Vol. 8, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2009)

Third Transcultural Thematic Issue

"Transcultural Impacts and Perspectives on the Future"

Perspectives from Finland, France, India, Italy, Japan, Sweden, the United States of America, and Venezuela.

Changing Times – Changing Identity

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To cope in changing society, to be able to answer to its needs and challenges, and to build a coherent, stable identity calls for new basic skills. Yet the new practices and institutions that would be solid, safe and enduring by nature and thus offer us help in this process are still missing, even though we desperately need them in order to develop those skills. The old institutions offer old solutions that do not necessarily work anymore in rapidly changing circumstances and in the reality that weaves itself constantly anew. Due to and along with technological development, especially information technology, the reality has reticulated and become more and more difficult to specify. It escapes parsing and avoids classifications; it does not bend itself to definitions. Instead it is composed of increasingly abstract phenomena, the parts, interrelations, causes and effects of which are difficult to understand. The borders of "the possible" become continuously redrawn in our reality, just to be overridden again the next day by new information.

Something strange is taking place: although Aristotle said long ago that "change is the other name for time," change itself has now changed. The codes and laws that appertain to the ceding era do not appear as predictable or logical anymore. Therefore also the traditional institutions, organizations and acquired models of action that for so long served us well, no longer produce the end result that we expect.

Cultural processes and implications

Barth (1996, 183-191) divides cultural process into three analytical levels, i.e., macro, medium and micro. On the societal macro level, the change of change and the weakening of aging institutions are due to globalization in all its forms and modes. We can take the erosion of the Nordic welfare state with the rupturing of its traditional safety nets, a topic widely discussed in Scandinavia, as an example of the

outcomes of globalization. On the mid-level (that of organizations and institutions), the forms of networking, new leadership and flexibility come forth as a counterweight to aging and deteriorating hierarchical and vertical structures and models of action. Therefore the change of change does not leave any institution untouched; they either break down or renew themselves in a way the forms and requirements of which are not yet unequivocally open to us.

On the personal micro level, one of the most demanding presumptions is that one must constantly renew ones skills and education – we speak of lifelong and life-wide learning. This presumption has its roots in the tradition of the renewal of the workforce, which goes all the way back to the beginning of the industrial era. Learning and education have therefore been the main antecedents of modernity and the industrial society, since they have ensured the availability of skilled workforce. However, the meaning of learning is going through a transition, since in the present information society, the very need for which the learning institutions were once developed, is no longer the same. People now study and learn more for their own sake, for their own personal development, and for their personal market value than for the needs of society. But, as a result, the process of learning has also changed. Now, in order to cope, one has to learn and study the new and unlearn the old whilst maintaining constant participation and experiencing new things. Additionally, one has to be ceaselessly available and ready for interaction in the 24/7 spacetime reality. We feel that we are therefore forced to keep keen track of what is constantly going on all around us, since if we do not, we fear that we might fall off the ride and then be unable to catch up with the others again.

In this turmoil, it is more and more laborious for a single actor to be genuinely creative and to have an effect on things and events – or even to feel that they can be affected. Therefore, according to studies on images of the future (Rubin 2000; Rubin & Linturi 2001), the images tend to reactively emphasize more how to adapt to change and its new challenges instead of proactively considering how the direction and quality of change could be influenced. The future therefore appears as an inevitable force, not as the aspired and shared end result of decisions and choices.

Whose is the future, then?

No one has the copyright for the future. Earlier choices and their consequences form the basis of our present reality, and likewise, the future will be built on what has already taken place. The future will form as the synergic and complex entailment of decisions yet to be made, and their consequences. Therefore the quality of the future can be influenced by making good decisions and by considering their possible consequences.

The media, together with the development and innovations in information technology, continuously bring new elements into our reality and revolutionize our world view. At the same time, they move society towards a new model of reality that is no longer in debt to modernity. The revolution in information technology, the restructuring of the global economy, and the cultural responses to those phenomena have all converged towards redefining the concepts of production, power, and human experience. All this portends the emergence of a new kind of society in which the relationship among these three entities – production, power, and experience – undergoes a structural transformation into a new alliance which replaces the industrial and modern rationale. A consequence of this switch is social transition, as the rational of the industrial society is little by little yielding to the rationale of the information society. In the institutions, there are gradually growing pressures that result from changed needs and expectations.

In the last couple of years, society has strongly invested in top learning and the creative economy. Both topics have been hyped in public speeches and in the media, almost as if they offered magical tools to guide the economy to safer waters, away from the current recession and from the threatening global depression. Educational institutions and curricula have been established, development programmes launched and political agendas made public. As a result, for instance, quite a lot of money and resources have been directed to high-level education and research programmes and through this, to those

educational institutions that have been regarded as having a high potential in this respect. On the other hand, this situation has led to a state in which those schools, polytechnics and universities that are tasked with providing a general education and that try to fulfill the educational needs of society as such, fall further and further behind in public funding and the distribution of economic resources. Funding therefore has become the most critical determinant in the survival of many such educational institutions, since the mere fulfillment of the basic educational task – however ably it has been carried out in the past – does not seem sufficient anymore. As a result, even primary schools have started to brand and market, to feature and advertise – a personal edge and a distinctive and inviting attraction in the study programme (or in addition to it) is more the rule than the exception. We can still think that what counts in the end is the general level of national education, not merely the achievements of the education elite.

