New Futures Ahead: Genetics or Microvita?

Futurist Sohail Inayatullah looks ahead to the future of human civilization and the trends of multi-culturalism, globalization, and the understanding of the subtlest particles of consciousness, microvita.
by Sohail Inayatullah {mosgoogle}The conventional view of the future assumes that life will keep getting better. Income will go up, houses will increase in value, new technologies will make life better for all, even if in the short run some of us have to retrain. To be sure, there will be difficult times, but problems will be solved, either through government or business. OECD nations will remain fair societies, which take care of their most vulnerable members. This incremental view of the future is challenged by some who say we are coming into a post-industrial post-modern, ‘knowledge economy.’ Indeed, this is a time of many ‘posts’, meaning that the new era is being created, its outlines not yet clear, the institutional arrangements (what will government look like, who will watch over whom) still being sorted out. Deeper changes But perhaps the transformation is even deeper, challenging not just industrialism, but the entire rise of capitalism and of Western civilization, the Colombian era. Nano-technologies and artificial intelligence might make production on a scale never before possible. Of course, these technologies are not yet on-line but we are seeing hints of a society that challenges the idea that poverty will always be with us (well at least because of technological reasons). Smarter markets will soon be possible. Here all products can be bar-coded with complete pricing details (how much the Indonesian worker was paid, how many trees were cut down, how much the middle-man made), allowing consumers to vote with their dollars. ‘Standards’ will not just be the product’s physical quality (what it looks like, is it safe and safely made) but also its functional quality (how well it does what it claims to do) and its ethical quality. In this way, the Internet could level the inequalities of capitalism, creating a giant people’s market. Capitalism could also transform through another—global—depression, once the speculative bubble of the financial markets bursts. Multiculturalism will also play an important role, perhaps shattering any notion of one culture, one state, one knowledge system, one view of science. How will nations organize this gaia of civilizations; this ecology of different world-views? The nation-state as the sole holder of power has entered a terminal process (even if the passport office retains its power to deport). Whether it will take 50 years or a hundred, we know well that revolutions from below (non-governmental organizations), revolutions from above (international institutions), revolutions from capital (globalism), revolutions of culture (new ways of seeing self and other, of boundaries) and revolutions of technology (air travel, the Net) all make the nation-state deeply problematic. Of course, the Milosevics, the brahmins and mullahs won’t disappear. With no place to hold onto, they will fight until the bitter end, hoping that enough of us will retain our patriotism (and be willing to kill for it). They will hope to transform the quite legitimate concerns of individuals fearing change, corporate control, foreigners and loss of jobs into a politics of exclusion, of attacking the other. Governance What world might result from these historical revolutions in governance? There is a range of possibilities. One alternative is that one religious system dominates, creating a world church, temple or mosque. A second option is that one nation dominates, creating a world empire. The former is unlikely, as reality has become too fragmented. Neither Christians nor Muslims (or Buddhists) are likely to convert en masse tomorrow, even if Jesus, the Madhi, or Amida Buddha return. The problem of recognizing God is not likely to be solved in the year 2000, even if the Redeemer does return. The second option, world empire, is difficult given the democratic impulse. The only nation currently vying for the job is caught by its own democratic language. Disney and Microsoft are more likely victors than the US State Department, despite what conspiracy theorists in Belgrade, Baghdad, Beijing and Kuala Lumpur believe. But can the world capitalist economy—the third alternative—define identity? It has flourished because the economy has been global, expanding, while identity has been national, fixed, as has politics. With the nation in deep trouble, can a world economy with national politics continue? Localist movements—the fourth alternative—hope to capture the spaces created by the loss of national identity. However, in their attempts to be authentically local, to challenge corporatism, they find they must link with other environmental, spiritual, labor, organizations. Cyber-lobbying, the politics of the Net, too, forces them into global space. Localism only succeeds when it becomes global. Globalisms While we are halfway through the first phase of globalization, that is, of capital, phase two is likely to be the globalization of labor, Marx’s dream all along. If capital can travel freely, why not labor? Already, elite intellectual labor does, and soon other forms will. At the very least information the conditions of labor will, via "the smart products method," become global. The next wave will be the multicultural. News—not the details of