

## **Looking Backwards into the Future: using qualitative methods to survey assumptions about the future.**

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The following paper reports on an anthropological variant of the Delphi technique I've used to solicit future narratives from students that we then examine for their underlying assumptions about "the future" and "progress" as ethnocentric chronotypes re-inscribing the hegemony of Western ideologies and institutions onto future possibilities. The purpose of this is not to proffer our own futuristic predictions, but to utilize the collected narratives as a way to precipitate what Herbert Marcuse called the "The Great Refusal," i.e., the resistance to the one-dimensionality of capitalism's culture.

I begin with an introduction to future studies, including anthropology's ambivalent role in that body of discourse. In the third part, I introduce some examples of the narratives I've collected from students over a two-year period and suggest their utility in gesturing a future marked less by consensus than by radical alterity.

### **The quantitative future**

The most well-known sorts of futures are the predictive sort—the 52-year cycles discovered by Nikolai Kondratieff (the Kondratieff Long Wave) that have been used

to predict the boom and bust of the capitalist system over the past century (Westwood).

This has been recently extended to the world capitalist system as a whole, notably by the economist Dasseg (1993, 1999) and by Wallerstein (2000), who finds in them a vindication for his own world-system theories. AS Wallerstein explains (2000:250):

The period 1945 to today is that of a typical Kondratieff cycle of the capitalist world-economy, which has had as always two parts: an A-phase or upward swing or economic expansion that went from 1945 to 1976-73, and a B-phase or downward swing or economic contraction that has been going from 1967-73 to today and probably will continue on for several more years.

The idea, of course, is hardly a new one, and underlies the stagial narratives of Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, Karl Marx and others, all of whom traced the history of nations or of political economy in sinusoid cycles of boom and bust.

Of course, these are backed up by economic data, etc., but the narrative remains the same: a cybernetic monologue on the positive- and negative-feedback, together with the inevitable “corrections” that have been naturalized as inevitable in neoliberal cosmology. From Wallerstein (2000: 257-58):

The capitalist world economy has long maintained itself, as a system does, by mechanisms that restore equilibrium every time its processes move away from it. The equilibrium is never restored immediately, but only after a

sufficient deviation from the norm occurs, and, of course, it is never restored perfectly/

And these sorts of boom-bust cycles stimulate other sorts of change. As Broadbent (2003:635-36, *World Futures*, 631-637, John Broadbent, 59(8))

These waves of creative destruction crash through socio-culture every fifty-five years on average and, in doing so, change all the institutions and organizations of an economic, political or social nature. (635-36)

Other simulations, generating future predictions mostly from linear projections (and linear regressions) based on the past, are following the same, general method. Thus, the World3 simulation, developed for the Club of Rome, unfolds according to that timeworn, procrustean bed. That is, World3 is essentially a Malthusian growth model: growth precipitates exponential demand, depleting the world's resources and precipitating ecological and economic disaster

What Kondratieff long-waves suggest is a fundamentally conservative approach. After all, it hardly motivates one to revolutionary action if one already knows one is locked with a sinusoid pattern anyway—just ride the long-wave, as it were. On the other had, the neo-Malthusians prognostications of the Club of Rome or Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* could well be utilized for progressive causes (and have been), in this case, activism and policy designed to address imminent catastrophe. Of course, these are all structured in the familiar Malthusian tale of the

fecund under-class, with its spiraling birth rates, the barely concealed racism of which continues to dog international population control groups today.

However, as Reed Riner (HO art, p. 299) has remarked, whether reactionary or progressive, these simulations share a dogged linearity:

At any moment in its progress the model may be arrested to display—once the numbers are decrypted—as an image of the future. The kinds of images are, as economist-futurist Robert Theobald has often remarked in private communications, “surprise-free, zero imagination” images of the future.

In a world of frequent surprises, simulations ensure that the future we envision will be a bland recapitulation of the past. To say that they are obsolete is to ignore the continued usefulness of World3 and other global simulations (remember that global warming?) (cf. Meadows *et al* 2004). Nevertheless, these stand in striking contrast to simulations and modeling premised on complexity, e.g., those models of change developed at the Sante Fe Institute for the Future (although, as I argue in the next chapter, these exercises in ‘unpredictability’ are only too predictable). And, moreover, they hardly jive with the actual track of what has been the field of “future studies” from the 1960-s.

