



laetus in praesens

Alternative view of segmented documents via Kairos

August 2001

Presenting the Future

an alternative to dependence on human sacrifice through global pyramid selling schemes

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Paper Abstract for: World Futures Studies Federation XVII World Conference, Brasov, Romania (5-9 Sept 2001)

Introduction

Abstract: Explores ways of making understanding of the future meaningful in 'the present' moment by giving it a new operational form of actuality and immediacy that 'the future' tends to lack when it is described in terms of scenarios that may become a reality at some distant time. 'Presenting' is therefore used here in a much stronger and more radical sense of 'making present' rather than in the more common, weaker and more dissociated sense characteristic of 'presentations' about the future. This approach responds to the often dramatic, concrete challenges of personal survival through the austerity gap between present circumstances and the future time when their unsatisfactory conditions may possibly be remedied by proposed initiatives. From the prevailing perspective it is argued that many contemporary proposals are difficult to distinguish from variants of Ponzi schemes in which people are called upon to invest psychological or material resources in ways that benefit the few 'in the present' without any guarantee of benefit to the many 'in the future'. In this light the paper explores enhancement of quality of life, and sense of well-being, in the present -- and the ways in which 'the futures' that can emerge are necessarily embodied embryonically in the understanding of the present moment -- to a greater degree than is implied by efforts purporting to remedy external conditions towards such ends. It therefore explores 'the future' as a distinct way of being in 'the present', rather than as how people might experience 'the present' in some projected 'future'. This requires new consideration of the kinds of conceptual feedback loops essential to sustaining well-being in the moment, whether or not such considerations have long been characteristic of some non-western cultures. It takes account of the variety of cultural understandings distinguishing, or failing to distinguish, the present from the past or the future (typical of the prevailing 'arrow of time' model) -- and the challenge of providing a coherent framework for such a diversity of worldviews. The challenge of articulating and understanding such a 'global' framework is seen here as raising many issues with respect to 'local' understandings of experience in the moment, which must necessarily impact upon commitment to 'development' through time as currently advocated.

The inspiration and preoccupation of this paper is with the loss of the present as a moment-by-moment experience. This experience is either projected onto the future in terms of hopes or anxieties, or fragmented and commodified as discrete consumables by which people may immediately be tempted.

Whether for the individual, a group, a nation or the world, there is much investment in the articulation of desirable futures that might be planned for or purchased -- to avoid less desirable futures. This kind of focus on the future, and the ways of getting there, distracts from the lived experience of the moment, from *nowness* -- where most people are necessarily obliged to live and move and have their being. Much is said about the quality of life that might be achieved in the future -- whether near or far. Little is however said about how people can more fruitfully experience the present moment in anticipation of such changes -- if indeed they are ever brought about. Many people are effectively being subject to a form of Pyramid Selling (or Ponzi) scheme through the manner in which they are encouraged to buy into a future -- sacrificing the present -- in a process that offers no response to their well-being of the moment. The calls for investment in the future -- repeatedly neglecting any investment in the present -- increasingly parody the pitches of 'snake oil' salesmen.

'Presenting the future', in this paper, is therefore about how the present may be experienced in order to generate a more fruitful future. But it is also about how the future may then be understood in new ways from such a contrasting way of experiencing the present. In this sense it is an exploration of why the proposed futures of the past have not worked and why -- contrary to what is claimed -- those presented now are equally unlikely to work for many subscribing to them.

An early inspiration for this paper came from involvement under Johan Galtung in the Forms of Presentation subproject of the Goals, Processes and Indicators of Development (GPID) project that he coordinated for the United Nations University in the period 1979-82 (see Judge, 1984). The challenge of 'future generation' was briefly explored in a paper (<https://www.laetusinpraesens.org/docs/converse.php#future>) for the 15th Conference of the World Future Studies Federation (Brisbane, 1997), itself partially triggered by the initiative of Saul Kuchinsky through the UniS Institute and partially by articulations of

phenomenology by Francisco Varela (1997) in relation to mindfulness.

More recently, however, it was inspired by exposure to the psycho-social role of music on the west coast of Ireland (cf Steve Coleman, 1996). In this respect, if guidance were to be given to the spirit in which this paper could fruitfully be read -- as is given to those playing a musical score -- then the keywords might be: lilt, fey, sparkle, green, wit, tragedy, ancient mystery!

