Jim Dator's Alternative Futures and the Path to IAF's Aspirational Futures

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Abstract

Jim Dator has specialized in understanding and developing "alternative futures". He periodically assesses the range of futures as seen by experts and futurists and by people in various settings where he serves as a futurist. These expert and popular images change over time, and some reflect that lack of thought about the future. But for three decades Dator has compressed the range of futures into four archetypes – continued growth, collapse/decline, conserver/disciplined society, and high tech transformation. As co-founder of the Institute for Alternative Futures and futures mentor to Clem Bezold, his approach has been significant in the origins and evolution of IAF's aspirational futures approach. Aspirational futures has organizations or communities generate several scenarios: a most likely, best intelligence future that usually parallels a continued growth image; a challenge scenario that considers significant responses to "what could go wrong"; and one or two visionary scenarios that identify future visionary conditions and alternative paths to get there.

Introduction

Jim Dator has a unique approach to futures in which he seeks out "alternative futures." He recently described these alternative futures as a broader concept than scenarios, based on historical archetypes or deep patterns that reoccur through time (quoted in Inayatullah, 2009). This article illustrates Dator's alternative futures over the past three decades and identifies how they have influenced me and the Institute for Alternative Future's development of our "aspirational futures" approach. Jim Dator was my mentor, along with Alvin Toffler, as I became a futurist. Dator distinguishes between forecasts for the future from experts or futurists and the images of the future that people carry. He has used a set of four alternative futures to summarize what experts and futurists envision and has stressed the need for each of us to develop our sense of our preferred future. As Jim Dator's images of alternative futures, particularly the identification of "archetypes," have evolved over time, they have had a significant effect on the growth of the Institute for Alternative Futures (IAF) and our development of "aspirational futures."

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History

I met Jim Dator through Alvin Toffler in the early 1970's. I was working on my dissertation as a political scientist on foresight in the U.S. Congress, which included the "foresight provision" of the House Rules, in which Toffler played an influential part. At that time, Toffler was one of the most well-known futurists, notoriety he earned from his 1970 bestselling book "Future Shock," that identified the increasing pace of change and its impact on individuals and society. Toffler's prescription for future shock was "anticipatory democracy." Toffler created the Committee for Anticipatory Democracy in which Jim Dator and I were very active. We worked with Toffler, Senator John Culver, Rep. Charlie Rose, and Rep. John Heinz to put on the first legislative seminar on Futurism in the U.S. Congress in September 1975 (Rose, 1978). This session led to both the creation of the Congressional Clearinghouse on the Future and in 1977, of the Institute for Alternative Futures by Alvin Toffler, Jim Dator and I, with the support of Antioch University and its law school.

The unusual factor that led to this legislative seminar on the future was the request for the seminar by a Senator, John Culver of Iowa, and two Representatives, Charlie Rose of North Carolina and John Heinz of Pennsylvania. Most legislators think of the future in terms of the next election. Their constituents seldom challenge that time frame. This is a major structural issue, one reviewed extensively in the late 1970's in the chapters of Anticipatory Democracy (Bezold, 1978). There are exceptions, however. At times there are elected officials who take a longer view, or who have an intellectual interest in considering the future. This was the case for the three members who requested the 1975 futures session. John Culver also had a commitment to increasing foresight in Congress. He served in the House and was part of the Bolling Committee that proposed a series of reforms for the House of Representatives. Almost all of their procedural recommendations for the House (but not their recommendations for committee restructuring) were accepted. Among these was the House "foresight provision" that requires committees to do oversight and foresight to consider whether changes in the larger environment require changing legislation. Unfortunately, the provision is there, yet seldom complied with. (Rose, 1978)[1]

