

Mutant Futurists in the 21st Century

Jose Ramos
Journal of Futures Studies
Taiwan

In this essay I touch on a few of the insights I've gathered over the last decade in the futures studies field, hopefully of benefit for thinking about the next generation of practitioners. I don't think the emerging generation of practitioners is any different than any previous. Each has to invent itself the same as the last one. This is therefore just one dip into a conversation for generational evolution.

To consider generational evolution I'm going to use a kind of kitchen dialectics. I've done and seen a few stupid things over the years, so I'm going to employ some old fashion Maoist self-criticism as well as hypocritical finger pointing. What use is a revolution if we can't conjure up counter-revolutionaries from our distorted imaginations, anyways? Who knows, perhaps I'll send myself out to a work camp to re-learn a few things. In this sense, it is a personal and inter-personal dialectics, a dialectics of stupidity, but hopefully through reflection it becomes a dialectics of wisdom. Of course the wisdom of today becomes the stupidity of tomorrow, so all of this might also be quickly dated. But then the stupidities of today may also become the wisdoms of tomorrow as well! The nature of cultural and ideational change is complex, if not entertaining.

They Must Be Idiots

I found futures studies through intuition and journaling, a practice I did for about 10 years in my 20s. A combination of pop futures literature and writing science fiction, as well as environmental activism pointed me toward this thing that I didn't even know existed at the time. After my lightning strike on the way to Damascus (road tripping off the coast of Gibraltar of all places), I was calling up universities out of blue asking them if they studied "the future". They thought I was weird and I actually enjoyed that. I was finally pointed towards the program in Hawaii, whereupon I made a phone call to a guy named Jim Dator, he probably doesn't remember. I do remember him telling me that his program was "one of the best", and then he asked me if I had done any social science or social theory, all I could say is that I had read some Marx - I felt quite lame. Why did I do a degree in comparative literature anyways? What was all the critical theory and post-structuralism I studied as part of a degree in comparative literature good for anyway? Deconstructing why it's very hard to get a job? Living in Taiwan, and then meeting Sohail Inayatullah there in 1999, I found my answer, Causal Layered Analysis, "poststructuralism as method" (Inayatullah, 1998). You mean I could make a living deconstructing how we frame our lives and each other? Wow.

I was one of those people that fell in love with futures studies. As such I became a true

believer, in an evangelical sense. The evangelical sensibility is a strange one. There is an in-group with a special vocabulary for the enlightened. People who don't really understand you must be idiots. Either that or they are of inferior moral fabric. I really did think futures studies could save the world. If only "they" would understand "us".

The first stupidity then was to cloister myself in a futures community, but not have enough alternative identities, communities and relationships, to form a bridge or transition point from the new José to the older José. I was hopping countries, so this "bridge" thing was hard, but no excuses for me!

The problem with futures studies (in some circles) is that it is a form of secular cosmology. It is replete with theories of everything, grand visions of change, explanations of past, present and futures, macro-this and macro-that, it makes sense of the unintelligible, and renders clear the complex (or so it seems). The siren seduction is to create theoretical edifices that proclaim us grand wizards of temporality, subsuming and making sense of the myriad schools and things, without the necessary prerequisite of contextual rigor, immersion in messy assemblages (see Latour 2005), or the actual work of translation (see Santos 2006), a messy process done with people that have no idea what futures studies is. Or even care.

A Tale of Two Camels

During my journey in the field I've seen varying approaches to risk. One proverbial colleague had been told that, by getting a degree in futures studies, he would be employable as an independent consultant. Believing this he finished his degree and proceeded to "mortgage the farm", to start an edgy post-conventional foresight consulting practice. A short time thereafter he lost the farm. Another proverbial colleague, after his futures degree experience convinced him to go into a particular peer to peer business opportunity, decided to leverage / borrow off existing assets (house etc.), then proceeded to put these assets in a trust in his wife's name! Ironically, the latter's business did fairly well. Nonetheless, as the saying goes, "Trust in Allah, but tie your camel."

