WHY CREATIVE FUTURES?

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Why creative futures?

Why do we need creative futures? And what exactly does the term mean? In the broadest context, creative futures are needed because there is a global transformation in progress. The modern, industrial world and its worldview—associated with the west but also with global reverberations and impacts—have run their course. As the old world (and view) breaks down, as the old normal falls apart, the world has entered postnormal times to use futurist Zia Sardar’s term, marked by chaos, complexity, and contradiction (Sardar, 2010).

While outlines of alternative worldviews have emerged (Capra, 2002; Settegast, 2001), it seems that thinking about the future has become harder, as if it has run into a wall, with only dystopian visions projected onto the wall. The new (and next) has not appeared largely because it has to be created by human beings, and many human beings are struggling to make sense of how to do that, often disagreeing on the direction. Creativity is needed both for the big picture but also for the more concrete changes that need to be made and for all the ways in which life needs to be reinvented or in other ways, re-remembered. Systems thinker and Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy (Macy & Johnstone, 2012) offers a tangible framing of three dimensions of this worldview shift: (1) engaging actions that slow the damage to the earth and its beings (what is important to preserve and sustain), (2) Engaging in critiques of structural inequities along with the creation of structural alternatives, and (3) creating in shifts in consciousness and in what it means to be human. A creative futures orientation values the importance of all these pathways toward change, with a particular emphasis on the third as gateway into more compelling futures.

Indeed, the reinvention of what it means to be human, embedded in the personal to the organizational and community levels, is now seen as a defining characteristic of the times (Elliott, 2013). Creativity is needed to break out of the tendency to do more of the same, of feeding the same patterns that recreate the same world. Adding to the complexity of the situation, the creativity necessary for creative futures is not the same creativity of the previous age, as we’ll explain. It’s not enough to just reinvent. Cosmetic surgery on the body of modernity will not do the trick. What is needed is a transformation (Morin, 2011).
Images of the future

Creative futures are needed because the current images of the future in the media, fiction, movies, and the news are often dismal. Human beings all over the world have a sense of profound anxiety about the future, with 6 out of 7 people worldwide feeling moderately or very insecure just before the COVID-19 pandemic (Conceição, 2022).

The Dutch futurist Fred Polak wrote a very ambitious and important book titled *The Image of the Future* (Polak, 1973) in which he argued that

The rise and fall of images of the future precedes or accompanies the rise and fall of cultures. As long as a society’s image is positive and flourishing, the flower of culture is in full bloom. Once the image begins to decay and lose its vitality, however, the culture does not long survive.

(p. 19)

Polak’s main argument was that the image of the future is key to all choices. Therefore, the character and quality of both individuals’ and societies’ images of the future (and how they reinforce one another) are of tremendous importance to survival and flourishing. Polak argued that the future affects the present, or more precisely, that the image we have of the future provides a context for decisions made in the present. An obvious example is that if one knows they have only 48 hours left to live, their actions for those 48 hours will likely be quite different from everyday behavior.

In the political arena and in the fight for social justice, the emphasis has been on critique of injustice. Speak truth to power. Fight the power. This is an important part of shifting the quality of futures to move toward, as Macy’s (Macy & Johnstone, 2012) work outlines. But often, in this approach, there can also lack a sense of what happens if and when “the power” is overthrown. A real sense of alternatives can be largely absent or difficult to pin down. What are we fighting for?

There are a number of important reasons for this absence. Some have to do with the intellectual climate that is highly skeptical of “universalizing” visions of the future (“a better future for all!” can be dangerous) and the real need to dive into questions like “better futures for whom?”

Not having a sense of the possible and of desirable possible futures can reduce the sense of hope for the future (Lopez, 2013). Often, hope is easily dismissed as wishful thinking, a fantasy, or a dream. But Snyder et al. (1991) provide a useful definition of hope that ground it as a useful and realistic orientation:

Hope is defined as a cognitive set that is based on a reciprocally derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed determination) and (b) pathways (planning of ways to meet goals).

