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Futurist History Comes Out of the Closet

by Jay Herson



I was cleaning out my closet last month and was surprised to find the World Future Society conference volume for its Sixth General Assembly with the theme “Future View: The 1990s and Beyond.” This was the first WFS annual meeting that I attended. It was held in Washington DC July 16-20, 1989.

The conference volume itself was entitled “The Future: Opportunity Not Destiny” and was edited by Professor Howard F. Didsbury, Jr. whose “Introduction to Futurist Methods” tutorial I attended the day before the conference began. The meeting itself was very exciting for a “relatively” young person trying to learn what futurism was all about. I remember the impressive panel of leading futurists at the opening plenary session making their predictions for the 1990s. I can still see Marvin Cetron predicting that the Berlin Wall would come down in 1993. I had never considered that happening in my lifetime. When the wall fell later that year I became even more interested in following futurists if not becoming one myself.

It is fascinating to see what 1989 futurists, most of who are leading futurists today, were writing about back then. The recurring theme of the conference volume articles was the accelerating change, decline in US productivity and standard of living, and global threats to the environment and peace. An article by Gregg Edwards and David Pearce Snyder entitled “The Enterprising Community: Leading America into the 21st Century” has the thesis that the liberalization of communist political systems appears to offer hope on reduced global tensions while the simultaneous rise of ethnic and sectarian militancy throughout the world threatens to plunge us all into an era of growing international terrorism. While optimistic about third world nations’ rapid industrialization leading to improved living conditions, they predict that the U.S. will have continued decline in productivity and more than 10% of Americans may be unable to afford decent housing by the year 2000. Skyrocketing health care costs would be expected to impoverish 1/3 to 1/2 of our elderly by 2000 and that the U.S. government had “neither the resources nor resolve to restore our environment.” Edwards and Snyder argue that the social democracies of Western Europe should be the U.S. model for the 21st Century. They advocate grassroots Enterprise Communities for economic development rather than depend on government or business to achieve national goals. In a related article entitled “The Labor Movement and the Redesign of the Workplace” Arthur B. Shostak wrote that empowering labor unions and their alliance with productivity researchers was the step needed to improve productivity.

John W. Kiser in his article “Why US Industries Should be Looking at Soviet Technology” sees the Soviet technologies as the way to improve U.S. productivity. He mentions vinyl acetate production methods, semi-conductors, peaceful uses of atomic/nuclear energy, ceramic manufacturing, surgical stapling and food processing among other examples. With R&D costs in the Soviet Union much lower than in the U.S. he advocates partnerships between American industry and Soviet science centers. A footnote shows that Mr. Kiser’s primary business was technology transfer between the USSR and US.

William E. Halal in “One World: The Union of a New Capitalism and a New Socialism” is fascinated by Mikhail Gorbachev’s comment in 1988 that the world was becoming a “single global organism.” He predicted a convergence between capitalism and socialism that will embody similar blends of democracy, social welfare and free enterprise. This convergence was essential to support the coming knowledge based economy. In a related article, “Perestroika in America,” Steven M. Clark sees the “public interest partnership” as a way of achieving Halal’s vision of a blend of capitalism and socialism. He shows how these partnerships could blend capitalism market efficiency with planning and cooperation for the overall social interest. In so doing he argues that the Soviet Union was not an “evil empire” and although a one-party system prevailed it was a much better provider of some democratic rights and market planning than the one-party dictatorships of South America.

Remembering 1989

- Fall of the Iron Curtain and Berlin Wall
- Tiananmen Square riots in China
- France celebrated its bicentennial as a republic
- California—median price of a home \$196,000; median family income, family of four-\$41,000
- Best Film—*Driving Miss Daisy*
- Best Actress Jessica Tandy in *Driving Miss Daisy*
- Best Actor—Daniel Day Lewis in *My Left Foot*
- Earthquake in San Francisco during the third game of the World Series
- Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska
- Time Magazine’s Man of the Year—Mikhail Gorbachev
- Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan
- Kurt Waldheim elected President of Austria amidst complaints of a Nazi-sympathetic past
- Pete Rose accepts lifetime ban from baseball for gambling
- A TV show called *Seinfeld* makes its debut
- First federal computer indictment for a graduate student planting a computer virus
- Voyager II sends back outstanding photos of Neptune and its moon Triton

It was Joseph N. Pelton who picked up on globalization and the pre-internet electronic age in “Future Talk: Coping with Our Electronic Technologies.” He speaks of a global electronic village but through satellite telephone and television communication and distributed data processing via telecommunications technology rather than the internet. He is concerned that world leaders are not at all aware that the world was becoming smaller and the implications of this trend. He saw the Pacific Rim nations becoming the new focus of global political and economic power in the 21st Century. The principal Pacific Rim powers he saw emerging were Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan. Interestingly he adds that this group might *possibly* include China and India. Pelton sees the trend of decreasing manufacturing jobs in developing nations and that artificial intelligence expert systems will be replacing highly skilled service jobs by 2005 and that artificial intelligence rather than the internet would be the economic engine of the 21st Century. Although he saw financial transactions, travel arrangements and consumer purchasing being automated, he saw all of these happening with distributed data processing or some level of artificial intelligence using human intervention rather than the empowerment of the internet. Pelton speaks of the 168 hour work week in the global electronic village rather than use the term 24/7. He predicts human evolution as a result of artificial intelligence and of everyone being “plugged into a global electronic machine” but stops short of using the term “singularity.” He speaks of electronic terrorism. Could he have been thinking of virus proliferation and SPAM?

Other articles in the conference volume deal with the creation of colonies on other planets and their moons as a way of escaping the environmental problems of earth, problems of futurists relating to other professionals and the public, biotechnology as a way of saving the U.S. agricultural sector, the need for a manifesto for the coming information age, etc.

So, here we are in 2007. The Soviet Union does not exist but China and India have emerged as economic powers. The internet has become a vital communications link and economic engine and globalization accelerator. However the US still has stagnant economic growth and has almost given up on resurrecting productivity centers of the past whose economic base was manufacturing. We still have the global environmental threats but recent events show that something akin to “public interest partnerships” may be forming to deal with this issue. Most Americans can’t afford the housing they want and go into debt to buy less than their dream. The 1989 futurists did a good job of telling us where we were heading and suggesting possible, although somewhat utopian, solutions to the 21st Century problems. I look forward to reading the 2007 conference volume.

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POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- *Are predictions from futurists generally more accurate in some areas of human endeavor (e.g., economics, the environment, technology, living and working patterns) more than in others? If so, which ones?*
- *Which futurist methodologies are most effective in obtaining forecasts that are “on target”? What factors generally cause futurists’ forecasts to be “off the mark”?*
- *In 2020, will futurists be more effective in relating to professionals and the general public than they are today? If so, will this be universal or only in certain parts of the world?*