

"The Future Has a Long Fuse"

An Interview with Jim Dator

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Interviewer: Rick Slaughter, October 1991)

Q: Jim, would you mind telling us how you got started in futures work?

JD: OK. But first let me point out that I have a chapter in a book edited by Michael Marien and Lane Jennings, titled, *What I Have Learned. Thinking about the Future Then and Now* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987) which goes over some of this information. The chapter is titled, "Hawaii 2000, The World Futures Studies Federation, and Me: Thinking Locally and Acting Globally." That is obviously a play on the well-known futures slogan, "Thinking Globally and Acting Locally." I'm trying to stress that in my life I have done just the opposite of what I guess I was supposed to have done. I have had the opportunity to see what the future looks like from a lot a different places on the globe, but I am still very much a victim of my own personal experiences and "culture." Anyway, back to your question.

From very early on--at least from high school and especially college, I was interested in two sorts of things. One was philosophy, especially ancient and medieval philosophy; and especially such questions as, "What is a 'good life'? What should a 'good state' be?" Ethical and moral questions about the purpose of social organizations always interested me. On the other hand, I was drawn to macro theories of social change, such as those of Spengler, Toynbee, and Marx. Later, in graduate school, I became particularly interested in two additional ideas. One was the concept of "development" which is very well known now, but was sort of a new idea back in the 1950s. The other was the notion, also then new, that it is possible to create a positive social science; especially that it is possible to predict specific political events, such as elections, legislative roll call votes, or the votes of members of the US Supreme Court. My graduate education, and initial academic career, was very much under the influence of what was then called "The Behavioral Revolution" in the social sciences. All of these experiences led me to wonder about the possibility of predicting and perhaps even guiding the future movement of all aspects of all societies.

However the catalytic event which threw me out of conventional political science scholarship into futures studies was something that happened to me while I was living in Japan. In fact, I went to Japan as a fresh PhD to teach, for six years at a Japanese university, Rikkyo Daigaku, in order to try to discover why Japan had industrialized so much more quickly than had any other nonWestern country. I came to understand the crucial relationship between values, technology, and society as a consequence. I also learned that, no matter how hard I tried, or how "Japanese" I thought I was, Japanese society is essentially impossible to penetrate from the outside. I thus learned to have a certain independence from culture which I guess many people never acquire. While I don't endeavor purposely to insult or ignore conventions, I don't feel in the slightest bound by them because for six years the culture to which I so fervently desired to adhere wouldn't accept me no matter how I behaved. If I did something thoroughly outrageous from a middle class American point of view, the Japanese tolerated it, but considered me to be a "hen na gaijin" (strange foreigner, or outsider) It I did something thoroughly conventional

from a middle class American point of view, they also tolerated it but still considered me to be a "hen na gaijin." No matter what I did, no matter how outrageous or conventional from my American point of view, the Japanese both tolerated it and rejected it. So when I came back to the US, I decided not to care what middle class America--or anyone else--thought about me. If it seemed right to me, I'd do it. If it seemed wrong (no matter how strongly my culture said it was right), I would resist it. And I found I could do so easily and without (as far as I can tell) any guilt about it.

But that still is not the catalytic event I want to mention. Rather, an American friend of mine, John Randolph, who was Associated Press Far Eastern correspondent for many years, showed me the draft of an article he had written titled, "The Senior Partner." Randolph took the theory of Spengler which describes the "stages" which all civilizations go through, and showed that both Japan and the West had gone through exactly the same stages, in exactly the same sequence, for almost exactly the same length of time for each stage. But, and this is what turned my world upside down, Randolph concluded that Japan went through those stages approximately 200 years AHEAD of the West.

If he was correct, the West could see its future in the present of Japan.

That was a truly new idea to me. I have no idea, now or then, whether Randolph is correct or not about any part of his thesis. But his argument sent me on my way as a futurist. I became, and have remained, fervently committed to studying ideas about the future of my society, and of all other societies and cultures in the world. Thus, I was a "futurist" from about 1963 onward.

Q. So what was the first practical step that you took after getting involved?

JD: Well, first of all, I began re-orienting all of my teaching so that there was a futures component to it. Then I began trying to find out what other people were beginning to say about the future. I began compiling a bibliography of books and articles dealing with the future--including that last paragraph or chapter of most books where "the future" is allegedly considered.

In 1966 I returned to the US from Japan--having regretfully concluded I could never become a Japanese--and happened to fall into a group of architects and artists teaching, as I was, at Virginia Polytechnic Institute in Blacksburg, Virginia. They were members of the Archigram Group from England. They made me think more about questions of design--especially social system design. One of my friends, David Greene, read some stuff I was writing and said, "Jim, you sound like Marshall McLuhan." I said, "Who?" because I had never heard of McLuhan, or Buckminster Fuller, or any of the other people David said I sounded like.

David told me that something called the World Future Society had just been formed in Washington, DC, not too far away, so I immediately affiliated with it and got to know the North American futures folks.