(pp. 570–571)

Snyder et al. play on the expression “where there’s a will there’s a way” in the title of their article and in their definition of hope, essentially the willpower to move toward goals or agency and the ability to find multiple ways to reach goals. This is not hope in the sense of “I hope things work out,” which is essentially no more than a wish. It’s not a bland “oh I’m sure things will work out” because, at this point, that sounds very hollow. This reframing of hope involves taking action—finding agency and pathways toward the possible. Articulating a sense of possible and more desirable futures can be a north star, providing navigational direction. Without it, we can become lost. Creative futures ground hope in actionable ways.
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Human identity and the silent revolution

It is not uncommon to find discussions of the future dominated by technology and the hope that technology will somehow solve humanity’s problems (ah, the allure of techno-optimism!). Yet there is another, deeper force creating change across the globe. A strong global cultural trend that has been called a silent revolution of value change has been in motion since the 1960s (Inglehart, 1977). It has to do with a transformation in human identity. While the main themes will be all too familiar, their radical nature has, arguably, not been fully recognized. Norris and Inglehart (2019) describe it in this way:

The trajectory of value change first became evident in Western societies during the early 1970s, bringing an era of student protests. This cultural revolution was expressed through shifts toward social liberalism in mainstream left-wing political parties, as well as the rise of Green parties, and the mobilization of new social movements advocating environmental protection and fighting climate change; LGBTQ rights to employment in the military, adoption, and same sex marriage; civil rights for minorities like the Black Lives Matters movement; feminist networks with global mobilization on behalf of gender quotas in elected office; anti-domestic violence, and anti-sexual harassment, international assistance for humanitarian disasters and economic development, and human rights around the world.

(pp. 94–95)

The silent revolution challenges profound aspects of humanity’s very sense of itself: humanity’s identity vis-à-vis nature, gender, race, and ethnicity. It further challenges the question of what kinds of relationships are possible between humans and nature, across races and ethnicities, and what happens when the binary view of gender explodes. This movement, which has now become global (Inglehart, 2018), opens a remarkable set of possibilities. In fact, they are so remarkable they threaten to overturn what for many is just the “natural order” of things under a modernist mindset: human dominion over nature, the superiority of men over women (and gender nonconforming people), and the superiority of one’s nation, race, and people over others.

The transformative nature of the silent revolution has, in a predictable fashion, evoked a pronounced authoritarian backlash from socially conservative and fundamentalist movements of all stripes. Globally it has led to the repeal of legislation designed to protect the environment and the rights of equity deserving groups (e.g., ethnic minorities, women, trans, and nonbinary people) and is accompanied by a call to close borders to prevent the entry of immigrants and a rise in xenophobia. Authoritarian leaders tap into the “cultural anxiety” that has emerged for some groups as a result of the silent revolution and its implications, groups concerned that they will no longer be a dominant majority, that their values no longer reflect their nation’s and consequently feel that this is not their country anymore (where ever their country may be) (Jones et al., 2017). In many cases, authoritarian movements have used popular anxiety and dissatisfaction with the complexity, chaos, and contradictions of change to promote going back to the days before the silent revolution. Environmental legislation, women’s rights, civil rights, and LGBTQIA+ rights have all been challenged. Authoritarian leaders propose a return to earlier, “simpler” times (“simpler” for whom?). We can see the global nature of this movement in the authoritarian responses all across the globe. Russia’s president Putin has been explicit about his transphobia and his concern about dangerous western cultural influences. He wants to return to the days of the powerful Soviet Union. The
most recent Taliban regime in Afghanistan quickly returned to eroding the rights of women, including denying access to education, requiring dress codes, and imposing travel restrictions. Brazilian president Bolsonaro disparaged Brazilian Indigenous peoples and doubled down on the destruction of the Amazon. Right-wing parties in Europe are continually becoming contenders in most elections, and Hungary’s Orban has become a darling of the American right-wing. In China, President Xi Jinping has found that K-pop and other boy bands do not present an appropriate image of “Chinese masculinity.” In the United States, the Supreme Court has overturned the constitutional right to abortion, among other examples.

