

James A. Dator: The Man Who Beats the Drum for Futures Studies

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I think it was in 1991 at the Hawaii Judicial Foresight Congress in Honolulu. Jim Dator was a major speaker—if not the keynote speaker—before a very large audience. After he was introduced, Jim walked to the podium and, as the audience quieted down, he stood for a moment or two looking at the assembled crowd. Then, suddenly, he dropped straight down and disappeared behind the podium.

Instantly, all eyes in the conference auditorium became riveted on that empty podium. Everyone was wondering what had happened to him. A few long seconds passed in silence. Then, up popped Jim from behind the podium. He was wearing mock rabbit's ears on his head and was furiously beating a small tin drum. He had turned himself into the Energizer Bunny.

Never have I witnessed a more stunning and effective way of getting people's attention. Everyone in the conference hall was now fixated on Jim who was off and running, as he segued into his speech, "beating the drum" for futures studies. Beating the drum to help people understand the importance of futures thinking to their lives and to the human communities of which they are part. Beating the drum for imaginatively envisioning alternative futures. Beating the drum to explain how policy and decision-making can be improved by exploring images of the future. And beating the drum, too, for the well-being of humanity and for creating a better world for future generations.

It may still be true, as Jim said in 1998, that, unless you are a futurist, "you have never taken a course in futures studies, never met a person who taught it at the university level... and probably associate 'futures studies' (if the term means anything to you at all) either with astrology and charlatans or Alvin Toffler, John Naisbitt, or Faith Popcorn" (or possibly with the late Herman Kahn or the Meadows who co-authored the *Limits to Growth*) (Dator, 1998, p. 298). If it is still true, and, unfortunately, in large measure it probably is, it is in spite of the long-term, herculean efforts on Jim's part to explain futures studies to you more fully.

Jim Dator, a pioneer of modern futures studies, has contributed to the field in many different ways for about fifty years. He started when he was teaching at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, Japan, from 1960 to 1966, where he "had more or less 'invented' futures studies." He continued at Virginia Polytechnic Institute in Blacksburg, VA beginning in 1967, where he introduced in the Department of Political Science what may have been "the first undergraduate course on the future that went through the normal channels of faculty and administrative approval" (Dator, 1998, p. 299). Already a member of the World Future Society, he published his first article in *The Futurist* in 1967.

Having read his writings for decades, having worked with him on the future of American prisons in 1978 and for him in 1989-91 as a consultant for some of his work for the Judiciary of Hawaii, having attended meetings of the World Futures Studies Federation where he served as secretary general (1983-90) and president (1990-93), being aware of his pioneering role in founding and developing the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies and the graduate program in futures studies at the University of Hawaii, Manoa where he had moved in 1969 (Jones, 1992), and knowing about the many students he taught and mentored some of whom have become highly respected professional futurists themselves (note, for example, the contributors to this volume), as well as his brilliant work on the Hawaii 2000 project of 1970, I thought I knew Jim's work reasonably well.

I was wrong. I didn't know even half of what Jim has contributed to futures studies until I looked recently at his CV (and it goes only to 2010). There I discovered the full extent of his travel, often repeated trips, to many countries in different parts of the world in his efforts to advance and apply futures studies. I learned about his co-directorship of the Space and Society Division of the International Space University, Strasbourg, France and his contributions to space futures, from the future of human spaceflight to designing governance systems for Mars. I read about his research and many publications dealing with the political and economic futures of the Pacific Island region and East Asia, especially Japan and Korea. I found listings of his numerous presentations on radio and television, including "Voices of Dissent," a half-hour TV show that appeared every Sunday for more than two years, and "Tune to the Future" that was broadcast for an hour twice a week during four months and was awarded a prize for Creativity from the National University Extension Association in 1972. Also, I read about his many other projects (including creating a network of teachers of futures studies in institutions of higher education in the Asia-Pacific region for UNESCO), his assignments as a consultant (including being on the Scanning Advisory Board, Office of State Planning, Office of the Governor of Hawaii, 1990-1995), and his numerous contributions at professional conferences and meetings throughout the world. The list of his professional activities in connection with futures studies goes on and on.

