

Review Essay

Futures of Democracy

Mika Mannermaa, Jim Dator and Paula Tiihonen, Eds.
Democracy and Futures
Helsinki: Parliament of Finland, 2006

Mika Mannermaa
Democracy and the Turmoil of the Future
Helsinki: Parliament of Finland, 2007

Osmo Kuusim, Hanna Smith and Paula Tiihonen, Eds.
Russia 2017: Three Scenarios
Helsinki: Parliament of Finland, 2007

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Farrington Hall is no more. It was built in 1930 to honour Wallace Rider Farrington, the sixth territorial governor of Hawai'i—and a staunch Republican. Just off the original quad, it provided the University of Hawai'i with its first theatrical venue. It was, however, already decrepit and moldy when I first met Jim Dator. He was coming out of his office one fine summer day in 1970. We were introduced and exchanged pleasantries. That was shortly before Farrington Hall was demolished.

In its place, the University has built a modern high-rise and hermetically sealed tower to house its social science faculty. It has a palm tree in its central arboretum. It has air conditioning, wifi and vending machines that take credit cards. The new building is called Saunders Hall. It was named in honour of Allan Saunders, who taught political science at the University and who helped start the Hawai'i chapters of the League of Women Voters, the American Civil Liberties Union and the American Association of the United Nations. He also led the movement to allow male professors to wear “aloha shirts” on campus. Times change.

It was in Saunders Hall that I most recently saw Jim Dator, one fine winter day, in 2007. He has lasted longer than Farrington Hall. The “future” has caught up with him. Me too.

Saunders Hall is said to be environmentally sustainable. Personally, I liked the old building much better. Not feeling the tropical breeze through an open window just seems wrong. In any case, Farrington Hall was and Saunders Hall is about as far away from Finland as it's possible to be. The books under review were all produced by the Parliament of Finland. Small world.

In 1970, Jim Dator won some local renown by addressing a committee of the state legislature. I was tremendously impressed. So were the committee members—almost enough to take his advice seriously and engage in public sector innovation. Dator suggested a number of new ways to do things. He tried to convince the legislators of the reality and the urgency of environmental issues. He advocated a systematic and not a merely analytic approach to problems. He told them to think scientifically and experimentally. He undermined their penchant for law making and asked them to understand the wisdom of law discovering. He may have upset them a little when he suggested that they not punish, but instead reward non-violent social deviants and nonconformists. In any case, they listened attentively. They could have acted; but, they didn't. Almost no one has.

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Fast-forward forty-odd years and three books appeared on my desk unannounced, unsolicited, about 6,600 kilometres from Helsinki and also about 7,500 kilometers from Saunders Hall. They were handsome volumes made with excellent paper. They were well-designed, featured fine graphics and displayed a photo of a splendid bronze statue of a mother and child on the front of each one. The sculpture was named "Future." Jim Dator's name was on the cover of one of the books.

I had never thought much about Finland until relatively recently; when it began to dawn on me that it might be the most successful country in the world. By almost every measure of social well-being—education, health care, life expectancy, civil liberties, economic equity, prosperity and so on—Finland always seems to rank in the top ten and usually in first, second or third place. Its only consistent rivals appear to be Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and sometimes Switzerland. I don't speak Finnish and I detest the cold. So, I haven't begged the country to let me in. I may yet do so. After all, the Finnish members of parliament seem to have taken Jim Dator more seriously than members of the Hawai'ian legislature. Good for them.

By some lights, these books might be considered out-of-date. They are not and they are obviously still available. Anyone interested in the possibility of a future that is no worse than the present and perhaps even a little better is urged to read at least one of them and to try to resist going on to the others. They are a few years old, but we may hope to catch up.

"Will America ever become a democracy?" ... the jury is still out on that one.

Democracy and Futures, the opening volume, contains seventeen exemplary chapters dealing with global trends and expectations. They are written by women and men from thirteen counties. The diversity of academic specialties (mainly some

variety of economics, political science and sociology) in no way undermines the consistency of the academic quality of the work, no doubt because they all have a demonstrably passionate interest in what is called “futures” research.