The second stupidity then is to either promise or to believe in the certainty of success, or the stability of a job. Many of us want this, and it is a reasonable desire. But it is not necessarily a reasonable expectation. For accountants, I would say it's a reasonable expectation. But not for most of "us". A few might get tenured positions, and even this within the precarity of the modern day University. By signing onto futures studies, we have signed onto some level of precarity, we have signed on to risk. This is not all bad. By choosing to live in the interstices between the post-conventional world of futures studies and the conventional world of being a human with basic survival needs, we both open ourselves to precarity, but also live in the space of opportunity where rewards may be bountiful, where change may be truly enabled, or transformation, personal social and global are possible. Accepting the precarious nature of what we do and who we be is, I feel, needed to drive a healthy, pragmatic and strong opportunism that has to work so that we can take care of our selves, our families and take care of our world, all at the same time.

It's Insanity and It Must Stop!

Recently, three new journals in futures or foresight were created, On The Horizon (OTH), the European Journal of Futures Research (EJFR) and Social

Foresight.¹ Now, I shouldn't be mentioning this because, for the last two years I've been the senior consulting editor for the Journal of Futures Studies (JFS), and the last thing I want is more competition! The field now has seven academic journals, Futures (the flagship), Foresight, JFS, Technological Forecasting and Social Change, OTH, EJFR, and Social Foresight. Please, please, please, don't start any more futures journals! Granted it is a healthy sign for any field when publications surge and can sustain many journals. But in particular please don't start journals where everything written goes into a black hole of corporate ownership. Futures research and knowledge should not be the preserve of a select number of institutionally privileged teachers and researchers that have access to ridiculously expensive journal subscriptions.

So, forgetting the fact that what I'm writing here is biased beyond redemption, as JFS is an open access journal, here I will proclaim with revolutionary zeal that the third stupidity is to create and to sustain knowledge bases that are locked away from public view. Futures research and knowledge is meant for the world. Why are we accepting such a closed system of knowledge access? I inquired at one point how much it would cost me to make an article I write for Elsevier to be open access. The price was about \$2500. So I write an article for a journal. My research has possibly been funded by the public purse, or worse, my own purse. Two referees with decades of experience give their expertise *pro bono*. And the whole thing ends up being owned by a multinational corporation, costing \$25 per customer for anyone to access, and if I want to make it open access I pay \$2500. It's insanity and it must stop! We need to create open pools of futures research and knowledge that can not only inform the world, but inspire people to do futures in their own contexts. Of the six journals that I mentioned, only 2 are open access. How much of the research knowledge in the field is going into this black hole? This is not a criticism of any single journal, but rather the "knowledge-as-property accumulation industry".

And then there is my own culpability. How many journal articles have I written which are now not owned by me, which have become difficult share. So I think we need some defiance, some dissent. Like most Australian universities over the last two decades, liberal arts and social sciences have been whittled away in a steady process of economic rationalization. When I started my Ph.D. I was at the Centre for Social Change Research. After 3 years that was shut down and all social science and liberal arts were put into a "humanities" holding bay (the half way point before being shipped to the Gulag). After two more years they got rid of that and then I belonged to the "Division of Research and Commercialisation". So on my PhD, in the submission it says submitted to Queensland University of technology, the "Division of Research and Commercialisation". Well I have something to say to this process.... "commercialize this"! After this, I had no choice but to make my thesis Creative Commons, if only to preserve an inkling of self dignity.

The way I see it, for humanity to thrive if not survive in the 21st century we will not just need a global knowledge commons, we will need a global foresight commons.² This means shared resources that help many people cognize and understand the great challenges and opportunities we face, that enable popular and widespread creative civilizational responses. At the moment we are going in the exact opposite direction. It's time for a U-turn. Personally, I have vowed to never ever submit any article that I myself will not be able to share and make public. Of course, the Maoists of yesteryear are now busy buying up the world in a capitalistic

frenzy, so lets see what happens. All vows are works in progress.