My entry into the futures field was sealed by the creation of IAF. Looking back, I became a futurist by combining my activism and political science, then following the advice in a Robert Frost poem. I had been active as a college student at Georgetown University with Richard McSorley, a Jesuit priest and leader in many of the peace and civil rights demonstrations in Washington in the 1960's. I graduated from the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown, in the spring of 1970 (the time of the shooting of protesting students at Kent State University). I determined that my service work should focus on campaigning for a peace congressional candidate for congress who focused on ending the war in Viet Nam. This became my first job after graduation. In graduate school, as a political scientist, I choose a dissertation focused on government responsibility – anticipating issues/avoiding crisis decision making. This focus on foresight was aided by my job as a social scientist for the Center for Governmental Responsibility at the University of Florida Law School. It was furthered by being a visiting scholar at Brookings as I completed my dissertation. I had good contacts in

Congress and in federal agencies. When I met Toffler he appreciated these connections and we put them to use organizing for anticipatory democracy, including the above mentioned September 1975 meeting for Congress. Toffler persuaded Antioch University's President William Birenbaum to fund the creation of the Institute for Alternative Futures. Edgar Cahn, Dean of the Antioch School of Law agreed to locate IAF at the Law School in DC. My transition to being a futurist was secured. Toffler and Dator were my mentors but Dator became my more immediate and ongoing coach, focusing on alternative futures.

A line of poetry from ***Two Tramps in Mud Time*** by Robert Frost also affected my becoming a futurist:

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

I had carried this with me from high school all the way through graduate school and in hindsight recognized that I wanted a mission – being a foresight oriented futurist, I came to realize, was that mission. Jim Dator and Alvin Toffler were likewise committed to foresight and anticipatory democracy and working with them became a natural choice. The Institute for Alternative Futures has been my platform.

During that time, Toffler convinced me to edit a book on Anticipatory Democracy that was published in 1978 (Bezold, 1978). Jim Dator had a chapter on the "future of anticipatory democracy" that traces his own evolution in becoming a futurist, particularly using "the future" as a focus for individuals and communities creating the future (1978). The chapter chronicled his experience over 15 years of living and teaching in Japan, teaching the first course in futures at Virginia Tech University in 1966, moving to the University of Hawaii and being active in community and government efforts to shape the future. In this early futures work, Dator focused on three questions: 1) what are the most likely alternative futures; 2) what do various people *think* the future will be; and 3) what do I personally want the future to be (1978, p. 316).

Jim Dators' questions, and his answers, shaped my orientation to futures.

Given our common backgrounds as political scientists, activists and promoters of "anticipatory democracy," understanding the future and creating it were essential for both Jim and I. As we worked together, we focused on dealing with these questions. The first question, "what are the most likely alternative futures," relates to what futurists or experts would think the "most likely alternatives" to be. The second question, "what do various people *think* the future will be," calls for understanding what people or citizens think about the future. Jim's third question of "what do I personally want the future to be," required individual reflection and choice. Placing these questions within the context of a community or organization requires a collective choice of preferred futures. Pursuing these three questions evolved for IAF into our "aspirational

futures" approach, including the way we argue that scenarios should be developed (Bezold, 2009). More on that below.

Jim summarized one vein of his approach in a memo on scenarios in 1981 (Dator 1981b, p.1):

> *No one can predict the future (meaning the next 30 to 50 years). But policy-makers are forced to attempt to do so very frequently. From my experience, most decisions which affect development policies, for example, are based on wholly inadequate forecasts. The problems of the present and the immediate past are generally reviewed and projected into the future, and then "planned" for. While no one can say what the future certainly will be, I am quite certain that it will not be, primarily or significantly, like the present. Thus most plans and policies for the future are made, in my judgment, on the least likely futures.*
> *One way that futures studies tries to increase the efficacy of long-range planning is through the development of significantly different alternative futures. While the range of such alternatives is, literally, infinite, there are several... that have captured the attention of most serious students of the future.*

This perspective, combined with his three questions, led Dator to maintain a set of overarching images of likely futures, and to develop tailored futures for particular sectors. This also led him to discern the images that groups of people held about the future. Two examples are relevant.