I also happened to run across one of Alvin Toffler's first pieces on the future in a hardback magazine called *Horizons*. The article was titled, "The Future as a Way of Life." I was thrilled by it. So I immediately began teaching my classes at

Virginia Tech with even more of a future orientation. And then, in 1967, got all the necessary university approvals to teach what may well be the first officially-approved, regularly-scheduled undergraduate university course on the future ever taught in the US--in fact, I got two of them approved.

The World Future Society also published that little bibliography I mentioned, which by then had become a rather big bibliography. And Eleonora Masini, with the group called IRADES in Rome, Italy, read it. She had just begun a future-documentation service herself, and we began corresponding. Later she invited me to Rome to meet with some other futurists from elsewhere in Europe to discuss setting up a futures library through IRADES. That is the way I got plugged into the European futures community which eventually became the World Futures Studies Federation.

Q. Can you tell us a little bit about those early days with the Federation?

JD: Well, in many ways they were not very much different from now. Probably the most interesting thing about the WFSF as an organization is that it is an early example of what I think is an increasing phenomenon. It is an organization that began transnationally, globally, and not nationally or locally. Unlike many organizations that begin in some city or nation and then become "international" by taking in foreign members (such as the World Future Society did in Washington, DC), the WFSF had its origins, from the beginning in 1967 in Oslo, Norway, as a meeting of people from many different parts of the world. The next meeting (the first that I attended) was in Kyoto, Japan in 1970. The next was in Bucharest, Romania in 1972, and the actual Founding Conference, where the WFSF was officially established as an international organization according to French law (as it still remains), was in Paris in 1973. Our other World Conferences, as we call them, have been in Rome, Dubrovnik, Cairo, Stockholm, San Jose (Costa Rica), Honolulu, Beijing, Budapest, and Barcelona. Our next World Conference will be in Turku, Finland, in August 1993. In addition, we have held regional meetings in Jakarta, Mexico City, West Berlin, Buffalo, The Hague, Zurich, Nagoya, and Sofia (Bulgaria), as well as in many of the cities I already mentioned. We expect our next regional meeting to be in Islamabad, Pakistan in October 1993.

Now we don't go from city to city in order just to jet set around the world. We do this for two very fundamental reasons: First, the future looks very different in different parts of the world. The future I see from Honolulu is not the same as the one I saw in Cairo or San Jose or Buffalo or Beijing. Since the WFSF is so poor--and in part deliberately so--we must rely totally on local organizers to fund our World and Regional Conferences. That means a heavy investment in local human resources and activities which those of us from the outside get to see "close up and personal" you might say during the conference. And that is the second reason too. By holding our World Conferences at different parts of the world, we mobilize and legitimate local future-oriented people, and the entire futures focus, thus strengthening local futures research, as well as broadening it, and the future work of all of us who are able to attend.

I must immediately point out we go to very great lengths to find ways to fund the attendance of futurists from all over the world, so that our meetings are not dominated either by the local futurists, or by those rich and/or powerful enough to pay their own way to the conferences. This, I believe, is a very important point. Of course, we don't ever have enough funds to see that "the

world" is any where nearly "fairly" represented, but we do our best to bring in people doing futures research from places or in situations which otherwise would not be able to attend. Thus, I think the term "World" Futures Studies Federation is probably more justified in our case than in many others. But we need to do much, much more!

Q: Can you identify what are the key factors that have enabled your operation to grow and become successful?

JD: Which one?

Q: At the University of Hawaii.

JD: Well, I think it all goes back to before I arrived at the University here; back to the mid 1960s when a group of local politicians and business and labor figures first heard about Daniel Bell's "Commission on the Year 2000," and decided to set up one of their own. Totally by coincidence, I came to the University just as the Commission on Hawaii 2000 had been created by Governor John Burns. One member of that Commission was Glenn Paige, also in the Department of Political Science of the University of Hawaii. He told the Commission that a futurist--me--had just joined the Department and that they should engage me to work with them, which I did. And the rest was, well, the future.

Q: What do you mean?

JD: The initial task of the Hawaii Commission was to convene, in 1970, a huge, Statewide, very-participative and extremely well-prepared Conference on the Year 2000. I can't tell you how fantastic that was. It still remains, in my experience as the best futures conference--and the best example of what Alvin Toffler calls "anticipatory democracy"--in the world. Read all about it in the book, *Hawaii 2000*, edited by George Chaplin and Glenn Paige, and published by the University of Hawaii Press in 1972.

One of the many outcomes of that Conference was that the State Legislature created the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies in 1971 and placed it at the University of Hawaii for administrative purposes. I was named Director. For a variety of reasons, it took a long time for the University formally to adopt it, but the Center has been housed in the Social Science Research Institute of the University from the very beginning. And when the Secretariat of the WFSF moved to Hawaii in 1983, the University finally got around to accepting the Center formally.