I confess that, when I was first exposed to the term, I was unimpressed, fearing that it was just another quasi-intellectual side-show for people who weren’t much good at what they were trained to do and who were opportunistically latching on to a 1960s-era fad that had, in my narrow view, very little “future” (so to speak). Though no less encumbered with scholarly charlatans than any other disciplinary or multi-disciplinary tradition, I have come to respect futures research more and more. These books helped change my mind.

Jim Dator’s specific contribution bears the provocative title, “Will America ever become a democracy?” As far as I can tell, the jury is still out on that one. But, there is much, much more. It would serve no good purpose to attempt a mini-précis of each article and it would be unfair to select one or two for special attention. Instead, let me just point to the fact that the subject of democracy is approached from many angles and with many sets of academic and experiential interpretive and analytical tools.

We see, for example, insights varying from psychiatry to social history and technology applied to Korea, India, China, the European Union and the United States with predictably mixed but never totally predictable results. From the early emergence of democracy as an “anti-theory” pressed against traditional authoritarian regimes to intimations of a post-human future, this collection is a deeply moving/disturbing introduction to futurism for those unfamiliar with or, like me, initially sceptical of the art/science of discussing what is yet to be. It is also a very important treatment of democracy as a concept and practice with which our species has only begun to experiment. It is fitting that (who else?) the Finns were the first to extend the unrestricted right to vote to women (1906). Finland’s leadership is no less apparent today.

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Mika Mannermaa’s *Democracy and the Turmoil of the Future* offers a more focused narrative. The books under review are the result of an initiative first launched by the Finnish Parliament in 1993 as a “temporary committee” to draft opinions about official Finnish policies on the future. The members did not waste their opportunity and, in 2000, it became a “permanent committee.” Unlike many political-bureaucratic entities, it became an important centre for futures research, especially with regard to decision making both in Finland and in the international community. This book represents the culmination of the effort and is intended to concentrate on Finland itself. It does, and it does more. In fact, it would be an excellent primer on the issues facing any liberal democracy. Its three main chapters speculate upon the kind of world coming generations will inhabit, the future of democracy, and a series of “what if? – scenarios” for ten,

twenty and one hundred years into the future. As well, like any good primer, it not only provides basic concepts and pertinent data, but is also outlines an ongoing research agenda for any individual, institution, city, country or region that wants to plan for change and not merely to react to it.

It is good to read these opinions and outlines. They remind me ... of Hubert Dreyfus' argument —not yet adequately refuted—that computers must have bodies in order to be intelligent.

The topics that Mannermaa discusses are, of course, inherently controversial. Some time is spent, for example, exploring the notion that the social media could become an important mechanism for intense democratization. I do not dispute despite the ability of dissident groups to create a demonstration with thousands of participants in major cities on very short notice. Yet, I also know about the capacity of state or corporate Big Data Analytics to infiltrate virtual dissenters, to learn almost everything about almost everyone and have plenty of gigabytes left over to launch drone missions from the other side of the world. On balance, I am left a little sceptical about the liberating potential if “swarm activism” using tweets to counter Megadata processors equipped with Hellfire Missiles. I am, in short, aware that information technology is changing global relations, but I am unconvinced that it is doing so in the interest of human freedom.

Still, it is just this sort of debate that needs to be addressed and, as, Mannermaa says, is there an outside chance of “global democratic governance”; moreover, that increased democracy is not just a ideal, but it is also an essential quality of any kind of sustainable and therefore enduring future.