Jim Dator's Alternative Futures – Late 1970's, Early 1980's

Jim Dator had spent years considering what was likely to happen by gathering views from diverse regions of the world and differing types of people. These were essentially the forecasts of experts and futurists as well as the images of the people. In the mid 1970's, as he sought out what people think the future will be, he identified 10 major images. In his article on the "Future of Anticipatory Democracy," he identified ten images of how people see the future, many with names related to themes in songs or movies from the 1960's and 1970's. (Dator, 1978, pp.319-323)

1. *Que sera, sera*
   - will be will be; whether because it's in God's hands or there's no discernible pattern
2. *As It Was In the Beginning Is Now and Ever Shall Be, World Without Change, Amen.*
   - Traditionally people don't concern themselves with the future as change comes slowly
3. *If Winter Comes, Can Spring Be Far Behind?*
   - Everything has its season, to predict the future, all you need to know is what cycle we're in.
4. *Why Don't You Make Something of Yourself?*
   - An industrial society view that posit that we have permanently broken out of the traditional cycle and are "developing," growing forever, led by the appropriate elites

5. *After the Revolution.....!*
   - A Marxist view that the revolution is needed for development to continue
6. *We Are Entering a New Dark Ages*
   - We will soon reach, or have already passed, our limits to growth. We face an immediate future of wars, famines, internal strife, followed by a new and lengthy Dark Ages
7. *Toward a Steady-State For Spaceship Earth*
   - Stop growth now, create more decentralized, ecologically balanced, more human and stable communities
8. *Let's Return to the Garden of Eden*
   - Back-to-nature, reversing industrial society
9. *I think I'm Going Out of My Head*
   - The future has no reality beyond the images in our consciousness: prayer, meditation and consciousness are necessary for self-realization
10. *Machines of Loving Grace*
    - Where ever enhancing social and physical technologies are put to effective use

Dator notes that these include conscious images of the future, as well as reflecting "non-thinking" about the future (an unexamined sense of the future, like "Que sera, sera" ("Whatever will be, will be" – a song from a hit movie in the 1960's and, for some, a philosophy). The 10 futures above also include some of what would become Jim's "archetype" alternative futures.

Jim Dator presented a condensed list of four, what I'll call archetypes, as part of a 1977 Conference held by IAF on the Future of Legal System at Antioch School of Law (Bezold & Dator, 1981). For the conference we attempted an approach that would continue to affect our way of using alternative futures as well as the substance of those futures.

For that 1977 Conference we recruited futurists and legal experts to develop papers on several topics: law & order, court management, tort reform, reducing punitive responses, justice management and the judicial system. We wanted the authors to develop their papers in light of their own expertise and thoughts about the future and in relation to the alternative futures for US society that Jim would provide.

In his introduction to the conference, Jim Dator identified "some of the more popularly-identified alternative futures of American society, and how various selected social institutions, including "the law," might be significantly different within each of these alternatives." Since one of the things shaping the future "in reality is what people presently imagine the future as being... these are among the more important possible alternative futures for America, even though adherents of each image may be totally unable to conceptualize the future positively from any of the differing points of view." (Dator, 1981a, p.5) These four images of the future are: (Dator, 1981a, pp.7-11)

1. **Continued growth** – the persistence of the general characteristics of American society – growth oriented, opportunity-filled, technologically-progressive, upwardly-mobile, internationally- dominant, science-guided, rich, leisure-filled, abundant, and liberal society.

2. **Societal collapse** – driven by resource shortages, food shortages, climate change, environmental disasters, widespread natural or human-made diseases, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and other "acts of god." Political or administrative ineptness or a snowballing series of pure accidents or terroristic events, nuclear war or some combination of these lead to a slide of our present "high civilization" into conditions not unlike the early Dark Ages in Europe – or worse.
3. **A conserver society** – the "Good Ship Industrial Growth" cannot persist; it is already beginning to sink. We need a managed shrinkage rather than growth.
4. **The transformational society** – American society over the next 30 to 50 years (from 1977) will go through a fundamental paradigm shift which will be a challenging "birth-like" process. Some advocates of this image parallel those who call for the conserver society, but see new value, institutional, and technological arrangements fundamentally different from anything we have seen before. Others (Alvin Toffler and Jim Dator) focus on transformation driven by the fragmenting and individualizing effects of impending technologies, an end to Western dominance, artificial intelligence and technology.

