saw the future of Europe. Taking care of children – and ensuring that the state provided funds for this – taking care of the elderly, and in general living so that familial relationships were far more important than exchange relations was a foundational value. In contrast to the community scenario, this future was far more focused on the nuclear family – the *Family Future*. Indeed, efforts to maintain this institution were considered crucial by some participants especially with the rise of genetic engineering, and the possibility of test-tube factories in the not so distant future. Indeed, while more formal visioning workshops with

technocratic experts examine scientific variables, these students asked, "will I have children? How many? How will I spend my time with them?"

Other participants believed that the new technologies would be dominant and instead of resisting them we should rejoice. We should celebrate in artificial intelligence, plastic surgery, gene enhancement, said Nadine Pepe, creating *Plastic Europe*. Anonymity in fact gives freedom from other; it allows the individual to express herself, while community and family suppress the individual. The new technologies as well promise great wealth, said Martin Valkenberg. Indeed some argued that far more important than family life was single life. It gave choice; it was not steeped in outdated institutions such as marriage. Europe was flexible and it should remain so when it came to formal relations.

A Bright Future?

While these visions were explored, the context was not always of a bright future. One participant, Christina Weiß, argued that oil reserves would certainly run out, and Europe would quickly decline, while Africa, with its plentitude of sun, and eventually solar energy, would rise. Mass unemployment in the context of Castle Europe – keep the barbarians out – was the likely future. AIDS, Ebola, and many other disasters loomed ahead, said Green activist Jost Wagner. Eva Michels added that nuclear technology could also lead to serious problems and new forms of energy were needed. Unless alternative forms of energy were developed, the future was bleak.

But again it did not need to be, argued Frerichs. The new technologies create the possibility for a network instead of national identity. They allow creativity to grow, and along with more spiritual views of what it means to be human, let humans transcend their narrow limitations. What Europe could offer, said Asma Nitardy, was its multilingual focus, its vision of a multicultural society. It was this gift she wanted to give her children, to ensure that they could speak German, Swahili, French, English, and mandarin, for example

The future can be bright, even if many of the trends do not currently look positive, was the overall conclusion of the seminar.

Sohail Inayatullah was UNESCO chair at the University of Trier, June 1999. He is professor in the graduate institute for futures studies at Tamkang University, Taiwan, and adjunct professor, faculty of arts and social sciences, University of the Sunshine Coast. He is the co-editor of *the Journal of Futures Studies* and associate editor of *New Renaissance*. www.metafuture.org