### The turn to Future Studies

As futurists of all kinds are fond of saying, they do not offer predictions. One of the founding futurists, Jim Dator (4), explains:

Everyone agreed that future studies does not try to “predict” the future, in the sense of saying precisely what will happen to an individual, organization or country before it actually happens. However, many of the authors admit that they were originally drawn into futures in the hope that—indeed, often in the firm belief that—it would be possible to predict the future if one just had the correct theory, methods, data, and, of course, enough funding.

Indeed, the discipline of “future studies” (with Master’s granting programs at University of Hawaii, University of Houston and other places) is much more involved with the elicitation and description of “alternative futures”. Again, Jim Dator (1998, 4):

Most futurists therefore \_forecast\_ a wide variety of “alternative futures” rather than predicting “the future.” They also seek to help people (students, clients community groups, even entire nations) invent and try to move to their “preferred future,” at the same time monitoring their progress towards it, and reconsidering their preference in the light of new information and experience gained as time goes by.

And, As Textor (Mead, 21) writes:

To recapitulate: Anticipatory Anthropology is more generally about designing Through articulating alternative future scenarios, than about predicting a particular future.

And, in Cole and Razak (195, 378):

Sociologist Wendell Bell asserts that ‘Futurists aim to discover or invent, examine and evaluate, and propose possible, probably and desirable futures. They seek to know what can be, what might be and what out to be. They try to render decision making, choosing policy objectives and designing social action more intelligent and effective by providing prospective thinking about alternative futures.

But there is a lot of ambiguity in “invent,” “discover” and “propose,” and therein lies the role of anthropology.

Several methodologies have been developed within the auspices of future studies that echo anthropological fieldwork techniques in interesting (and often unacknowledged) ways. Probably the most well known of these kinds of futurist projects are variants of what is called the “Delphi Method.” Developed in 1964 at RAND, Delphi involves a tendentious succession of interviews with “experts” in science and policy. As [that RAND book] explains (16),

In successive rounds, a group of experts is asked to supply responses to a list of questions. At the conclusion of every round, the participants view each other’s answers and may change their views in light of what others believe. The answers are presented anonymously to eliminate the possibility that undue weight will be placed on the responses of persons who hold particular high statuses within the group.

From these interviews stem a number of products. First, there are the initial interviews themselves, a polyphony of futures from the perspectives of different disciplines and different heuristics. However: this is only the starting point; Delphi continues onto the next round by requiring participants to review each other's responses, changing theirs in turn to craft a consensual vision of the future in what is designed as a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, Delphi uses, essentially, the power of suggestion coupled with a kind of Milgram-esque manufacture of consent to produce a desired future state using informants who will be both the agents and beneficiaries of future change. Delphi in this respect is the exact opposite of a critical method; it actually serves to silence alternatives. Thus,

In round one, Questionnaire 1 (Q1), the Delphi method presents an issue or states a problem in broad terms and then invites answers and comments/. The responses to Q1 are summarized and used to construct Questionnaire 2 (Q2)/ Q2 presents the results of Q1 and gives respondents an opportunity to re-evaluate their original answers in light of comprehensive feedback on the entire respondent group . . . This iterative process is continued until consensus or clear disagreement is reached among the panel (Moldrup *et al* 2002: 6).

In this formulation, the outliers are forced to concede to the tyranny of the majority; after all, like Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*, Delphi panelists awaken each morning to an iteration of their future narratives *until* they finally leave hubris behind and fall in line with the will of the group. There have been several, interesting variants on Delphi since its introduction (e.g., Foresight), but these still remain the methods of

policy studies and marketing, with Delphi used to shape new products (Moldrup *et al* 2002; Mullins 2006) or just to create consent (Tatsuya *et al* 2005).

Probably the “Delphi” methods is best known through some of its popular variants, whereby magazines (Wired, etc.) poll the experts, “Six Trends that Are Changing the World”(Wired 2006), where trends in technologies are adduced for their role in changing culture and society with, of course, the self-fulfilling goal of increasing attention on those selfsame technologies. Other well-known works—e.g., John Naisbitt’s *Megatrends* (1988[1982]), dispense with the need for experts (other than its omniscient author), but still utilize a consensual vision of the future with the ultimate goal of catalyzing that future as much as predicting it. Thus, for Naisbitt (as well as for the Toffler’s, George Gilder, Ray Kurzweil and others), the goal of their intervention-predictions is to specify which technologies or economic shifts will arise, manufacturing the need for social and cultural change on the tails of their prediction.