The conference was successful, although most of the authors could not, or did not, take up the challenge of relating their forecasts to Dator's alternative futures. The approach, however, of putting alternative futures in front of individuals or groups and having them consider the implications became a common technique for IAF as we engaged groups with the future.

Variants of Jim's Four Alternative Futures

In 1981, with Dator's participation and leadership, IAF set about conducting a series of meetings with the goal to refine the U.S. alternative futures that we were using in various aspects of our work. We had been using Dator's four futures in many of IAF's projects at the time. At these meetings, with input from Bob Olson and several others, we reviewed the trends and literature of the time to identify the variants within the four alternative futures "archetypes." This yielded a broader set of possibilities within each of the 4 futures, as shown in Figures 1 to 4:

Figure 1. – **Continued growth futures**

- Supply-side economics
- Moral Majority
- Friendly Fascism
- Space/High Frontier
- Business-As-Usual
- Hyper-Expansion
- Libertarian Growth
- Squander Society (Maximized industrial through-put)
- Multinational Corporation States
- Multinational City-States
- Pre-Revolutionary Marxism (Socialism)
- Non-Traditional Oligarchy

- Inter-Planetary Consortium
- Autarchic Growth
- USA, Inc. (After Japan, Inc.)

Figure 2. – **Decline & stagnation futures**

- Limited Nuclear War (Terrorists or regional conflicts)
- Political Chaos/Social Disorder
- Small Failures – Slow Decline
- Racial Conflict
- Lack of Success
- Autarchic Decline
- Entropic Decline
- Fragmented Breakdown
- Natural Disaster (As a catalyst for the breakdown process, e.g. a major California earthquake)
- Unacknowledged Policy Failure
- Environmental Illness
- Health & Lifespan Decline (Due to environmental toxins and resistant organisms, e.g. bacteria, viruses)
- Genteel Poverty (Due to slow decline resulting from infrastructure failures)
- Oscillating Systems with Instabilities
- Muddling Through (After Warren Johnson)
- "Magic"/Post-Industrial Future (Due to collapse or epidemics)
- Extreme Resource Depletion
- Triple-Digit Inflation
- Psychotic Strangulation (Where society is held hostage by psychotics, terrorist with high tech weapons)
- Collapse Scenarios:
  - Major Nuclear War
  - Economic Breakdown
  - Climate-Driven
  - Armageddonmania
  - Survivalist
  - Management Breakdown
  - Alien Attack
  - Monetary Breakdown/Collapse
  - Biocatastrophe
  - Cosmic Catastrophe

Figure 3. – **Disciplined society futures**

Authoritarian/Conserving:

- Enforced Conservation
- Enforced Allocation
- Less Friendly Fascism (Low-growth Capitalism)
- Medieval Repeat

- Caste System

Authoritarian/Growth Oriented
- Enforced Growth
- East European-Style Marxism
- Anti-Terror Society
- Ideological Society
- New Republic (High Technology with Philosopher Kings)

Authoritarian/Either-Or/Conserving-Growth Oriented
- Authoritarian
- Theocracy
- 1984 Propaganda-Driven Society
  Conserving By Choice
- Conserver Society
- Ecotopia
- Frugal Society (Neo-Puritan)
- "Global Sharing"
- Political, Economic, Psychological De-Coupling for Stability

Figure 4. – **Transformation futures**

Technological:
- Ultra-Efficient Growth
- Space/High Frontier (Industrialization of space)
- Space/ETI (Extra-terrestrial intelligence contact)
- Technologically/Politically Driven
- High Technology/Limit Sensitive/Paradigm Change

