



PII: S0016–3287(97)00049-9

FUTURE GENERATIONS THINKING¹

Sohail Inayatullah

Future generations thinking provides a non-Western reading of space, time, nature and self, contrasting itself with the liberal openness of much of futures studies by asserting a non-negotiable core. This includes a commitment to the family as a basic unit of analysis; inclusion of all sentient beings; belief in the repeatability of time; an inter-generational approach balancing ancestors and future generations; sustainable social and economic practices; a global focus; a spiritual and collective view towards choice and rationality; and the realization of a global ethics beyond postmodernity. In practice, however, future generations thinking often falls short of its claims. Nevertheless, if future generations thinking can become authentically multi-civilizational, it could create a new history for future generations. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd

A World Wide Web (and traditional literature) search of futures studies and of futures generations studies reveals that while futures studies is many things: forecasting, social foresight, transformative politics, and utopian imaging; future generations thinking or 'studies' is more concerned with the survival of people and nature through deep time. Among other sites (such as home pages focused on population forecasts and home pages with inspirational speeches ending with the phrase, 'let us save the world for future generations') Web sites related to the language and civilization of native 'Americans' and other indigenous groups frequently come up.

A futures studies search leads in different directions: the University of Hawaii, University of Houston, Southern Cross University, the World Future Society, and the World Futures Studies Federation are among the sites that pop up. While certainly there is some claim to institutionalization in future generations thinking, largely from the work of the

Sohail Inayatullah is Senior Research Fellow at the Communication Centre, Queensland University of Technology, Box 2434, Brisbane, Queensland 4001, Australia (Tel: +61 7 3864 2192; fax: +61 7 3864 1813; email: s.inayatullah@qut.edu.au).

Malta Future Generations Program (headed by Emmanuel Agius) and the Kyoto Future Generations Programs (headed by Katsuhiko Yazaki and Tae-Chang Kim), in general, it is more of an approach, a perspective, a way of thinking.² The efforts of Yazaki and Kim have focused on making links with the futures studies community and attempting to make future generations thinking into an academic field of research.

Taken together—the indigenous, Malta and Kyoto approaches—future generations thinking can be characterized by the following³:

1. Commitment to the **family** (going far beyond the nuclear family to the extended family to the planetary family) as a basic, non-negotiable unit of analysis;
2. An expansion of the notion of being, to include all **sentient beings**—plants and animals;
3. An **intergenerational** approach, an expanded temporal definition of the family that goes seven generations ahead and before, ancestors and futurecestors (in futures studies, Elise Boulding's idea of an extended present);
4. Primarily **values-based**, drawing from indigenous as well as Confucian and Buddhist thought, far less concerned with technical issues of forecasting and more concerned with creating a future that rebalances the fundamental forces of the universe: 'Man', Nature and God(s);
5. **Repeatability**, a view that the future is the past, that ensuring the survival of future generations is in fact keeping alive the dreaming of ancestors (as in 'Australian' Aboriginal dreamtime epistemology). We are the dreams of our ancestors, our wise actions can keep them alive. Their dreams have created us. The future and past curve into each other with the distinction between dreaming and reality blurred such that past and future 'snake' back into each other. In this sense, while in futures studies the future cannot be remembered, in future generations thinking, the future can be remembered!
6. A **spiritual and collective** view of individual choice and rationality in that choice is contoured by both the *aina* (as in the Hawaiian tradition, land not real estate) and the heavens. Rationality is not individual or instrumental based but collectively linked to *samaj* (the idea of a society/family moving together towards a spiritually balanced society in the Indian Tantric tradition) and it is given by God. Rationality is not merely logic but inclusive of other ways of knowing such as intuition, the voices of the spirits/ancestors, and the altered fields of awareness generated by interaction with the wildness of nature.
7. Pedagogy that has a strong focus on **enhancing wisdom**, on moving beyond the litany approach of problem identification/solving to deeper issues of conscience, of discerning what is lasting and what is temporary (civilization foresight, to use the language of futures studies).
8. **Sustainability or reproducibility**, ensuring that current practices do not rob material and cultural resources from future generations. Future generations research is an implicit critique of the idea of progress. There are natural limits which humans must not transgress.
9. A global focus, a view that while future generations thinking is civilizationally-based its message is universal, searching for similarities amongst the many differences between peoples, creating a **Gaia of cultures**, a circle of civilizations.