This period of transition, and specifically the silent revolution, poses challenges to the very way human beings understand what it means to be human at a fundamental level. It also raises the question of what the range and limit of human possibilities is. The implications of the silent revolution involve radical changes to arrangements that have been in place in some form or other for thousands of years. Many people regard these arrangements, such as “traditional” roles for men and women and exploitation of the natural environment, as “natural” or divinely appointed. As a result, any change is not just wrong but an attack on the natural—and usually God-given—order. Images of the old order are pervasive in the social imaginary, fueled by very selective nostalgia and by the promise of an illusory simplicity, clarity, and decisiveness. The future of the silent revolution has not been fully articulated. Even for those who support the silent revolution, it is often easier to critique the existing world or other “progressives” than to articulate what a new world could be like.

**What creative futures?**

We have given a sense of why creative futures are necessary. But what are these creative futures? As we suggested, these futures are creations, so we need to first review what the emerging understanding and practices of creativity involve, and how they are different from those of modernity (Montuori, 2011).

**Dimensions of a new creativity**

To break out of the grip of postnormal times, to create a sustainable, regenerative future, a different kind of creativity is needed. It is not the creativity of modernity. The tech motto “move fast and break things” is simply the unsustainable creativity of modernity on steroids (Taplin, 2017).

The creativity of modernity is reflected in the worldview and culture of modernity. Modernity undoubtedly saw an exceptional explosion of human genius. It transformed the planet in a few short centuries. The speed of change was mind-boggling. The Wright brothers flew for the first time in 1903, and by 1969 there were men walking on the moon. The transformation was remarkable. But there were problems (the ongoing destructive nature of colonialism and neocolonialism, and unsustainable growth and consumption of resources to name just a few).

In the process of briefly summarizing, we highlight also the other two fundamental and interconnected conceptual cornerstones we feel are necessary for creative futures and how they interact in the “new” creativity (Montuori, 1989; Montuori & Conti, 1993; Montuori & Donnelly, 2017) (the caveat around “new” is that it is new in relation to the dominance of the modernist worldview, but not necessarily new within the full diversity of human creative expression across cultures and histories.) These cornerstones are a systemic, complex way of knowing (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Morin, 2008) and a win/win, post-oppositional, partnership way of relating (Eisler & Fry, 2019; Keating, 2012; Wright, 2001). In a nutshell, this means an
emerging form of creativity is systemic, relational, contextual, and focused on creating mutually beneficial win-win relations.

A particularly important feature of the emerging creativity is that it is not just about creating new products, objects, works of art, or scientific theories. It is about human beings creating who they are (self-creation) and how they relate with other humans, the natural environment, and social systems—a form of relational creativity. A fundamental assumption is that creativity is not a gift possessed by a few individuals of genius. We need to be very clear we do not mean everybody is a great artist or scientist. But it is the case that everybody can be creative in what we have called “everyday, everywhere, everyone” creativity (Montuori & Donnelly, 2013; Richards, 2018), where creativity is not confined to great works of art of scientific findings, but is also manifested in everyday problem solving, interpersonal relations, and more generally the warp and woof of everyday life. It refers also to how creativity can make it possible to break out of dysfunctional patterns, and to create fresh and responsive forms of being, knowing, relating, and doing (Montuori & Donnelly, 2017). This view assumes that it is possible to contribute to positive social change in the everyday world, in everyday interactions. In the same way that micro-aggressions show the deleterious effect of small events individually and cumulatively (Sue et al., 2007), there are also innumerable examples of what we call micro-connections and micro-creations (Montuori & Donnelly, 2017), where diverse human beings come together and create generative relationships. In an age of increasing polarization, the importance of creative, collaborative, connective communications and interactions cannot be overstated.