Spiritual (Metaphysical):
- High-Spirit
- Wisdom-Generated
- Out of Body – Spirit Guide (Creative Imaging)
- Non-Physical Emergence
- Doing to Being Conversion
- Re-Alignment of Elements (New human and earth energies)
- "Ixtlan, Inc." (Castaneda's other world, inner reality)

Other Transformational:
- Steady-State
- Extreme Simplicity
- Entropic Adaptation
- Disciplined Transformation
- "Low Spirit" Lifestyle Evolution
- Humanization of Values
- Post Revolutionary/Post Socialist Marxism
- Global Motherhood
- Balanced Ecology
- Wild-Card Society (Resulting from on-going social experiments)

- "Atlantean" (High technology, mystical, infrastructure-enhancing economics, social control)
- "Aquarian" (Knowledge-based, social cohesion, space, economy of sufficiency, decentralized)

The evolution of the archetypes from the late 1970's is evident in this list from 1981. "Continued Growth" is more complex and includes futures focused on socialist growth. "Collapse" has shifted to "Decline and Stagnation" with several variants, the most extreme of which are collapsed futures. The "Conserver Society" future has also become a category in a broadened set of "disciplined society" futures. The "Transformation" future more clearly distinguishes high spirit and high technology categories. As the number of images in each of the four archetypes has expanded, some of these images of the future could fit into more than one of the archetypes. Also, some of the variants are more themes than fulsome images or multifaceted alternative futures.

The point is that Dator's focus on alternative futures evolves, reflecting movement in what people see as the future and what futurists/experts see. Also, as Dator remarked in his article for the 1977 *Judging the Future* conference, the future will likely be a mixture of several of these images (Dator, 1981a).

More recently, Dator has reiterated his call for alternative futures put in the context of the "unholy trinity" of the end of cheap and abundant oil; climate change and other environmental challenges; and global economic and financial collapse. The four archetype images of the future from 2008 remain essentially the same as those archetypes from 1977:

- Keep the Economy Growing!
- Severe Energy, Environmental, and Economic Challenges
- Towards Disciplined, Evolvable (Sustainable) Societies
- Transformational Visions (Dator, 2008, pp.43-46).

IAF's Evolution to Aspirational Futures

Dator argued that we should consider what is likely, what people think will occur, and identify the future that we want. I agree. IAF was founded to use futures so that communities, organizations, and governments could more wisely understand, choose and create the future. Since 1977, we've evolved our approach to alternative futures into what we call "aspirational futures" (Bezold, 2009).

Scenarios are an important part of aspirational futures, and aspirational futures suggest a particular approach to developing scenarios. Scenarios are the form that alternative images of the future most often take in our work. With Dator's original guidance, we have been developing and using scenarios based on his archetypes (or an evolved version of them) since our inception. We have focused on how communities and organizations can better choose and create their future. We periodically release scenarios that IAF has generated on particular topics, such as health care, to the public. In addition to scenarios, much of our work involves getting organizations or communities to develop their own scenarios in order to clarify what they think the future might be.

Admittedly, scenarios are only part of the task, as was well pointed out in the recent dialogue in this Journal on scenarios (Inayatullah, 2009). Our use of scenarios has morphed from Dator's archetypes somewhat. Our "aspirational futures" approach now argues that any set of scenarios should include three or ideally four scenarios. The first should be a "best estimate," followed by "continued growth," and an "official future." This first scenario should include the best intelligence about where current and recent trends are headed. This generally parallels the "continued growth" future. Where there are official assumptions about the future (as is the case in many policy areas) they are included in this first future.

Dator's 'Decline/Stagnation/Collapse' futures have also evolved in our approach. We argue that all communities and organizations have a set of bad news events or "what could go wrong" factors. These factors should be collected and reviewed, then merged into a challenging set that are chosen to create this "hard times" scenario. The challenges should not be overwhelming – they shouldn't go "over the cliff" so there is nothing that can be done in response to them.