The future generations perspective thus has very clear value positions drawn from its varied cultural backgrounds. In terms of the division of futures studies into predictive,

interpretive and critical frameworks, it is perfectly placed in the interpretive.⁴ The goal is to recover a future obscured by the materialism and instrumental rationality of modernity—by the desire and urge for more, quicker, and bigger. The challenge is to recover a balance, a *prama*, an ontological equilibrium that was given to man by nature and ‘God’. This equilibrium—golden age—has been lost because of ‘man’s’ inner greed and from waves of imperialism. What is missing in modernity is an understanding of the very real global physical limits and a lack of appreciation that Nature, Gaia, is more than alive, it is actively living.

Future generations thus has a clear non-negotiable core while futures studies has many core perspectives.⁵ For example, if we use the distinction of probable, preferable and probable futures, future generations research is concerned with creating the preferable and not specifically with exploring the full range of alternative futures. This does not mean, however, that it is myopic or dogmatic. Rather, the strength of future generations research is its ability to find links with other civilizational projects. These include the full range of the non-West: the Confucian, the Buddhist, Maori, Aboriginal, Hawaiian, ‘American Indian’, Tantric, Islamic, African, and dissenting Western traditions.

Of course, there are philosophical differences as well in the various future generations perspectives. For example, the Kyoto-based future generations research would argue that the divine should not be seen in deistic terms but rather as in nature or as nature, not in history but as part of history. It would thus take a Taoist approach to issues of agency and structure—the tao being illusive, not ownable by any nation or group. In contrast, future generations research, as conducted in Malta, is less concerned with East Asian Confucianism or with indigenous commitments to land and more concerned with issues of sustainable development and governance, searching for global legal principles such that current policies and actions are less focused on the immediate and more on the very long term. Its institutional base is the extended UN family of organizations.

In addition, many use the language of future generations but more in a general metaphorical sense, almost as a plea, as a way to conclude a speech.⁶ For example, Mihajlo Meserovic and Eduard Pestel in *Mankind at the Turning Point* are far more concerned with issues of population, pollution, economic growth, and resources rather than issues of culture, religion and civilization.⁷

While their conclusion was that to survive, humanity had to be more concerned with future generations, they certainly would not go so far as to give rights to future generations. Nor would they go as far as recent efforts by Allen Tough, who asks us to emotionally feel their aliveness and thus to act in more responsible and wiser ways today.⁸ Technical efforts like Meserovic’s—and the many others who use the language of future generations—would also not take ontological positions towards self, god and other. Rather, they would take a traditional individual rationality view that somehow, through more information, better decisions can be made: knowledge about the future can incrementally develop and the world can become a better place.

Future generations thinking is not just epistemologically rich, it also has ontological depth. Future generations thinking can help rescue the past and future from both modernists (who maintain largely Western secular categories of self and universe) and traditionalists (who seek to reverse to an imagined past when the universe was more stable, forgetting feudal power structures which were anything but emancipatory).

Perhaps the most crucial difference between futures studies generally and future generations thinking is that with the latter there is a clear demarcation between what is

negotiable and what is non-negotiable. Not all is available for deconstruction—for Muslims, the Prophet; for aborigines, certain songs and dances; for Tantra, certain meditative secrets—these are core values which are not available for relativization. In futures studies, research and movements, this line is far more liminal, if there is a line at all.

Links between futures studies and future generations thinking

What then are the links between future generations studies and futures studies? In general, they both:

1. focus on time;
2. focus on the deconstruction of the present, of the dominant industrial/bureaucratic paradigm;
3. focus on creating some other type of society, on an alternative future (but not alternative futures); and,
4. focus on global perspectives.

And there are basic differences, for example, futures generations research is committed to a particular type of time (intergenerational) instead of linear, spiral or economic time and a particular type of unit of analysis (the family or collectivity instead of the individual or other possible associations).

Future generations thinking is thus consciously less broad than futures studies, although it (in its more universal sense) can be seen as one of the many futures movements (joining the family of peace, feminist, social innovation research, and environmentalism). It is far less process and more content-based, far more concerned with creating a particular future than the constant exploration of alternative futures.

However, future generations thinking is not transparent, it is problematic. The question not often asked is, 'whose future generations?' In the plea to save the world for future generations, issues of the rights of the Other are often forgotten. Each civilization wants to ensure that its members survive and thrive, expanding to all corners of the world, that the graves of their ancestors are forever enshrined, but often it is at the expense of other civilizations that these claims are made. We should remember the paradigmatic words of indicted Serbian war criminal Dragoslav Bokan, who gained fame by forcing Croat civilians to walk through minefields, and gunning down those who refused:

All I care is how much I can use my influence with the young to inspire future Serb generations.⁹

Also noteworthy is the whitepower website devoted to future aryan generations.