We Need Eel Pancakes

I've witnessed a few of programs that churn out a lot of futurists. Sometimes, the template given to these people that enroll is that they will become "consulting futurists". But I have never seen the field in this way, and it makes no sense to me at a personal level. I have to agree with Richard Slaughter here, who argued that futures studies is a core enabler that can flow into many activities, projects and careers. Futures studies connected with my work within the World Social Forum Process, the counterpoint to Davos, a gathering of civil society constructing counter hegemonic visions of the world. It connected with my documentary filmmaking, and connected with my social activism. It led me into teaching, and it led me into facilitation. So for me I find the consulting futurist template a straitjacket on the creative potential of people in this field. Indeed there are many paths one can take, as a scholar, in government policy development, (social) entrepreneurship, community development, media, activism, and as I will argue later, many niche areas. This is a really bad analogy, and I mean no offence to the vegetarians among us, but it's like starting a pancake restaurant but only serving one type of pancake. People may want more than just one type of pancake, they may want a more specialized pancake, something different, for example it could be pancakes with eel blended in. My Aussie wife (De Chantal Hillis) has a grandfather, Jack, who used to eat pancakes with eel blended in. Granted he was eccentric and the socially fringe dwelling type, but it does show how far we can push the pancake thing.

Therefore stupidity number four must be a monolithic and static identity and practice. And with all these tools and methods, who can resist starting a consulting practice? I'm equally guilty of this. I remember in one conference everybody was asked to raise their hand if they referred to themselves as a "futurist". More than half did. I didn't raise my hand, because I didn't at the time like the term futurist, something about it didn't sit well, perhaps I felt like Stanley Kubrick was still making fun of me from beyond the grave. But I also felt like I betrayed something. That I wasn't standing up for who I was. Was there a part of me that was hiding? And now I realize that I wasn't hiding, but I wasn't comfortable with the labels and titles and identities that I had been handed down. I had told many people about futures studies, I had done many elevator talks, why the 's' in 'futures' etc. I had been ridiculed as a "futurologist" (ouch). But for me, in the grand words of Bruce Lee, this field is like water. It is fluid, it seeps into things, it moves through cracks, and it has the potential to carve a river through granite if given a few years.

In order to connect with the complexity and wickedness of the emerging 21st century, we need hybridity, we need plural identities. So for me it's a personal exploration of how to articulate myself and what I do in a way that's going to be attractive and compelling for the diverse contexts within which I may work or want to work. Therefore, I like terms like design futurist, or design futures, I like what one person called narrative foresight, with a stronger focus on things like Causal Layered Analysis, I like the idea of a foresight mediator, or trans-media futurist, imagine someone whose whole focuses is on mediating between audiences, knowledge producers, artists, image producers, advertisers. One person I know calls himself a changist. Then there are game futurists. There are scenario planners from the old days, there are network foresight practitioners, horizon scanners, there are systems

futures, there are strategic facilitators, ... the list goes on.

We do need a name for the field, because we need to draw on the wealth of past knowledge, and have a place to contribute our knowledge, and something that connects us. We need the deep collective watering holes that allow us to learn from each other. Shared domain of play good – monolithic identity bad.

So, let's find the resonance with the identities and the practices that empower us to speak our truths in ways that compel and inspire those we wish to work with. If this is still "futurist" then so be it. But it doesn't (yet) work for me, and I am still on the hunt. Thus, allow me to take Jim Dator's famous second law and adapt it a bit, that any useful idea in futures studies should at first appear ridiculous. I would like to adapt this to say that any serious identity label some one uses in futures should at first appear ridiculous. Why? Because, the world is a place of magical diversity beyond comprehension. Where our efforts to make futures thinking and futures research relevant must be adapted and translated into a myriad of contexts, localized beyond recognition. In which we have an explosion of interdisciplinary, trans-disciplinary and integrative projects that work across a number of fields, locales, spaces, cultures, problems, issues, visions. This requires radical creative hybridity.

We need eel pancakes!