Our third archetype grows out of Dator's Transformation images. In Figure 4 above, there are 'High Technology' and 'High Spirit Transformation' images based on different experts or futurists forecasts. In his 2008 listing, Jim's 'Transformational /Visionary' references are consistent with the 'High Tech Transformation' image that he prefers. For our use of scenarios for aspirational futures, we have the organization or community define their own "visionary futures." Many organizations already have a vision statement. However, very few take into account what they want their visionary future to be. Visionary futures tend to be transformational, but are not always.

A vision is the preferred future that a community or organization is committed to creating. A vision is not about reality. A vision defines a future desirable state that does not yet exist. A vision provides a "north star" that sets our direction for creating the desirable future state. Vision most often requires transformation from the current state to the visionary state. A shared vision requires a commitment, thus vision involves commitment and creating, whereas scenarios are used for learning, they do not require commitment. The learning scenarios should be about likely, challenging and visionary futures. In developing the visionary scenarios, the community or organization developing them should reflect on their vision, particularly what the future conditions would be. They should also consider what it would look like if a critical mass of stakeholders successfully pursued visionary options and created those conditions. A visionary (transformational) scenario would identify those future conditions and the pathway to them. Ideally there should be two visionary scenarios that consider alternative paths to those future states. Thus the power of alternative futures is harnessed by the group to enhance their own mental maps and images, and to use the power and creativity of the scenario process to clarify their vision and define pathways to it. To repeat, unlike a vision process where you make a commitment to creating your vision, this scenario process provides an exploration of alternative futures that explore what is likely, what could go wrong, and what visionary outcomes would be and how they could be achieved.

In summary, we use scenarios to enable learning. The scenarios that are developed may be informed by the experts and futurists, though the patterns in the scenarios may

parallel those in the Continued Growth, Collapse/Decline, and Transformation images from Jim Dator:

Dator alternative futures archetype	IAF alternative future/scenario
• Continued Growth	Best Estimate or the "Official Future"
• Collapse/Decline and Stagnations	Challenge/Hard Times Scenario
• Toward Discipline/Sustainable Society	(Some groups will choose variants of Disciplined or Sustainable Society as their vision)
• Transformation	Visionary Scenarios – defined by the community

We've worked with Jim Dator and his colleagues on putting this approach into toolkits and guidebooks. With Dator's former student and colleague Wendy Schultz, we test piloted a scenario and vision process with the State Court Systems of Florida and Oregon, then made the refined process available to all the state courts in the U.S. (Schultz, Bezold, & Monahan, 1993). This court futures work, as well as our 1977 Conference on Judging the Future was prompted by Jim's long term involvement in court futures. Since we produced the state court guidebook in 1993, over 30 state court systems have developed futures processes, most using this training material.

Conclusion

Jim Dator has developed and evolved the way we look at alternative futures, focusing on what experts and futurists think, and what average people think (or don't think) about the future. He continually evolves his sense of both. His prime images, Continued Growth, Decline/Collapse, Conserver Society, and Transformation have been stable for the past three decades. The assessment of the likelihood for each varies depending on the state of the economy, natural disasters and our recognition of climate change, technology advances and social advances and retreats, however, and their variants evolve due to many of the same factors. IAF and I have used and modified Dator's alternative futures and evolved the archetypes into a process where the community or organization can develop scenarios that allow them to consider how the "continued growth," "decline/collapse," and "transformation" apply to them.

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Notes

1. As I write this on August 25, 2009 Senator Edward Kennedy has just passed away. One of the many tributes to that first legislative conference on futurism in September of 1975 was that Senator Kennedy attended. The meeting was held in the Cannon House Office Building. It was then and remains a special occasion when Senators come across Capitol Hill to a House Office Building for a meeting. Along with the speakers at the Conference, the fact that Sen. John Culver, one of the organizers of the meeting, had been a roommate and on the Harvard football team with Edward Kennedy probably affected Kennedy's interest.

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