For future generations thinking to go beyond rhetoric, crucial is the idea of inclusiveness, ie all of humanity's future generations. Equally important is that within inclusiveness there must be some levels of hierarchy, both of knowledge and life forms. A totally horizontal system, as the Jains attempt, while admirable, forgets that every moment is a moment of violence against some life form. The challenge is to maintain biodiversity and civilizational diversity, to walk softly on the Earth in past and future.

Equally problematic is the confusion in future generations thinking that just because a culture is suppressed, everything from that culture must be recovered. For example, many practices are not post-rational practices that are inclusive of many ways of knowing, rather they are simplistic pre-rational practices that confuse cause-effect, that confuse levels of reality. The logical mistake of misplaced concretism is often made, leading some

to argue that angels can be tapped so that humans can travel to Mars. Metaphors are appropriate at particular levels but not at every level. Storytelling is not the best way to do everything, it is one way.

While, certainly, indigenous cultures are the caretakers of the future—the strength of the West has been in assimilating other cultures, in appropriating them and thus forever stalling its own Spenglerian demise. Cultures that use the metaphor of future generations should be seen in their entire humanity, as good and evil, and not as romantic reified archetypes that are the sole carriers of wisdom, of humanity's salvation.

Finally, while rich in temporal epistemology, future generations thinking is weak at disjunctive thought, at the dramatic changes to history that genetic, virtual, nano, and psychic technologies promise. While the future might be the past, it also might be the 'unknown country'.

Future generations oriented pedagogy

However, for educators, future generations thinking offers the following:

1. An acknowledgment of the role of **elders** in giving guidance and wisdom to others.
2. Liberation from harder **measurable time** (metric decades, centuries, millennia time) to future generations time, which is often cyclically looped, wherein future and past meet in the present.
3. Teaching that includes **many ways of knowing**: the logical, the emotional, the intuitive, the playful, and the connecting.
4. Pedagogy that helps **recover the balance** between inner and outer; self and other; spiritual and material; head and heart; and, between built and natural environments. Indeed, the entire educational project is about finding a *prama*—dynamic balance.
5. Teaching that is authentically **multi-civilizational** bringing the perspectives of time, space, self and god of many cultures, all the time searching for the anchors, the points of unity, within the sea of differences.¹⁰
6. Education that moves **beyond postmodernity**, that argues that there are certain givens, certain core values that cannot be deconstructed. They are non-negotiable. What is needed is a global ethics based on the needs of future generations. There are certain positions beyond values (which can be negotiated) necessary for civilizational survival. And, finally,
7. Teaching that is **inclusive**, going beyond egoism, nationalism, racism and other isms, that is about the needs and rights of *all* present and future generations.

If future generations thinking can help create such a pedagogical environment, then it will be seen as a gift from future and past to our troubled present and thus create a new future, a new history for future generations.

Notes and references

1. Galtung, J. and Inayatullah, S., *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians*. Praeger, New York, 1997. *Sitatuing P. R. Sarkar*. Ananda Marga Publications, Singapore, 1997. Inayatullah, S. and Fitzgerald, J. (eds), *Transcending Boundaries*. Ananda Marga Publications, Singapore, 1997.
2. Kim T-C. and Dator, J. (eds), *Creating a New History for Future Generations*. Institute for the Integrated Study of Future Generations, Kyoto, 1994.

3. This expands on a list from Inayatullah, S., Future generations studies: a comparative approach. *Future Generations Journal*, 1996, **20**(3), 5.
4. S. Inayatullah, Deconstructing and reconstructing the future, *Futures* **22**(2), 115–141 (1990).
5. See Slaughter, R. (ed.), *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*, 3 volumes. DDM, Melbourne, 1996.
6. Perhaps as an appropriation of the Other wherein the metaphorical language of future generations is used to coopt those who would find fault with the overly technical language of the research.
7. Mesarovic, M. and Pestel, E., *Mankind at the Turning Point*. E. P. Dutton, New York, 1974.
8. Tough, A., *Crucial Questions about the Future*. Adamantine, London, 1995.
9. J. M. Kragujevac, Face to face with evil, *Time* 13 May, 38 (1996).
10. See, for example, Inayatullah, S., The multi-cultural challenge to the future of education. *Periodica Islamica*, **6**(2), 1996. Also see the special issue of *New Renaissance* on Holistic education: preparing for the 21st century, **6**(3), 1996. Weisenauer Weg 4, 55129, Mainz, Germany. Email: newren@compuserve.com.