For Edgar Morin (2008), “the modern pathology of mind is in the hyper-simplification that makes us blind to the complexity of reality” (p. 6). A fundamental aspect of modernity’s way of knowing is simplification. The premise is that to understand any phenomenon it has to be simplified and broken down into its fundamental components. We find this process in the term analysis, which is commonly used to signify serious inquiry. This strategy of simplification worked very well, as the explosion in science and the industrial revolution showed. The global problems we are seeing now are the result of what this way of knowing did not include. Simplification was achieved by eliminating context and connection and, as a result, the complexity of life.

The lack of context meant that factories were created with amazing new technology, but their waste products were simply dumped in the nearest river. The waste products were not accounted for as part of the larger industrial system of creativity and responsibility. If the factory was the system, which received all the attention, the system’s environment was everything else and received little or no attention (with cumulative, disastrous effects).

As Gregory Bateson (1972) put it:

When you narrow down your epistemology and act on the premise “What interests me is me, or my organization, or my species,” you chop off consideration of other loops of the loop structure. You decide that you want to get rid of the by-products of human life and that Lake Erie will be a good place to put them. You forget that the eco-mental system called Lake Erie is part of your wider eco-mental system—and that if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of your thought and experience.

(p. 484)

Bateson’s point is that with this epistemology (what we are calling a way of knowing), humanity is driving itself in completely destructive directions (to update Bateson’s language).
The classic image of the “mad” lone genius is one of self-destruction, of the romantic artist who dies young and leaves a beautiful corpse (McMahon, 2012). The artist’s wild creative spirit abused the flesh (its context), and the factory’s production abused its natural and social environment. The emerging creativity is more complex, systemic, part of a larger ecosystem, part of a larger regenerative culture, concerned not only with sustainability but with actively enriching its environment (Córdoba-Pachón, 2018; Montuori, 2011; Montuori & Purser, 1995; Wahl, 2016). It is relational, drawing attention to the creativity of relationships, groups, and organizations, which were ignored when the focus was exclusively on the creative individual and also on how environments can support rather than inhibit creativity. Ironically, industrial, factory assembly line organization—found in workplaces and in educational institutions—was explicitly designed to eliminate creativity.

Traditionally, in the west, creation and destruction have been seen as going hand in hand, whether in Picasso’s statement that before every creation comes destruction or Schumpeter’s economic theory of creative destruction (Montuori, 2011). But much is missing from this view that some non-Western cultures have understood for centuries. We see, for instance, that the Hindu trimurti is a triad: not just Brahma the creator and Shiva the destroyer, but also Vishnu the preserver (Jones & Ryan, 2007). Kuumba is a Swahili term that means an act of spontaneous creativity but also creativity as leaving one’s community more beautiful than one has found it. Taoists speak of creativity in the same breath as the “ground of sympathy.” With the view of inextricably connected, intertwined dualities, the ground of sympathy is the yin to creativity’s yang (Chang, 1963). This is the nurturing matrix of creativity, its generative context, associated in Taoism with the feminine (Loye, 1988). We have to recognize that yin and yang may have been philosophically and spiritually intertwined, but the social reality, whether in China or the United States or just about anywhere else, is that it is women who historically provided this context, this invisible and unrecognized matrix of support, creating generative contexts, interactions, and relationships (Eisler et al., 2016). A complex, contextual view of creativity is one that does not deplete the ecosystem that made creativity possible but actually enriches it. It does not seek to control the larger system, but to create a regenerative culture that is consciously building the capacity for everybody to respond to change, survive, and thrive (Wahl, 2016). Two examples of this approach can be found in doughnut economics and biomimicry (Benyus, 2002; Raworth, 2017).