Going back to the secular cosmology of futures studies, I will indulge my inner true believer revolutionary. Futures studies is an expression of the creative power of the universe (one could just as well say this about almost any discipline, except perhaps economics). It is not a field that is just about understanding, analysis, it is about change, transformation, and evolution, cultural evolution. Life did not evolve by cranking out the same pancake, one after the other. Humans are mutants, and futures, to profoundly serve humanity in its century of need, will need to become a tribe of mutants, evolving and adapting for the myriad contexts within which futures may be needed.

Some of the best examples of this evolutionary hybridity are on the fringe of futures... many are in this Emerging Futures / Futurists Symposium, and it great to gather with my mutant brothers and sisters.

Get Over It

In 2005 I started my website Action Foresight. Over the next several years I put together content, started a blog, the basic things you do. However I'm still waiting for the government of Kazakhstan to contact me through my "contact us" page on the website, at which point they will tell me how much in need they are of my services, that they've looked at my website and my specialties match.

Stupidity number five therefore consists of creating one's unique futures bubble, complete with beautiful frameworks, theories of everything, levels, models, that all make amazing wonderful sense, which the world should, if they were smart enough, recognize and value - without going through any of the uncertainty, time, effort and effacement of talking to people about what we do, and how it can help them.

To this day, the only messages I get on my "contact us" page are from entities who want to sell me second-rate versions of Viagra, mixed in with all kinds of gobbledygook. The reality is, yes we do need to compose ourselves into something. We need to compose ourselves into some mutant hybridity that can serve the world

in a unique way. But people are not going to come to us. We have to go to them. We are the communicators, change-makers, strategists, entrepreneurs, we are the innovators, the creators, the networkers, the ideationists, the leaders. So then, what to do with a website? Create content, put it there, give some value, quite holding back! Create a resource that anyone can use. If that half million dolar contract comes through from Kazakhstan, well great, if not, get over it. At least we made a contribution to a global foresight commons, and to our collective adaptive, responsive and evolutionary capacities.

Seeds of Change

To conclude I offer what I consider key themes that flow from these reflections. These are not exhaustive but merely stepping stones...

1. Communion in diversity

Communion in diversity means that, even though we represent radical hybridity, mutating into new contexts, we are drawing upon each other's knowledge and experience in order to inspire ourselves and continue to evolve and mutate what we do. We need the field of futures as a space to gather and evolve in community. And our capacity to be creative requires understanding the foundations and development of the field: empirical, systems, interpretive, critical, participatory, action-oriented etc. Our individuation is not mutually exclusive to our communion.

2. The end of identity

Along with hybrid identities, in which we become some freakish mutant futurist that actually provides value for people, I also want to put forth the somewhat contradictory idea of an end to identity. I know this sounds either contradictory or impossible, how can anyone let go or give up their identity, it follows us like our own shadow.

But we can be a little bit different. I believe we must be different. In a world in which nations are armed to the teeth with weapons that could destroy humanity within an hour, where hyper nationalisms distorted collective projections of the foreign Other erupt across media-scapes, where economic warfare is waged not just by nations but by a transnational capitalist class, we, whatever we call ourselves, must go beyond identities which serve the one to the exclusion of the other – whether this is US interests vs. non-US, or Chinese interests vs. non-Chinese, or Google's interests vs. non-Google, Futurist vs. non-Futurist. Paraphrasing David Held (2005), we share the very same planetary destiny.

We know we need global collaborative approaches to address even our local challenges. We know that it means bringing people together from across nations, from across ethnicities, from across genders, that are not exclusivist, but which include, connect and serve common interests.

3. Global Foresight Commons

And thus it is really the time for a global foresight commons. Humanity will weather the storms of the 21st century for a number of reasons. One of those just mentioned relates to a new identity, a species consciousness with respect for all life,

neo-humanism, we are all one, brothers and sisters on a small dots in the middle of space.