Even when futurists (and, again, it is certainly a mistake to lump them all together like this) look to the cultural future, a la Alvin and Heidi Toffler, it is not exactly with an eye towards novelty and surprise. The Toffler’s oeuvre, built on the idea of sweeping, global change impacting every element of life from corporations and democracy to leisure and identity, is still premised on technological change, but these “waves” are much more sweeping and totalizing. While Michael Marien, for example, in a snarling review of the Toffler’s most recent submission, *Revolutionary Wealth*, takes great umbrage at their recapitulated characterization of our future as culminating in a post-industrial “third-wave,” but only because Marien himself has



already hypothesized a “fourth-wave” upon which we are now entering (Marien 2006).

But this demonstrates the assumptions in these kinds of trends- or scenarios- elicitation methods as well. The emphasis on technologies, etc., is not only an artifact of the assumptions of futurists and their clients (many of whom work in emerging technologies markets), but it also subordinates “culture” to a kind of precipitate of technological change, a form of simplistic determinism which, while popular in 1970s-era materialism (cf. Harris 1974), has been rejected by otherwise materialist-oriented anthropologists (cf. Nazarea 1998). Of course, if you’re building your empire speaking at business conventions like George Gilder, you had better focus on the “next technological thing”; only through hyping the accelerating productivity and accelerating production can you capture the imagination of CEO’s. But is this really imagination? As Gilder (2006, 14.10, “The Information Factories”) writes in a recent Wired article, what comes next as computer memory increase?

Moore's law has a corollary that bears the name of Gordon Bell, the legendary engineer behind Digital Equipment's VAX line of advanced computers and now a principal researcher at Microsoft. According to Bell's law, every decade a new class of computer emerges from a hundredfold drop in the price of processing power. As we approach a billionth of a cent per byte of storage, and pennies per gigabit per second of bandwidth, what kind of machine labors to be born?

What this means, of course, is that “technology,” as the leading indicia of change and the object for the futurist; by emphasizing technology, the “futures” promulgated looks remarkably similar across the globe—globalization already a *fait accompli* in these theorists’ minds. The future, for Gilder, is always already safely tucked away into corporate campuses in North California, Oregon and Washington (cf. Gilder, 2006, *The Silicon Eye*: W.W. Norton). *That is, technologies will dizzyingly spiral into the stratosphere, but the social structures that enfold them will, apparently, remain the same.* “We” will live forever, according to Kurzweil (*The Singularity in Near*\_, 2006, Penguin), and hyperbolic technologies will enable us to realize all of our dreams but, thankfully, it still looks like IT professionals drinking Starbucks in their suburban shopping centers. In Gilder’s vision, corporate CEO’s can breathe a sigh of relief: the future will still be presided over by white men.

This has been the primary complaint of people writing in the still-nascent movement of “Afro-Futurism.” Confronted with “waves” of futurist prognostications that, literally, engulf the racial and class “other” in a tsunami of global capitalism, people on the passive end of these rapidly techno-utopian scenarios have no choice but to attempt to create a space for their own, more autonomous future imaginings. As Eshun (2003:292) explains of neo-liberal forecasting for Africa,

These powerful descriptions of the future demoralize us; they command us to bury our heads in our hands, to groan with sadness. Commissioned by multinationals and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), these developmental futurisms function as the other side of the corporate utopias

that make the future safe for industry. Here, we are seduced not by smiling faces staring brightly into a screen; rather, we are menaced by predatory futures that insist the next 50 years will be hostile.

Within an economy that runs on SF capital and market futurism, Africa is always the zone of the absolute dystopia. There is always a reliable trade in market projections for Africa's socioeconomic crises. Market dystopias aim to warn against predatory futures, but always do so in a discourse that aspires to unchallengeable certainty.

In the framework of the WTO and IMF, there is little to be hopeful about in an Africa torn by war and disease; furthermore, in the projections of futurists, there is no Africa; that is, “waves” and “trends” elide the continent altogether, colonizing the language of the future for the West. The only hope for these places, à la 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropology, is to accede to Europe’s past, a Horatio Alger discourse that only colonials could manage to believe.

Of course, many in the futures field have themselves critiqued the Eurocentric pretensions of future studies

Upsetting these assumptions has prove difficult for future studies, despite the presence of a robust tradition of future studies in many non-Western countries, including Kenya, India and Korea (Kapoor 2004). The discourse of scientific progress, as many in science and technology studies (STS) have pointed out, is premised on continued Western hegemony and the universalization of Western

institutions (think Star Trek: The Next Generation, with its parochial vision of a militaristic, American future).