One of the most pervasive views in modern thought, and by no means only in the west, is the idea that the world is mostly based on zero-sum games: I win/you lose, or vice versa. Research shows that in the US, white people now see prejudice against white people as a bigger social problem than prejudice against Black people (Norton & Sommers, 2011). The research surfaced the zero-sum assumption underlying this view: To the extent that prejudice against Black people decreases, white people assume that it must, by definition, go up for them. This is a key insight that plays a central role in our argument about the need for alternative ways of approaching the changes brought about by the silent revolution.

The choice for win/lose interactions is created by human beings, but the pervasive belief in a zero-sum world gives the illusion that this is just the nature of existence. It veils human creativity as well as the possibility to create win/win interactions, interactions that are mutually beneficial. The word create is very important here because there is a choice of what to create. Choosing win/win interactions involves an act of creativity but also an act of responsibility. It may not be immediately apparent how to create win/win interactions, but that’s precisely the creative challenge humanity now faces.
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A center for creative futures

Now it’s our turn to put creative futures into practice. Both of us are scholars who also work directly with organizations and individuals in the work of creating change. Yet, even with our applied orientations, making these ideas concrete can be a challenge. So, let’s assume a Center for Creative Futures. What might such a center do? What would be the guiding premises? From what we have briefly discussed, it’s clear that articulating and applying the underlying principles of creativity, complexity, and win/win is central. The center would apply integrative transdisciplinarity (Montuori & Donnelly, 2016), the process of creatively weaving together existing knowledge and recognizing the importance of multiple ways of knowing and Traditional Knowledge beyond the narrow constraints of the scientific worldview associated with modernity.

The emphasis on creativity would point toward celebrating human creativity, specifically collaborative, cross-cultural, cross-racial, cross-gender creativity, and approaches such as biomimicry and its nature inspired innovation rather than domination. This would be part of the larger effort to create “attractor images” that inspire by showing what is possible as well as desirable.

Psychologists differentiate between avoid and approach motivation (Elliot & Covington, 2001). Avoid motivations are for the things we don’t want, and approach motivations are for the things we do want. At this point, it appears that avoid motivations rule the day, and there seem to be few approach motivations. In other words, there are a lot of things people don’t want, but they don’t seem to know what they do want. Avoid motivations are stressful and associated with negative social attitudes and relationship insecurity. Approach motivation is associated with less loneliness and more satisfaction with social bonds (Gable, 2006). Simply put, approach motivations can be exciting and give us something to look forward to. With too many avoid motivations and not enough approach motivations, and it’s not unusual for people to give up. One of the center’s main foci would be to surface examples of events, experiences, interactions, and individuals that can inspire approach motivations. In other words, examples of what is possible and desirable, and as a result, can be amplified.

The center would engage with the current struggle to step outside the ever more immersive world of social media and of 24/7 work (Hassan & Purser, 2007) to create a space for reflection about what people really want. Creative futures are futures that are in some sense more desirable (in equitable and life-affirming ways) than other futures. One of the main goals of the center would be to begin a series of explorations about what really matters to people, young and old and in-between. Through dialogue and participatory methods for collaboration, the center would convene ongoing conversations to collectively explore the future in generative ways and to delve into the values we want to shape emerging futures. In many ways, these existing processes—from The Art of Hosting Conversations that Matter, Collective Impact, Transformative Scenario Planning—are essentially forms of social creativity and have the potential to activate imagination, dialogue, and creative futures, and in many places around the globe, already are.

On the topic of human identity, the center would focus on transformations brought about by the silent revolution in the areas of gender, race, and the environment, as well as the ensuing backlash. Questions about human identity need a space for integration through transdisciplinary and cross-cultural dialogue. What are human beings capable of? What are human potentials and what are human possibilities? The Human Potential and New Age movements have popularized any number of claims about human possibilities through practices such as yoga and meditation, and while they have value for some, are also insufficient (and arguably diluted
in many cases through cultural appropriation and commercialization). This inquiry would be explored within a wider acknowledgment that each one of the transformations of the silent revolution is not completely new and that, for instance, variations on more complex, harmonious, and sustainable relations with nature can be found in many Indigenous cultures. There also already exists considerable research on topics relevant to the Center’s mission. The center would promote a transdisciplinary, transcultural, and transpersonal approach that integrates current siloed research connecting personal and social transformation.