Also the Department of Political Science in the mid 1970s was interested in establishing programmatic areas at the MA level, and the Alternative Futures Option was established at that time. Also, because so many employers were calling me wanting to hire people to do futures research for them, that Option has, from the beginning, had an intern requirement. My students spend one year doing academic work in futures studies, then intern for a year and then, having discovered what they really need to know to be useful as futures consultants, return for more study before going on as professional consulting futurists--or else they stay on for PhD work, writing their dissertation from some kind of an alternative futures perspective.

But you know, I would say that the real reason for my "success", as you put it, is my students. The students in the Alternative Futures Option sort of "infected" the rest of the faculty, and other students, with the futures bug. They began to ask questions and do research papers in other classes which led many of my colleagues, and other students, to become futurists themselves, in one way or the other.

So I would say the bottom line of my "success" is determination and continuity. Or, as I say, I have learned that the future has a long fuse. Unlike many futurists, I have pretty much stayed put at the University of Hawaii, and so I have had a chance to have generations of students take my courses, graduate, go on for more futures work, or just enter "the real world." They are now the captains of industry and the leaders of government (OK, some of them are. Others are in prison). But, in the process, "futures studies" here has become a normal, expected, part of life. Something you naturally do.

Q: Have you noticed any particular pattern of response in your students?

JD: Well, inspite of what I just said, I think that interest in futures studies in general depends upon the mood that people are in at the present time, so in the sixties, when I began, the future seemed extremely bright to most of my students. They were very positive and upbeat. Then we went through the shocks of the seventies--Vietnam, the oil crises, economic restructuring and all the rest--and the future seemed horrible. Interest in futures studies clearly dropped off. Then came the 80s. Even though from my point of view the 80s were, objectively speaking, much worse than the 70s, and certainly far worse for the future, my students became very upbeat again.

The absolutely worse time was right at the end of the 70s when Ronald Reagan, beginning to run for the presidency, introduced the idea of "winable nuclear war." A lot of my older students, who had either been Vietnam veterans or war protestors, dropped out. They couldn't take it. And some even committed suicide.

At the present time, interest in the future is extremely high among my students, and in most parts of the world, in fact. The futures consulting business, per se, is very good now--until the Depression, when business, or at least American business, will do the worst possible thing: stop looking at the future at all.

Q: Have your views on technology and culture changed over the past twenty years?

JD: They've fluctuated, but I wouldn't say they've changed. I frequently say that one thing that makes me interested in the future is that I know nothing, and care nothing, about my past. I have no "culture." I don't know my ethnicity. I have no idea where the name "Dator" came from. Do you? I always ask people, and while I get some interesting suggestions, actually no one knows. And I don't give a damn.

However, I know that most people of the world care very much--far too much--about their ethnic background, so I have alternated back and forth between being sympathetic with ethnic revival movements and being unsympathetic

and worried about their dangerous side. With the rise of nationalism in Europe again, I'm beginning to feel even more unsympathetic to ethnic identity questions. This makes me question even those which are on the rise here in Hawaii, as in Australia and especially New Zealand, of course.

Q. How far do you go along with Bob Jungk and his ideas that the future is made primarily by people and that technologies are just a secondary consideration?

JD: Not very far if he says it the way you've just said it because I see technology as a major cause of social change. Of course I certainly don't believe for a single minute that people are passive and have no role in envisioning and creating their preferred future. To the contrary. But I think that there are many forces creating the future of which the will of the people is one. "Will" alone is never enough, and, more importantly, "will" is influenced by peoples' experiences--what they are able to do, and not to do--and technology plays a major role in enabling them to have new experiences and/or in making it difficult or impossible to have older ones. That is why I look at technology as a major agent of social change: it conditions human ideas.

I think that technology humanizes and re-humanizes us. Humans are never without technology. We have had different kinds at different periods and cultures, but I consider it silly to talk about "technology on a human scale" or even "appropriate technology" without recognizing that past experiences shaped by past technologies have created our ideas of what "a human scale" is, or what "appropriate technology" is. New technologies change the human scale, and may, in retrospect (or more adequate foresight) be seen as "appropriate" after all.

Q. I believe you co-authored an article not long ago called something about the rights of robots.

JD: That actually was written by Sohail Inayatullah and Phil McNally, two former students of mine who worked in the futures research unit of the Hawaii Judiciary. They wrote a paper for the Judiciary which argued that, given the development of "rights" historically, on the one hand, and the probably development of artificial intelligence and automation on the other, that it is not unlikely that at some point in the not-too-distant future, robots will demand rights--and get them.

Q: So the point of this is really to stretch our thinking in the present?

JD: Not at all. I think that is a real possibility. I really believe that we are moving into a wholly artificial world, and that we might very well be the last, or near the last, generation of *homo sapiens* in the form it has been for perhaps a 100,000, certainly 50,000, years. Indeed, "humanism" will soon join all the other "isms" of sexism, racism, ageism, etc. as an illegal and immoral sentiment. We are creating our own intelligent successors, our own children if you will, and we had better begin expanding our understanding of love and life beyond ourselves or any other "naturally" evolved flora and fauna on the globe, and beyond the globe itself.

Q: Well, Jim, that's a very challenging note to end this interview. Thank you very much.

JD: Thank you very much for letting me talk.