But also it is because we will create a global foresight commons, drawing on web infrastructure, networks, governmental and corporate resources, and civil society, across every country in every region involved, collectively we will build humanity's collective foresight potential. They will be systems with granular complexity, ease of access for popular engagement, but scaling for specialized, tailored and targeted interventions. It will belong to everybody, commons-based. It will engage people in collective systems recognition that reframes problem-solving, dancing across the myriad of wicked issues and futures, building on each's thinking in a stigmergic process, creating collective intelligence, activating people and communities toward wise responses, creating a virtuous ecosystem from foresight to innovation to media to social change. This generation, young, old and middle aged, will do this. People in futures and those on the margin. This will be the generation that creates a futures oriented world environment organization, and a liquid democracy for the protection of our oceans. This is the generation that will create the platforms, infrastructure, and processes that will supercharge global collaboration.

4. Communication of foresight

Foresight the in 21st century will change dramatically, in my estimation. It will incorporate arts, drama, games, narrative, it will be rich in communications approaches that allows people to experience temporality in powerful ways. Our futures will become a global conversation, not just the preserve of specialists, but something which engages many in a conversation about their shared and distinct futures. I believe we are just at the very beginning of tapping the possibilities and potentials in linking new communications strategies and approaches with futures, in particular through trans-mediated approaches.

5. Experiential and embodied foresight

Experience is key. Whether this is the experience of an idea, the experience of an action, the experience of a workshop, or a project, we are always in the present moment. The future is not out there, it is within our own consciousness, it is embodied. I believe that the experiential basis of futures needs to come to the fore.

This includes a wide variety of action-oriented approaches to futures, anticipatory action learning, action research, innovation oriented foresight, communications oriented foresight. This also includes a deep appreciation for context specific adaptive approaches. What are people's lived experiences, and how can futures be a resource for people / communities in their specificities?

And the importance of embodied cognition, that billions of people already think about the future, already have assumptions / images about the future, and in fact there are already a variety of "foresight tribes" that have particular futures orientations: the Occupy movement, the World Social Forum process' "Another World if Possible", WEF at Davos, Kurzweilians / Singulatarians, Collapsists, Descentists, Business as Usualists, Retro Futurists, etc. What practitioners have tools, frameworks and theories to help us understand this embodied temporality of "foresight tribes"? We need some ethnography and need to begin to understand the embodied cognition of our futures. It is already out there, sitting tacitly, a bit like

gravity.

Ronfeldt (1996) suggested the network era is one in which global citizenry bring forth a future oriented consciousness. We need to get deeply ethnographic, and begin to understand the sticky nature of temporality among people that have never ever heard of futures studies. It is in people's heads, in communities across networks, we need to pay attention, and not pretend that 'we' are the only ones who actually think about the futures.

6. Integrative foresight

Finally, for me futures in the 21st century is a highly integrative affair. It is a movement across spirit, mind and body, linking arts and science, experiment-experience-reflection-abstraction, across the material and the ideational, across diverse communities of practices, weaving together new context specific holisms that provide news steppingstones for humanity to walk into the 21th century awake, alive, responsible and empowered.

Correspondence

Jose Ramos
Journal of Futures Studies
28 Fontein St.
West Footscray,
Vic. 3012
Email: jose@actionforesight.net

Notes

- 1 Social Foresight - <http://www.unitn.it/en/sofor> accessed Jan 2013
- 2 http://seedmagazine.com/content/article/on_a_global_foresight_commons/ accessed Jan 28, 2013

References

- Dator, J. (Undated) What Futures Studies Is, And Is Not, Retrieved August 2012, from <http://www.futures.hawaii.edu/.../futures-studies/WhatFSis1995.pdf>
- Held, D. (2005). At the Global Crossroads: The End of the Washington Consensus and the Rise of Global Social Democracy? *Globalizations*, 2(1), 95–113.
- Inayatullah, S. (1998). Causal Layered Analysis: Post-Structuralism as Method. *Futures*, 30(8), 815-829.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor Network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ronfeldt, D. (1996). *Tribes, Institutions, Markets, Networks: a framework about societal evolution*. Santa Monica, CA. : RAND.
- Santos, B. (2006). *The Rise of the Global Left: The World Social Forum and Beyond*. London: Zed Books