The center would have specific projects approached with the perspective of creative futures. One such project could focus on creativity and human diversity. Before we go on, we must emphasize that we believe it is vitally important to raise awareness of systemic racism, oppression, and injustice. We view our project as an adjacent strategy, not a replacement or a critique of the importance of the anti-racist and social justice work that is currently being done. It is not offered in any way as an effort to minimize the reality of systemic racism, oppression, and injustice—on the contrary. The approach of the Center for Creative Futures would reflect the paradigmatic shift outlined earlier, focusing on creativity, win/win collaboration, and complexity, and the importance of approach motivations that inspire.

The center would draw on research that shows that when people see images and stories of admired members of negatively stereotyped groups in the media, they show substantially less implicit race bias, anti-gay bias, gender bias, and age bias. These images and stories in the media have a particular impact for people who have had little or no contact with members of negatively stereotyped groups (Dasgupta, 2018; Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Dasgupta & Rivera, 2008; Montuori & Stephenson, 2010). For instance, Dasgupta and Greenwald demonstrated that even implicit attitudes could be improved by exposing subjects to positive, rather than negative, Black exemplars (Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001). The focus would be not just on individual exemplars but on creative, successful relationships across groups. Historically such celebrations as Black History Month have focused on the achievements of one particular group or “minority.” The aim of the center would be to celebrate creative coexistence, something that has received far less attention. The goal is to create “attractor images” that can invite people to appreciate relationships and build from these examples (Montuori & Stephenson, 2010).

Human cultural and ethnic diversity have thrived in the arts. The arts depend on difference and interaction among peoples and perspectives. A project on the arts and diversity can illustrate the generative interactions between artists of different cultures. There are a vast number of examples of musicians and artists from different cultures who have successfully collaborated and/or are currently collaborating, as well as the enormous cross-cultural and cross-racial musical cross-pollinations that have historically happened across the globe and continue to this day. Addressing this rich source of inspiration would be a goal of the research arm of the center. A related goal would be collecting examples of successful creative collaborations, influences, and interactions in fields ranging from food to spirituality to sports to social justice to the environment—and documenting them in various media so that they could be used for educational and entertainment purposes.

The fundamental purpose is to mobilize approach motivation by showing examples of what is possible and desirable as a way to counteract what is undesirable and unacceptable. The center would collect and present in a multitude of media positive images of the creativity of diversity that represent current as well as past realities, with a view to raising awareness, showing they are possible, and that they can be amplified.

Drawing on the everyday, everywhere, everyone relational understanding of creativity, these attractor images would also include what we call micro-creations and connections as a
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way of showing that the work of creating the future can begin right where we are, in every small interaction and our every utterance. This effort would not replace larger goals projects but act as a way of bringing a creative future home to our everyday experience by embodying the kind of future we would like to live in in the present.

Conclusion

Our goal here has been to propose that a complex, win/win creativity is needed in thinking about, envisioning, and enacting desirable futures. It is not sufficient to be against something. The struggle against something is enriched by higher goals and ideals, otherwise, it can descend into mere hopeless depression and aggression. It is necessary to have directions that provide active and tangible hope that it is possible to move beyond the existing conditions and create something new, something that embodies higher values. Inspiring “attractor images” drawn from the arts, everyday experience, and history can be created to give a sense of what is possible, as well as desirable, and further mobilize human creativity to break out of the crumbling edifice of modernity.

Note

1 Surprisingly, there has until recently also been relatively little research on creative interactions, hybridizations, and cross-pollinations in music. Ethnomusicology focuses on the music of individual cultures, a further example of the need for systemic, complex, relational view.

References

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