reporting but what we report about—will begin to flow not just downwards from Hollywood, New York and London, but upward as well. Already, the best newspapers are those that include the feeds of many cultures. The Pakistani paper, The News, for example, far exceeds any reporting The New York Times might manage. As The News is weaker, it survives with feeds from Arab, South Asian, East Asian and Western sources. Not just news, but ideas, language, culture is beginning to filter all around, and even if Murdock is likely to standardize, still standardization is being challenged throughout the world. Customization is the likely future; technology allows it, and postmodernism provides the cultural legitimacy for it. The search for authenticity, even if largely about style, questions one’s presumed universal values; especially the male, western, technocratic, linear, capitalist basis of reality. History books (why are Muslims seen only as threats, why is the Pacific, the water continent, seen as irrelevant?) and children’s stories are all being deconstructed (why are witches constantly portrayed as evil?) and seen as a particular world-view (Europe defining what is true, good and beautiful), and not as universal (for more on this, see: http://www.others.com). Facts come to be through narratives, or at the very least, what meanings we give to the facts change. The final phase of globalization is likely to be a world security force, inklings of which we are already seeing. So, empire, one church, localism and a world capitalist economy built around nation-states seems nearly impossible to sustain. Thus we will soon move to a world government system with strong localist tendencies, with thousands of bio-regions. The guiding ethic will be a move from strategy to health and healing (of negotiating reality, difference, of reconciliation, and of having a big stick: the world security force) along with an up-to-

date Magna Carta guaranteeing the right of culture, language and income. The details are terribly important and burdensome, and how the Chinese will get along with the Americans is difficult to predict (just as the modern era was not possible to predict from the feudal). Many hope for a world government with strong localism. But this is unlikely, as localist systems alone do not survive because they get taken over. It is not love alone that will create this new world system. Genetics or Microvita? Where then is home? Where is our resting space? And who will create it? Will it be those who are part of the current system, those in the continued growth model of the future? Government leaders, corporate CEOs? Or will it be the "bedouins", those imagining a more organic connected future, those outside official power? As they challenge the last 500 years of history, working for new rights (for humans, animals and plants), for gender partnerships, for spirituality and for social activism (a moral economy and politics) can they succeed? The bedouins are steeped in ancient cyclical time. Those whom the bedouins oppose prefer a future of speed, the teflon self, and genetically recreated offspring: the double helix generation. They imagine a future with no limits and seem to have the wealth to create it. Are there any limits to the technological future? Gordon Moore, founder of both Intel and Moore’s law (that the number of devices on a piece of silicon doubles every year or two), when asked about the pace of change says: "We’re working with sizes so small, they’re hard to imagine; you could say the features are about the size of a virus… We currently use visible light to etch components on the semiconductors, but now we’re getting down to wavelengths for which ... no materials are transparent. You can’t make lenses any more. We’re looking at three major alternatives to go beyond what we do now: X-rays, electron beams, and something called extreme ultraviolet … The next problem we run across is the fact that materials are made out of atoms. I don’t see a way around that one." But perhaps the solution to these limits will be from outside the material, outside our expectations. P.R. Sarkar writes that the very nature of reality must be ideational and physical at the same time—microvita. At the crudest form they are viruses, at the deepest, they are pockets of energy that can be used to direct evolution and can carry information. Like the geneticists, he believes we are directing evolution; but it is being directed through our creative collective unconscious, through our aspirations for a different world. These aspirations become not mere visions of dreamers but the program for our social, if not biological, evolution. Which future will it be then? Incremental change? The globalist artificial society? The organic global community? Or a collapse followed by a strong moral order? Will the technocrats or the humanists win this one, or are we creating a world where neither one has the current metaphorical capacity to recognize the future? Sohail Inayatullah, Professor with the IMC, Unesco Chair at the University of Trier and visiting academic at Queensland University of Technology, is the author of numerous books on the future of knowledge, culture and technology. Publications in 1999 include, Situating Sarkar: Tantra, Macrohistory and Alternative Futures; Transcending Boundaries; Transforming Communication; and Islam, Postmodernism and Futures. He is associate editor of New Renaissance. © 1999 by the author.