There is no way, of course, that the above brief summary can adequately convey the full scope, intensity, magnitude, creativity, and importance of Jim's work to the development of futures thinking. I suggest that, in addition to reading the articles by his former students in this volume, you check it out for yourself: <http://www.futures.hawaii.edu/about-contact.html>.

One of Jim's major concerns derives from his conception of human society and social institutions as human inventions. For him, such human construction of society is an ongoing and incomplete process of human actions and interactions. It invites us humans consciously to envision the future in new, innovative, and better ways to guide social developments. But, he asks, how can we learn to do so? How can we free ourselves from the patterns of political, economic, and cultural structure and organization that have existed in the past and exist in the present, so that we can invent anew and go beyond them? How can we free ourselves from the limitations of our present notions?

Thus, Jim encourages unconventional thinking, breaking into new territories of invention and discovery, asking people to be skeptical of dominant, mainstream views, even of their own certitudes. For example, it must have seemed perfectly

sensible to the citizens of Hawaii when their then-governor issued a decree in response to the gasoline shortage of 1973 by asking them to discontinue all non-essential automobile travel and to use their cars only to drive to work.

Jim publicly opposed the decree. Although he was not opposed to the statement against “unnecessary” automobile travel, he thought that the Governor was all wrong in his judgment of what was necessary and what was unnecessary: “if he wanted to make a contribution to solving Hawaii’s transportation crisis, then he should have forbidden anyone from using their automobile to drive to work.” People going to work, Jim said, should be arrested and sent to jail. To the contrary, people who were using their cars for fun, status, and truly necessary travel like going to the beach to surf or to visit their aunty ought to be allowed to do so. The bottom line was “if you believed it was, even in 1973, necessary to **go** to work, then you clearly deserved to be sent to a correction facility” (Dator and Borg, 1993).

Sounds crazy right? Well, let’s see. Jim was asking folks to think through alternative possibilities that they and the Governor apparently had not contemplated before. He was asking them to think creatively. He continues by showing that with the spread of personal computers, powerbooks, modems, cellular phones, fax machines, fiber optics, LANs and WANs, etc., people in a wide range of jobs can easily work at home or within walking distance of home. He points out that a “decade of experiments with telecommuting, including many successful experiments here in Hawaii, have made it absolutely clear that telework works” (Dator and Borg, 1993). You can work at home, so save your gas for things most of us can only do away from home—like surfing at the beach.

Another example of his provocative thinking can be found in Jim’s challenge to his students to start afresh, to design new, innovative institutions of governance without relying on their knowledge of existing systems. Thus, he asks them to design the systems not for anywhere on Earth, but for Mars, on virgin territory with no history of forms of governing institutions. Over the years, Jim has found that this tends to free students to think more inventively and imaginatively, yet seriously, in ways that might “be helpful not only for future space settlements but also for new forms of terrestrial governance.” (Dator, 1998, p. 13)

Jim sees futures studies as being to some extent like architecture. “Architects are trained to envision things that do not exist in the present, and to bring them successfully and sustainably into existence. Similarly, futurists imagine preferred human behavior, and the institutions that will facilitate it, and so should be able to build, test, simulate, improve and eventually implement new social institutions” (Dator, nd, p. 3). Part of being a futurist, thus, involves becoming a social inventor.