### **Onto Cultural Futures**

It is in this context—an already attenuated future—that anthropologist first encounter in futures studies in the late-1960s, and this very much despite Mead’s insistence on an “open future.” The first, official entrée of futures studies into anthropology, however, had to wait until the 1970, when Arthur Harkins and Magoroh Maruyama organized an American Anthropological Association Symposium . The call for [papers for the 1973 symposium suggests the very different grounds anthropologists were working through (Harkins and Maruyama 1973:32).

Commonly, culture change is considered to result from technological development. Can we reverse the trend and generate cultural goals ahead of technology, and make technology serve the generated cultural goals? How can cultural goals be generated from grass-roots up, instead of from top-down?

Maruyama and Harkins directly elaborate on the Mead-ian legacy. As the apical ancestor for futures studies in anthropology, it is no mistake that she contributes the introductory essay to their *Cultures of the Future* (1978). And yet, their work suffers from some of the same sorts of ambiguities as Mead. For example, it’s unclear here what exactly would constitute a “cultural goal” (what is the “goal” of something like culture?), and also disheartening to see “culture” and “technologies” relegated--as

they are in so much of Western discourse—to separate moieties. And there’s the emphasis on engineering, the “cultural tinkering” that future-oriented anthropologists have always assumed would be anthropology’s contribution, despite the ethical scandals that have erupted whenever anthropologists try to direct the course of culture change (Borofsky 2005). But what we do see here is an attempt to forge a place for anthropological discourse on the future, one centered on culture, rather than technology, and cultures, rather than one, myopic Star Trek culture stretching to infinity. This was the genesis of futures studies in anthropology.

Reed Riner (1987:314)—another founder of future studies in anthropology—expresses the growth of futures studies as, essentially, covering two areas—expressions of policy-driven studies, on the one hand, and more light-hearted speculation, on the other:

Their interests are expressed in the other portions of anthropological futures literature which includes cross-cultural comparison of space-time conceptualizations, structural and semantic analyses of popular images of the future, and studies of hypothetical or idea experiments represented by actual international community experiments and the imagined space-habitat and culture contact simulations of the annual CONTACT conferences.

It was Maruyama’s more policy-oriented futures-work that seems, however, to have survived into successive American Anthropological Association conferences; indeed, Maruyama’s prolific work seems to have outpaced anthropology altogether, and he was soon writing in the more instrumental, futuristic circles. Indeed, He is

remembered today primarily as a futurist and systems theorist (cf. *Mindscapes*, Michael Caley, 1994, Routledge).

The more ludic, speculative dimension of “cultural futuristics” coalesced in *Cultural Futures Research*, itself a combination of two earlier periodicals, *ANTHRO-TECH: A Journal of Speculative Anthropology* (1976-82) and *Cultural and Education Futures* (1979-82). CFR’s editor, Reed Riner (1982:3), stressed the interdisciplinary quality of the journal, which, he believed, answered the need to foster increased dialogue among social scientists, futurists, and science fiction writers/users, cognizant that we are all educators.” Indeed, articles during the journal’s two-year run (1982-1984) included applied anthropology, cultural studies of then-emergent information technologies and regular contributions from science fiction novelist, M.A. Foster.

But there were shortcomings to this florescence of cultural futures as well. In 1973, Harkins and Maruyama held a contest for fictional accounts of “cultural alternatives.” The winning papers demonstrate, perhaps, the limits of the anthropological imagination. Dorothy L. Keur’s and Russel La Due’s “Univaria” is a case in point: a utopian Great Society with technological fixes and a benevolent, Keynesian state solving all social problems. The *mis-en-scene* for this “alternative future” is a history classroom in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where children and their teacher compare their present to a gravely flawed past. Precociously bright, futuristic middle-school students lead the discussion. “Kurt” begins:

“Everyone in Univaria can be sure of a living wage. Those who lose their jobs, or are for any reason out of work, still get that basic unit of income. In the late twentieth century it would have been about \$5000 year.”

“But not like what they used to call welfare,” said Ruth, breaking into the discussion for the first time. “Everyone gets it, but they have to work for it. On whatever government project in progress nearby.”

“And if they refuse?” asked the teacher.

