

GLOBAL TRANSFORMATIONS AND WORLD FUTURES: KNOWLEDGE, ECONOMY, AND SOCIETY

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Summary

This theme maps the future, looking at four elements. The first is globalization. The second considers the foundational transformations in nature, truth, reality, and man. The third element comprises various scenarios of the future. The fourth element is an exploration of a preferred future.

1. Introduction

This theme is focused on mapping the future of humanity. The map has four main elements. One is concerned with transformations in the world economy, particularly focused on the impacts of globalization. Globalization is considered to have numerous integrated facets. These include economic globalization (the free flow of finances), cultural globalization (the free flow of ideas), and political globalization (the legitimacy of neoliberalism). However, these are so contested that the free flow of economic globalization is considered by many to be the ascendancy of multinational corporations, concentrating wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people. Cultural globalization is generally considered to be the further Westernization of culture, a process now exacerbated through postmodernity, which allows for the pretense of multiculturalism but still within the context of Western secularism. Granting political legitimacy to international bodies is considered to erode national sovereignty, a sovereignty that protects the labor and culture of those nations that are poorer or structurally disadvantaged in the world economic system.

Another element of the map of the future comprises transformations in knowledge, particularly in social and cultural knowledge. For this second element, two factors are crucial. The first is the globalization of science, meaning the corporatization and universalization of sciences and the development of postnormal science (a term used to categorize the full range of alternative science, including science outside the current paradigm, indigenous science, non-Western science, and feminist science). The second factor is the development of the Internet and its creation of cyberspace, a new space for the creation, accumulation, and dissemination of knowledge. The combining of these factors is generally considered to signal the onset of the information society, part of the linear progressive development of human society (from agricultural to industrial to information; see “Transformations of information society”). Other crucial factors include the genetics revolution, the feminist revolution, postmodernism, and multiculturalism. Taken together, these revolutions challenge traditional and modernist notions of nature, truth, reality, and “man.”

The third element of the map is concerned with world futures. What are the grand scenarios of the future? They include the globalized artificial society, the communicative-inclusive society, continued growth/business as usual, and societal collapse. The fourth element is more prescriptive. It considers what is necessary for a sustainable future. Under critique is the humanistic basis of the Enlightenment, the linearity of the development model, and the industrial metaphor that defines social organization. At issue, then, is not merely what the world system will look like, or even what the structural parameters of the world system are likely to be, but what *ought* the future be like – the fourth element of the map.

The thrust of this theme is not a summary of the particular articles or the general topic entries; rather, it is an overall framework for thinking about the short- (five to ten years), medium- (fifty years) and long-term (500 to 1,000) future of humanity.

While change has often been dramatic, the science and technology revolution now makes it particularly momentous. Technological, social, and economic transformations are important for us to understand, as the future – while an open space – is not an empty space. Our images, our history, are already creating it, colonizing it. The issue is, can we change or transform the trends we believe are disastrous for humanity? And if so, how?

To begin with, thinking about the future does not necessarily entail predicting the specifics of what will happen. It is, however, about developing the capacity for social foresight, for understanding the context and depth of the changes we are undergoing. For some futurists, we are in the midst of a 50-year transformation, the end of the cold war. For others, we are in the midst of a 500-year transformation, where the world that emerged at the end of the Middle Ages – modernity – is now on the verge of a fundamental transformation. For a few futurists, this represents not just the end of the modern era, but part of a deeper transformation. It is a bifurcation to a planetary culture: the end of patriarchy and tribalism. For some this big jump is technological: robots, genetics, and outer space. For others it is essentially spiritual: meditation, Gaia, and a universal renaissance based on authentic communication with the other.

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Biographical Sketch

Dr. Sohail Inayatullah is Professor, Center for Futures Studies, Tamkang University, Taiwan; Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of the Sunshine Coast, Maroochydore, Australia. In 1999, he held

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