Jim’s challenge to think creatively is not an unanalyzed abstraction. It is filled with realism, both in its specific content and its moral commitments. For example, in Jim’s graduate political design courses he asks his students to construct governing systems that will overcome real defects in presently existing political institutions. He focuses on six such features:

1. “The first is that all governments are fundamentally undemocratic, thwarting participation of some, while favoring other, groups and individuals” (Dator, n.d., p. 3). *How can governments be designed to be more democratic and to remain democratic?*
2. “All governments also are unfuturistic, severely discounting the needs and wants of future generations while favoring some people and groups in the

- present” (Dator, n.d., p. 3). *How can governments be designed to more surely and fully take into account the freedom and well-being of future generations?*
3. Following Glenn Paige’s work on a nonkilling society, Jim adds a third problem: “all governments are murderous, both using and causing killing as legitimate in the exercise of their power” (Dator, n.d., p. 3). *Can you imagine and design a governing system that does not use the killing of human beings in any way as a legitimate tool to maintain order and control?*
 4. All “governments are bureaucratic, placing the convenience of the governors over the needs of the governed” (Dator, n.d., p. 3). *Can you design an effective governmental system that facilitates and encourages individual access, treats everyone equally and fairly, and avoids trapping ordinary people in an “iron cage” of inefficient, needless, and frustrating rules?*
 5. Existing governments are “too nationalistic, privileging the nation-state over both smaller and larger units” (Dator, n.d., p. 3). *Can you design a system in which governments can encourage esprit, loyalty, and devotion in its citizens without using false patriotism, unrealistic aggrandizements of itself, and the demonization of other states or peoples?* [True patriotism is not: “My country, right or wrong.” It is rather, as U.S. Senator Carl Schurz said in 1872, “Our country—when right to be kept right; when wrong to be put right.” (<http://www.bartleby.com/73/1641.html>)].
 6. Governments “are patriarchal, insisting on a gender dichotomy that privileges men and violent masculinity, while marginalizing or oppressing other preferences” (Dator, n.d., p. 3). *Can you devise a governmental system that will guarantee to women as well as men equal opportunity to participate on every level and equal treatment throughout the system?*

Jim has observed that very “few graduate students in the humanities and social sciences have been taught to think of themselves as, and have learned to become, social inventors” (Dator, n.d., p. 3). Except, of course, for students in Jim’s graduate political design courses.

Another example of Jim’s efforts to promote imaginative thinking was his encouraging the creation of the journal, *The Manoa Journal of Half Fried Ideas (... about the Future)*. It is a forum, as most futurists know, to promote nonconventional thinking, including imaginative, sometimes far-out musings about possibilities for the future. Who knows? Today’s “half-fried ideas” may become tomorrow’s ingenious inventions, considered consensus, or even hallowed traditions.

There is more—much more—that can be said about Jim’s work, as can be seen by these contributions of Eleonora B. Masini and his former students who know him and his work better than I do. I hope that I’ve written enough to express my high regard for Jim as a person and my respect for his exceptional work as a futurist and public intellectual.

Jim is a leader and an organizer, a master communicator, a man who works hard, a firm believer in the importance of futures thinking as part of the effective means to achieve the well-being of future generations, a dedicated global citizen who cares about the whole of humanity as well as the individual persons who compose it, a teacher and a mentor who has exceptional empathy and effectiveness, and a man who creates a stream of continual becoming as he strives to fulfill his moral commitment to the mission of creating a better future.

At the end of one of his recent articles, Jim quotes T.S. Eliot, “only the fool,

fixed in his folly, may think he can turn the wheel on which he turns.” Then, Jim adds that he himself has been and still is such a fool when it comes to spreading the word about the importance of futures thinking. He says he keeps “pointing and wailing and hoping folks will act ethically and prudently, all the while trying to improve the ability of the futures community to see, point, wail, and hope” (Dator, 2011, p. 581).

Of course, those of us who know him realize that Jim often does “turn the wheel on which he turns,” and he does so with humility, grace, insight, creativity, empathy, and with wit and humor. Moreover, he does so with tremendous energy—moving forward, on and on, beating the drum for futures studies, like the Energizer Bunny.

Thank you, Jim, for your excellent futures work, your dedication to the futures community, and your kind encouragement, support, and personal friendship. Please keep beating the drum for futures studies. For as long as these aging legs of mine will carry me, I’ll be there, along with many others, following your lead and marching with you, doing my utmost to see, to point, to wail, and to hope that folks will act ethically, prudently, and futuristically.

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