“No one has refused,” Ruth answered/ “But if they do, the law says they will be deported. We have this arrangement with several of the undeveloped countries to accept our citizens.” (Keur and LaDue 1978:597-598)

H.L. Lefferts (1978:630) actually introduced this story into his anthropology classroom and reports that students found it, predictably, “old” and “dull,” and, interestingly, “ethnocentric,” i.e., premised on U.S.-style apotheoses of technocratic progress, free-market individualism and the role of the State. Having unleashed their imaginations in the creation of “new patterns of living,” those “new patterns,” unfortunately, turn out to be pale evocations of one, myopic vision of the present. It is hardly reassuring that academics who spend their lives studying cultural alterity can only come up with a particularly milksop version of the Keynesian state.

But is this the only option? Does futures research in anthropology only depend upon the strained imagination of anthropologists; are anthropologists just so many more futurists pushing their own suspect scenarios? Luckily, no. In the 1970s,

following on the tails of the AAA cultural futuristics symposia, Robert Textor took a sabbatical to begin readings about the nascent field of cultural futures, from which he developed his own variant, Ethnographic Futures Research (EFR), as an antidote to the “tempocentrism” he saw around him, i.e., “To one’s being unduly centered in one’s own temporality” (Honoring, 522). This “tempocentrism” was more than just a lack of imagination, it actually had (and has) serious consequences—in monolithic schemes of development that hinge up[on technology transfer of a “miraculous” technology: the “miracle rice” of the Green Revolution and the GMO wheat and soy of today. In this insidious replacement of biodiversity with monocropping on a huge scale; we are only beginning to understand the consequences of this limited horizon of “futures thinking” (Hess and Hess 1977). Instead, EFR promised to elaborate alternatives to monolithic schemes of development:

Moreover, I saw a great opportunity for anthropologists to enhance and improve research on alternative futures for people indigenous to the non-Western world. Although the great majority of social scientists in the world, of whatever discipline, are Westerners, cultural anthropology is unique among disciplines in virtually requiring that its members at least try to develop sophisticated and empathic understandings of non-Western peoples.

Textor’s method bears similarities to the “Delphi” methods of the sixties—interviews with people designed to elaborate futures along a range of preferability. And yet, there are substantial differences. For one thing, the Delphi method is all about



narrowing the possibilities down to a manageable few using a succession of questionnaires. As that RAND book later complains, (p. 18),

Thus, the method errs when it encourages experts to reach consensus on the latter rather than articulate the former.

Delphi has developed into a management tool; it is not a method for examining cultural alternatives, but for winnowing down the alternatives to the future in order to engineer a predictable (profitable, efficient, etc.) future for the organization. Textor's method focuses on the expansion of alternatives; the point (rather like the Foresight method) is to generate alternatives themselves,

The method I developed, known as Ethnographic Futures Research (EFR), builds upon one's ethnographic knowledge, but systematically asks questions about the future. The EFR interview has much in common with the ethnographic interview/ It is confidential, interactive, semi-structured, flexible, open-ended, and focused on patterns and systems. (Textor 2005:25)

That is, instead of asking respondents to select from a finite set of already structured futures—as in Delphi—EFR doesn't initially beg the question of what exactly the "future" might be. Although, there is still structure, with Textor asking informants to imagine "an Optimistic, a Pessimistic, and a Most Probable scenario".

The tour de force of Textor's methods is *The Middle Path for the Future of Thailand* (1990), a collaborative work applying EFR to a physicist and public figure in Thailand; in fact, the book is credited to Sippanondha Ketudat himself, with Textor listed as providing "methodological and editorial consultation." That is,

Textor has used EFR to facilitate Dr. Sippanondha's articulation of his own future. book, really Textor's facilitation of Dr. Sippanondha's own thoughts

(From Textor's futures article)

To supply a framework for elicitation., I asked that Dr. Sippanondha to imagine a continuum of 100 possible futures sociocultural systems for Thailand as a time-horizon of his own choosing, which turned out to the year 2563 of the Buddhist era, or AD 2020/ Moving from the left pole to the right, there will be, in theory, 100 positions on this continuum. Position number 1, located at the left pole. was dubbed by his values. As the worst possible sociocultural future for Thailand, while position number 10, at the right pole, was defined as the best possible. Futures located farther right (more desirable) than 100 were defined as utopian and impossible. Futures located farther left (less desirable) than 1 were defined as dystopian and, likewise, improbably.

Of course, this is not just Dr. Sippanondha opining in a vacuum; Textor has already structured the sorts of narrative Sippanondha will produce with the unmistakable impress of Enlightenment discourse, and while there's certainly value in stipulating that Sippanondha consider "utopian" or "dystopian" futures as aporias, it may be that "utopia" and "dystopia" are not really appropriate genres for talking of Thai futures at all. Nevertheless is entirely appropriate for the informant, a physicist with experience in policy as equally comfortable in rural Thailand as in more global contexts.