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Part 2: [Making \(the\) Present and Thriving in the Moment](#)

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Conclusion

Postponement of 'coming together': Individually we appear to have bought into a socially reinforced process dissociating from the present moment -- encouraged by collective initiatives promoting investment in the future. In the present moment, this has the effect of trapping people in what amounts to temporal dungeons (sweatshops, slave pits, etc) on the promise, in development schemes, that 'everything will all come together' someday -- as exemplified by current hype in favour of globalization. This 'coming together' is a denial of the arrow of time model underlying such proposals -- of which there will always be more of the same. The model offers no convergence -- except at the end of the universe or after death. People have effectively been transformed into waiters -- encouraged to work in a temporal waiting room in anticipation of the happy day. The incidence of Alzheimer's disease now offers a tragic caricature of the individual's relationship to the present in contemporary society. The future will recognize this to be as cruel as the crude practices of slavery and colonialism -- of which this is a temporal variant.

It is understandable that in historical terms humanity would traverse mutual mistreatment in its spatial (territorial, *habeus corpus*) manifestations before becoming sensitive to its more elusive temporal analogues. It is useful to recognize the extent to which the current manipulation of space-time through project logic -- based on forms of pyramid selling -- is dependent on human sacrifice, whether literally or metaphorically. The present has been turned into an unrecognized altar on which people are sacrificed to the future. This is typified by the worst of assembly line and sweatshop practices, and the enshrined drudgery of the housewife.

Loss of the future: Ironically, at a time when much is made of 'the future', for increasing numbers of people there is 'no future'. They have no sense of having any future. The future has been removed. For many there is a similar loss of the past, as traditional communities are destroyed. They have 'no past'. Much has been made of this sense of rootlessness and loss of history. The past has thus also been removed. Curiously however people are encouraged to take up mortgages, acquire obligations (*giri*), or are forced into some form of bonded labour (in certain societies). In the word mortgage, the *mort-* derives from death (as in mortician) and *-gage* is from the sense of pledge to forfeit something of value if a debt is not repaid. So mortgage is literally a dead pledge. It was dead for two reasons, the property was forfeit or "dead" to the borrower if the loan were not repaid and the pledge itself was dead if the loan was repaid. For many their future has been heavily mortgaged. In this sense both past and future have been devastated and people have been alienated from the present.

Cultivating the present moment: Much has been achieved through industrialization -- but much has also been lost. Nevertheless industrialization, like globalization, is still recommended as a pancea. The point to make here however is not a stress on 'back to the land' or romanticizing the wild, rather it is the patterns of thinking that have been lost to many through this disconnection. Industrial environments rarely offer reminder's of patterns in nature -- with the ironic exception of the atria of expensive hotels. Traditional farming offers, metaphorically, patterns of sensitivity to an individual's immediate environment that are absent in an industrialized environment.

This paper raises the question as to whether individuals can 'farm the present' for themselves. Is it possible to engage in patterns of relationship with the present moment that nourish in significant ways -- whether or not material foods are adequate? Are there 'fields' to be ploughed and irrigated, 'crops' to be cultivated, 'animals' to be husbanded -- in the microseconds of attention that characterize the present moment, rather than the grosser temporal preoccupations of the day? Are such patterns vital to engendering a more fruitful future?

How may the present moment be more fruitfully encountered or grokked?:

- One approach is to 'grasp' or seize it -- *Carpe Diem!* This approach is very consistent with a particular style of western opportunism, dimensions of which are frequently criticized by feminists. It is useful to speculate that, like many women, reality may have its own resistance to such grasping (see [discussion](#)) !
- From a different extreme, the moment may be seen in the light of giving birth -- as a process of continuous labour -- giving birth to the future. There are myths which recognize this perspective. The present may indeed be felt as pregnant with significance. Alternatively it might be understood as continuous intercourse between two aspects of reality -- again a perspective acknowledged in some cultures.
- More accessibly the moment might be experienced as a process of flirting with reality, as a form of continuing courtship between self and other. In this sense it could be experienced as a dance of changing style and rhythm. One might be enfolded by the experience of the moment, or switch to enfolding the moment.
- The present might also be understood as a dramatic moment in a continuing drama, with elements of tragedy, comedy and sublime significance. The future might be given form in the present through dramatic enactment in which others are cast in

suitable roles.

- The moment might be experienced as one of creative composition -- composing the moment, possibly orchestrated to include a variety of instruments, singers and musical styles. The art, in the moment, would be tuning the parts into a melodic whole -- however melodic is to be interpreted as meaningful. This art has been most assiduously practiced and advocated by the Renaissance leader [Marsilio Ficino](#) who headed the Florentine Academy (motto: *Laetus in Praesens* [Joy in the Present]). His approach is skillfully interpreted by Thomas Moore (1982), notably in a chapter on the *Well-Tempered Life*, and with the endorsement of depth psychologist James Hillman (1975) (see [summary](#))
- Can music, or singing, be embodied in the moment to engender a more coherent and meaningful future as suggested by the work of the philosopher, Antonio de Nicolas (1978), using the non-Boolean logic of quantum mechanics (P A Heelan, 1974) in exploring the epistemological significance of cognitive experience grounded in tone and the shifting relationships between tone in the *Rg Veda*. It is through the pattern of musical tones that the significance of the *Rg Veda* is to be found:

'Therefore, from a linguistic and cultural perspective, we have to be aware that we are dealing with a language where tonal and arithmetical relations establish the epistemological invariances... Language grounded in music is grounded thereby on **context dependency**; any tone can have any possible relation to other tones, and the shift from one tone to another, which alone makes melody possible, is a shift in perspective which the singer himself embodies. Any perspective (tone) must be 'sacrificed' for a new one to come into being; the song is a radical activity which requires **innovation** while maintaining **continuity**, and the 'world' is the creation of the singer, who shares its dimensions with the song.' (1978, p. 57)

This offers new dimensions to sacrifice that contrast with those required by contemporary economics. The physical effects of resonance from sound are well known. Can such psychological analogues be set up to engender the future and exert a time-binding force? Within such a context, can analogues to overtones as vehicles for particular forms of understanding?

- Another approach to the moment is through humour. Many spiritual traditions celebrate the moment through humour, notably in folk tales such as those of Nasruddin. Some taoists, and others (Chogyam Trunpa, 1991), practice a form of '[crazy wisdom](#)' to cut through mental clutter surrounding fruitful appreciation of the moment.

Separately, or as complementary attitudes, any of the above could effectively used to make of the present 'Camelot-in-the-Moment'.

Right to quality of well-being in the moment: Much has necessarily been made of the rights of individuals to tangibles (food, health, etc) and to intangibles manifest over time (freedom of information, freedom of religion, etc). Little attention has focused on the rights to what Christopher Alexander has discussed as the 'quality without a name' (*Timeless Way of Building*, 1979) as manifested in the moment. Industrialized society has however come to recognize aspects of its importance under the term 'quality time' or in the increasing difficulty for top corporations to retain valuable executives. But the point was made long ago by the realization that 'man cannot live by bread alone'.

The question raised here is whether a future of quality in the moment can be continually postponed to provide tangibles for some, and promises of tangibles to others -- with little attention to the quality of experience in the moment.

Aesthetics of nowness: There is an aesthetics to nowness that is being lost in industrialized society. This has been reviewed by Gary DeAngelis in relation to Shintoism and Zen in Japan (, *Zen And The Art Of Teaching: the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom*, *Diotima: a philosophical review*, 2, 2001, 1). He argues that from this perspective:

...beauty is tied into mortality and a deep awareness of the frailty of life, beauty and love. This awareness leads to a heightened sensitivity to and appreciation of the immediacy of things or the nowness of life. This is most clearly manifested in the Japanese concepts of *mono-no aware* and *yugen*.... I think that *aware* could also be translated as a sensitivity to things, an incredible and profound sensitivity to life in its very 'beingness' or 'isness'--a sensitivity to the wonder, beauty and pathos of things because of the transitory nature of life....

If we add to this the notion of *naka ima*, with its emphasis on living in the purity of the present moment, we perhaps come closest to the uniqueness of the Japanese religious worldview. It is here that we see a vision of life not based on rational abstractions and artificial social conventions but in emotional and aesthetic sensitivity to the beauty and pathos of life.

This understanding is quite elusive at the rational level--so, how does one acquire this? Where does one look? This leads us to the notion of *yugen*. *Yugen* is a symbolic word used to describe the mysterious, the profound, the remote--things not easily grasped nor expressed in words--a region lying well beyond form....The *yugen* is this elusive place, this silence which lies beyond our rational grasp. It may be impossible to explain the *yugen* but we can intuitively sense it....

What needs to be emphasized here is the centrality of pure feeling, experience and sensitivity of the quality of the lived moment. For the Japanese the realization of truth at this level is what makes life extraordinary.

Clearly religions with other aesthetic and spiritual emphases -- notably Christian religions -- would attach quite different terms to such experience.

A focus for such explorations is the significance in many cultures of the natural spring -- stylized and enhanced in fountains. It is the upwelling of the spring which beautifully epitomizes the emergence of the present moment -- defining the future and its transition into the past. In the brief moment of emergence it holds imaginative magical qualities that have made it a focus for human architecture down the ages. Unfortunately, in practice it is surrounded by material accretions that deny the quality of that moment whilst claiming to enhance it. It is in the world of these accretions that industrialized culture encourages people to live. Spring water is commodified as bottled water

imported from afar -- and the qualities of the present moment are commodified in media moments.

'Time past and time future, What might have been and what has been, Point to one end, which is always present.' (T. S. Eliot)

"To master attention is to hold consciousness like a paintbrush and transform one's life into living art." (Vivian Wright)

'The future will be made by the people who can relate to the present' (Allan Howard)

Laetus in Praesens [Joy in the Present -- motto of the Florentine Academy]

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