Mannermaa does explore possibilities in the future that may seem bizarre, but surely no more so than my father experienced being born in the year that the Wright brothers flew the first heavier-than-air airplane and living long enough to watch Neil Armstrong take his giant leap for mankind onto the surface of the moon. When he does venture into technological fields, as for example, in the realm of transhumanism and the “ideologies of robots,” he helps us all by keeping at least one step on the safe side of sanity. Recognizing that a parliament of self-guiding robots “is not credible for the simple reason that *decision-making is an area of purely immaterial industry* (italics his), he allows us to be grounded while, at the same time, exercising our imaginations in a genuinely critical and creative fashion. It is good to read these opinions and outlines. They remind me not only of Dator's speech in the quickly receding past, but also of Hubert Dreyfus' argument (1967)—not yet adequately refuted—that computers must have bodies in order to be intelligent.

In sum, it is my contention that, for all the banal chatter about “cutting-edge technology” and the ineluctability of computerized and humanistically compromised future states of affairs, we have not yet begun to take technology seriously. As we purchase new and updated equipment and watch Bill Gates fill our classrooms with keyboards that *denature* our children, we have not yet started the fundamental

ontological, epistemological and axiological discussions that are necessary if we are to bring *things* under control in order to liberate ourselves before we cease, as McLuhan (1964) famously said, using our media as “extensions of man [sic]” and allow ourselves to become, instead, extensions of *them*.

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The proof of pudding being in its consumption, the Finnish exploration can best be assessed very close to the arrival of its first scenario date. In *Russia 2017*, Kuusi, Smith and Tiihonen make an effort to predict the future using current conditions and trends as a basis for forecasting. Their three scenarios mentioned consist of:

- (a) Russia as an “influential global player” with many of the qualities for good or ill of other major nation-states jockeying for position in a familiar geopolitical game;
- (b) a managed multi-ethnic “mosaic” with continuing tensions and economic inequities but a sustainable pluralism nonetheless;
- (c) a Russia in the hands of a “power elite” in which authoritarian traditions combine with an emerging kleptocracy under increasingly centralized control—a kind of capitalistic Stalinism, so to speak.

Elements of all three are visible today as Russia continues its ambiguous relationship with the European Union—simultaneously its biggest trading partner and largest rival—and its difficult relations with some bordering states which present serious difficulties as sponsors of terrorism. (Make no mistake, although the United States and Russia each play their favourites in the Near and Middle East with more or less geopolitical cunning and covert skills, neither is exempt from attack and both are preoccupied with appearing to be resolute in principle and adept in practice in the face of such tenacious adversaries.) Meanwhile, questions of civil rights remain unresolved within the country and prospects for a genuinely open society are uncertain. And, of course, tensions on its borders from Ukraine to the Kuril Islands can easily be exacerbated.

That said, once again, the Futures project presents a helpful and instructive guide to thoughtful consideration of the multiple shapes of things to come. *Russia 2017* is, of course, a matter of singular importance to Finland which shares a nervous border with the giant to the east. That border, we must recall, defines the existence of the Finnish nation as much or more than almost any other border defines almost any other nation on the planet. The authors are therefore circumspect: “We know little about the future,” writes Paula Tiihonen, “and it is not often wise to say anything with certainty about the little we know.” At the same time, she adds, “this does not justify absolving politics of responsibility for critically following events in the world, appraising various trends of development, seeking opportunities and preparing for various contingencies.” We are

therefore compelled to size up our situations as well as we can in order to make better educated guesses about what to do not merely to avoid catastrophes, but also to avert making the inevitable ones worse.

It has been said that there is one sure way to make the gods laugh: Make plans for tomorrow! Still, if we avoid committing ourselves to precise goals and objectives and to steering toward them with a firm hand on the wheel, but instead try to steer between hazards in the general direction that we prefer, we may not wreck ourselves on the reefs of overconfidence or delusion. Taken together, these three books attest to the ability to project our thoughts forward, to open up fresh ideas and anticipate potential dangers. We may not end up where we had planned and, indeed, we may not end up anywhere at all, but we may still be alive to tell the story of our voyage.

With a concern for democracy explicit in parts and implicit in the whole, the Parliament of Finland has done us all a service by sponsoring the kind of project and the kind of thinking that may assist people around the world to anticipate what courses of action are needed if we are to negotiate a future worth having.

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