And what Sippanondha articulates is in many ways profoundly different from the monolithic discourse on the future as the acceleration of invention and the homogenization of culture. Instead, Sippanondha (1990: 128-129) suggests a future where Thailand reigns in the power of technology and modernization is particularly Thai ways:

A salient traditional Thai characteristic is generalized empathic kindness (namcaj). That Thai morpheme *caj*, which may roughly translated as “heart,” is found in well over 300 Thai terms. This is a truly remarkable pattern, and suggests to me at least, that the notion of hearth, feeling and empathic concern is pervasive in our culture. And that “caring heart” can legitimately be considered a basic aspect of Thai identity. I am projecting optimistically—and indeed most probably—that this feature of our culture and identity will survive essentially intact.

And even more than this—against Thai culture as a kind of “survival” amidst modern institutions and modernizations—he is optimistic that “progress” will mean not only a more modern, more prosperous Thailand, but more perfect realizations of Thai identity:

Optimistically, a pattern will become increasingly prevalent in which running a company “according to the Dharma” of Buddhism (or the ethical; code of some other great religion), will serve to promote an equitable sharing of the fruits of annual gains in productivity. (85)

That is, capitalism will develop into a Buddhist future (rather than Buddhism being conceived as some kind of blockade to the “free market.” That is reserved for his “Pessimistic” scenarios, which, unfortunately, have come to pass in the form of IMF –mandated currency devaluations after the crash of the Baht in 1997. But what’s interesting here is that Sippanondha is free to imagine all of these futures without necessarily conforming to the singular future plied by the futurists: more capitalism, faster technologies, more profit, more productivity, more money. That he still envisions increased technological productivity is testament not only to his background as scientist and technocrat, but also his hope that Thailand 25 years in the future will command global prominence (but not global hegemony).

This has the effect of not only helping people in other places to imagine non-Western futures, but it also serves as a corrective to unilinear conceptions of Western futures:

As Riner (HO, 307) suggests,

Ethnographic futures research enables us to apprehend and clarify what our hosts, informants, and/or clients envision about the future, to reconstruct a lexicon of their expectations or a grammar of their hopes and fears, to discover and make explicit the hidden premises and indigenous process rules, about the future as these are entertained and as they may be shared among members of a group or organization where policies or strategies are formulated or implemented.

Thus, EFR can simultaneously liberate *and* critique, evoke a certain vision of the future while providing a sort of critical perspective from which to reflect.

This is what I have tried to do in my own futures research. For the last several years, I have asked students in American Studies classes to extrapolate 100 years into the future, writing down their prognostications on the future of culture and society which we then compile into a timeline to discuss in class. In each iteration, from 204-2005, 30-40 students were surveyed; the following are samples of those prognostications. [samples from 2004-2005]. Looking over the changes students predict, I am struck by their excessively maudlin tone; the world will end, apparently, several times over the next decades in paroxysms of fire, disease and war. Interesting, none of the student surveyed are sanguine that the U.S. will be able to continue its hegemonic position in the world-system for more than a few years and all project more Asian-centered futures.

However, the purpose of the exercise is not, as in Delphi, to actually predict the future, but to confront students with their own assumptions about what the future will be. After soliciting their predictions, I compile all of the futures together and we examine them as a class for their underlying assumptions. .Despite the dystopian tenor to their ideas, student invariably see the future as a geopolitical power between superpowers locked in a free-market battle for market supremacy; nation-states will, a la Oswald Spengler, rise and fall, but the geopolitical scrum at the heart of *The Wealth of Nations* is forever. In addition, social and cultural changes are always precipitated by technological progress; rather like Bush's wishful-thinking science,

global warming and environmental pollution are problems that will solve themselves. Moreover, technological change is the engine of all other change. Finally, the kinds of futures envisioned are still very much *American* futures with large portions of the world in Latin America, South America, Africa and Asia excluded as meaningful agents of change in future decades. In “Occupied Territory,” Patricia Kelly (2002:561) outlines the assumptions that overdetermine a Western, global future

1. The only worldview, and the associated metaphysics and values, worthy of attention is the Western civilization’s worldview.
2. There is only one science of nature, that is objective, positivist and universal;
3. ‘Reality’, however it is defined, is constructed in the image of the white man.
4. Cultural difference will fade away as people discover the superiority of rational

Finally, in a theme I take up below, these futures lack a capacity to imagine the radically new. The “future” is construed as the teleological completion of the present or, pace Henri Bergson, the future conceived as the increased magnitude of the present: more capitalism, more war, more pollution.

