

Dissenting Futures – A Rationale

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Futures Studies (FS) emerged in the rich West and many, if not all, of its early expressions were culture-bound in ways that its practitioners seldom acknowledged. A whole tradition of futures work emerged from this starting point; a tradition that was predominantly empirical, embodied notions of predictability and control and entirely overlooked that other voices, other cultures, might have anything worthwhile to contribute. In other words, the type of FS emerging from this Western tradition all-too-often became an instrument of cultural hegemony. Though the dominant concept of FS is arguably that of ‘alternatives’, the latter were framed within a taken-for-granted world of Western rationality and financial-techno-political dominance. Hence many so-called ‘alternatives’ were merely micro-options available within the narrow confines of the dominant frame. The upshot was, and remains, a reduction in diversity, choice and, indeed, alternative futures.

It is for such reasons that the notion of ‘dissenting futures’ is a vital and positive one. Ashis Nandy suggests that,

‘for me, futures studies is basically a game of dissenting visions. It is an attempt to widen human choices: by reconceptualising political, social and cultural ends; by identifying emerging or previously ignored social pathologies that have to be understood, contained or transcended; and by linking up the fates of different polities and societies through envisioning their common fears and hopes.’

Similarly, Sohail Inayatullah writes, ‘real futures ... are perhaps those that cause cognitive dissonance, that do not make sense to the immediate - not because they are nonsensical but because we do not have the epistemological frames to comprehend them.’

So there are several reasons why the ‘dissenting futures’ theme is significant. First, Nandy’s point, that such futures enhance what might be called our ‘grammar’ of options. Second, that dissenting futures can call forth hitherto unknown or ignored ‘ways of knowing.’ I would also add a third - the fact that the dominant Western, materialist, reductionist, growth-and-marketing-oriented outlook is inherently unstable and hence unsustainable. Where the growth curves even out, it literally has no future. While there is plenty of room for conventional futures work within the globe-spanning meta-matrix of Western culture, more innovative ways forward are likely to be found in the emergence of new voices which will tend, on the whole, to be non-Western.

Such a view has nothing whatever to do with ‘political correctness.’ Rather, the prospects for humanity as a whole will be enhanced to the degree that the futures conversation is embraced by people from many cultures with diverse starting points, different languages and epistemologies and, indeed, ‘other ways of knowing.’ This theme has been flagged in Vols 1-3 of *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*.

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