The temptation would be to see this as a failure on the part of students’ imaginations. While certainly not representing a high-water mark of imaginative thinking, what I’ve used this anthropological version of Delphi as a tool for critiquing the “consensual” future, where the language of the future is already colonized by the

present, where, as Popen (2002:390-391) writes, we live “in the midst of a totalizing culture that produces and contains our capacity to engage in substantive critique.”

That is, the most egregious error in these futures is not so much that they are derived from countless other narratives of war and ecological apocalypse, but that they, as Kim Stanley Robinson complains, portray the current triumph of capitalism as inevitable, eternal, and unbeatable” (Szeman and Whiteman 2004:186). Looking at the sheer banality of these manufactured futures stimulates students not so much to *imagine* alternatives as *admit* the need for imagined alternatives, or, as Jameson (2005: 416) writes, not the “presentation of radical alternatives” but “simply the imperative to imagine them.” The most egregious error of this cavalcade of interplanetary battles is what these futures show is the assumptions people bring to the future—the future as the battle for national hegemony (the future as the US. Future), the progress of technology, the continuation of a status quo politics vacillating between a moderate conservative and a radical conservative, the endless continuation of capitalism.

### **Appendix—Samples of Future Surveys, 2004-2005**

#### Future Survey--2004

2008

Worldwide depression is very close to occurring before barely being averted in 2008-2009. The solution is found in selling military arms to various industrialized countries throughout the world. To divert the incoming depression, the US and Great Britain close many of their joint military research and development operations, personnel/bases around the world, and peacekeeping missions throughout the world. At the same time, two longtime American allies, Israel and France, continue to procure advanced military equipment from their tight-strapped allies (the US and UK). In effect, domestic strife internally causes each government (Israel and France) to become more and more militant and authoritative.

Mad cow and the Avian flu have spread through from Asia to the US. Populations worldwide are being wiped out! The people of earth are scared to purchase foods, for fear of catching the sickness. And through that our economy has collapsed.

2010

The people of earth have noticed a change in their environment, the global warming from the ozone has made earth hotter, species of animals have been disappearing at an alarming rate and the oil supply has began to reach an all time low. People of Earth fear the worst; that the planet they love is falling apart. In response they totally disregard all environmental laws and begin to further trash earth. Their motto:"screw it! Its gonna blow up anyway".

2011

All out war has broken out in the Middle East between Israel and PLO sponsored countries-- Saudi Arabia, Iran, Palestine, Iraq, Sudan, Kenya, Egypt, Syria. In addition, other countries of the world such as, France, Germany, and Japan clandestinely support the Arab cause against Israel trying to cripple the US economy. US neutrality is transparent (as usual), and her favorite receiver of military supplies, Israel, decides unilaterally against a long war after their capital is captured and casualties continue to rise. Nuclear war follows, with each side destroying the other's infrastructure. American oil companies fold under financial pressure. A new energy innovation is needed to keep the American capitalist economy afloat.

2018

Due to the increase of global warming all car companies are now forced to make hybrid cars to decrease toxic fumes being put in the air.

2022 Doctors and Scientists find a cure for cancer.

2024

World War Three! Terrorism reaches an all time high. Every country on Earth is affected. Biological warfare is the most prominent way of fighting this war. Country against country- no one knows who their allies are. Half of the earth population is wiped out.

2025

Earths scientists work hard to resolve the problem with the environment, the people of earth have trashed it, and most of their natural resources are gone, the landfills are almost to the top with trash and the people will soon begin to suffer from the bacteria and infectious diseases cause by that much waste. Scientists decide to begin a program to research new and extreme ways of recycling all this garbage.

World War Three takes place between 2025 and 2031. It involves all major countries in Europe and present day Russia as well as China and Indonesia and the Middle East, Canada and the United States. After two years countries begin to use biological and chemicals weapons, and eventually nuclear weapons. One third of the population of Earth is totally destroyed and forty percent of all usable land is considered contaminated. The human population left is forced to move to distant third world countries not involved in the war.

1.

2026

With the pollution level at an all time high and the ozone layer nearly depleted, the US government is finally persuaded to stop building roads and encourage the public to use public transport. Other governments around the world are starting to use magnetic levitation trains to



replace metro and light rail lines as a way to encourage more people to leave their cars and get where they need to be in 10% of their normal commute time.

2038

World War Three has been over for years but the affects are devastating. Every country has suffered and the world's economies are just beginning to recover. Countries have merged together. The United States now covers North America entirely.

2058

The stock market crashes and the global economy is in the middle of a Great Depression. This makes it possible for the current U.S. President to take on the role of dictator. The people are desperate and looking for someone to lead them, not thinking about the consequences of abandoning our constitution. He leads us back to the days of global colonization and imperialism in an effort to improve the economy.

2060

There is a catastrophic nuclear explosion at a weapons testing facility in Great Britain. The winds carry the radiation eastward affecting Europe and parts of Northern Asia. People move to the south and the east for safety, overcrowding the cities and depleting natural resources.

[2005]

2010-2015

The people with the most power, money, control and influence in the United States are the people in the media, either behind the scenes or the stars.

With the election of a new president, political policies from 2000-2008 are being abandoned and new ones formed. This sudden change creates chaos not only in the United States, but in all countries around the world.

2021-2025

\*Smokey the Bear could never have anticipated this.

A hole in the ozone layer over California and an area of the Pacific Ocean has resulted in unbelievable consequences. Experts have calculated that a pinhole was formed over the Los Angeles region of California sometime around the year 2000, so small that its effects would have hardly been noticeable. But by the year 2023, the hole had expanded quite a bit, and the damage was intense: forest fires raged uncontrollably in California for almost a year, many homes and thousands of acres of land were desecrated. The smoke from the fire created respiratory problems and general dinginess for miles around. Several important marine species became extinct due to mutations in phytoplankton, altering the ecoweb of the area forever.

2026-2030

Scientists have made great progress in combating some of Earth's worst diseases, such as AIDS and many forms of cancer. However, with these medical advances, have come those who take science and medicine to use for malevolence and greed.

Taking into account the number of casualties, the harmful effects of radiation, the damage done to the earth, and the complete depletion of natural resources, it is estimated that the entire human race will be extinct within the span of two generations.

In the Year 2030, the food supply on earth completely diminished due the conservative control over the US government. Without any consideration for the environment or measures to protect it, soil quality on earth became infertile and livestock could not survive. The oceans dried up and only fifteen percent of the earth's water remained unpolluted. Human beings were forced to survive on orbit gum and diet soda so they were forced to colonize outer space in hopes of producing more food for survival.

2031-2035

Researchers develop an advanced drug to help reverse the growth of many cancer cells. The drug, however, is extremely expensive and public interest organizations have been lobbying the federal government to cap costs.

2036-2040

A crackdown on immigration begins and America's borders are sealed. All American citizens are implanted with identification devices, complete with fingerprint and DNA information.

In 2045 the global economy of the time took a turn of the worse. Due to too much investment in Martha Stewart Omnimedia, the New York Stock Exchanged dropped a drastic 2000 points. Martha Stewart's greed is directly responsible for the stock market crash. Her encouragements to buy stock in her company make people pile stock investments in one area and other parts of the economy suffered. Martha Stewart has now returned to prison with a life sentence. 2046-2050

For years, environmentalists have been warning the world that we are slowly ruining the environment. However, not even the threat of the depletion of the ozone layer is enough to initiate a change in our behavior. Now, in the year 2050, we are presented with the devastating consequences. It seems that the hole in the ozone layer has grown at a much faster rate than was originally predicted. Harmful radiation from the sun is now directly hitting the earth's surface. Crops are failing, and scientists can only speculate about how much damage is being done to both humans and the animals they consume. Fear and panic set in, and the public demands a resolution to this problem. [Ozone]

\*It wasn't so much of a revolution as it was an absence of one, the anti-revolution. It happened gradually, so slowly that virtually no one noticed it: people simply stopped caring. The phenomenon began to peak around 2050, when global human population started to reach carrying capacity and resources grew fewer and fewer. Everyone's standard of living became survive, and although people still would have been able to live reasonably well if they simply cut back costs and sacrificed some creature comforts, expectations and material obsessions got in the way of this. As a result, nuclear families began to exclude their extended families, friendships were severed due to resource competition, and communication systems fell apart. Even though the changes were subtle, they were devastating on many levels. The only thing that thrived was the economy for a little while, but eventually even this deteriorated due to inflation and lack of resources.

2056-2060

Pollution by many American manufacturers has reached critical levels, making much of the water in lakes and rivers unconsumable, and killing most of the sealife in those bodies. Engineers are trying to develop better filtration systems to resolve the problem.