On the other hand, the social atmosphere which favors competition, specialization and originality, also emphasizes networking, interaction and cooperation. These seemingly contradictory features can be traced back to the changing needs of society – there is a reminder of the old, even though the new is already pressing on. This is a typical feature of changing social rationality – the old does not disappear completely, but its meaning and raison d'etre in social activities transforms into something else, when the general denominator of the everyday rationality changes. For example, when we slowly moved from agricultural society to industrial society, agriculture did not cease to be. Rather its situation and meaning as the main social determinant of everyday life merely diminished. Now we can see the same thing happening to industry and to the institutions which were established and developed for the needs of industrial society.

Identity – the new "tribes"

Findings in neurological research show that the human brain is affected by technology. New synapses are born, when we get to know more and have to continuously connect things in fresh ways and create new things. Even though creativity is increased together with those new neural combinations, still, according to studies (Nyman 1988), our ability to perceive our environment still has not changed or become any faster over time. Processing things still requires the same operations, and we still analyze our reality in the same logical sequences as before, even though the information society keeps on producing real-time information for our senses to deal with. Our human destiny is then to try to find a sensible life course and meaning in the information society with the same mental and perceptive abilities with which our ancestors were equipped in the Stone Age.

The identity process forms an important part of the social and community organism, against which we reflect our hopes, future expectations and personal characteristics and features. This way the identity process acquires its significance and gives a meaning to the existence of a person as well as a society. The identity is a representation that is born from the process of looking for the features in other people with whom we either want or do not want to identify. Therefore, in order to develop, the process of identity growth requires constant interaction and dialogue with the others. With the help of this dialogue, we create the borders between our personality and those of others and understand who we are and where we belong at different phases of our lives. Interaction helps us to figure out and define how we are different from the others and what in that difference is truly relevant – what it is exactly that makes me me. Therefore the stability and perseverance of the identity are also dependent on how permanent we understand those differences between people to be. (Taylor 1991)

However, the relationship between stable characteristics and changeable and flexible features in the process of identity building has changed. The construction of an identity is an endless and life-long process – we are never complete in that sense. Still many of the features which were earlier regarded as persistent and solid, unchangeable and fixed in our personality – e.g. attitudes, values, ways of reaction, etc. – are now seen as mutable. We are expected to be resilient and able to adapt to the constantly changing situations and challenges this transition brings about. We learn and re-learn again and again new ways of reaction, models of action, tools, technologies, etc., but, at the same time, this also means that as

a part of identity construction, we now have to learn to unlearn all that has become old, meaningless, and useless in light of new challenges. This process of unlearning sometimes proves to be much harder than that of learning new things.

People aim to diminish the consequences of this social fragmentation, which also appears as the alienation of decision-making and governance from everyday life, by increasing transparency and openness in these processes. The problem is not necessarily in the lack of visibility or intentional concealment of things and causes. Instead, in the deepening development process of the information society, the forms of power become increasingly abstract, while the issues that need to be decided become more and more complex by nature. There is not too little information available, but rather far too much of it. It is more and more difficult to create opinions on general and shared issues and to give out opinions on issues requiring decision, when the big picture remains vague, when information is coming from all directions and on a real-time basis, and when the complex synergy of different events and things make the perception of the future, specifically of alternative futures, more laborious day by day.

In order for society to be at least somehow understandable and controllable by its members, instead of a mere abstract power somewhere out of reach, human beings must also organize their understanding of that society in relation to their own identities. This is the basis from which individualism upwells. Individualism has deepened and become one of the most profound sources of meaning in contemporary Western society. However, because the social environment is constantly widening and the networks are thickening and expanding at the same time, what we understand as society is also changing into a collection of diverse overlapping, imbricate and partly virtual micro groups, or tribes (Maffessoli 1996). This development leads to the situation where, because human beings have a strong need to belong, morals and sociability are more and more dependent on the values and choices of the micro group that happens to be the most influential and strongest at the time when the person is building his/her identity. As a result, the experience (entertainment) industry and the lifestyle products industry, which are often the most influential, become sources of wealth. This impacts our experience of the workplace, where identity becomes a product that is tied to the mechanisms of market economy – that is, to the image, features and characteristics that are for sale to the micro groups. In turn, this notion of identity often influences one's lifestyle in general. Therefore the difference between the slow process of authentic identity building and the roles and lifestyles that are to be adopted rapidly and consciously is becoming dimmer and dimmer all the time.

Individualism in the "society of experience"

Individualism has become the main source of meaning for the citizens of the information society, and to have done this, it must have had to constitute a way in which it becomes applicable to everyone. This applicability is concretized in free and information-based consumerism: the brand, the story, and the image are becoming the most natural elements in our conception of the world and our life and roles in it, while the global media rework the criteria of acceptability and the norms of consumption and behaviour. Side by side with the traditional money economy, we now have the more and more profitable symbol economy with changing brands, images, etc. That is, we do not limit ourselves to "old-fashioned" money anymore. We now also use symbols that are far more abstract by nature than money ever was. Symbols of symbols, that is. Those symbols also have attributes, such as brands, images, etc. You just watch television for a while and see the next commercial of Visa or MasterCard. Or you can also show off your social status, desirability and popularity with a fancy car, hottest running shoes, fashionable taste in arts, going to proper restaurant, etc. However, you also know that the same things may not be "in" next week anymore. Therefore, you don't consume just because you like something, or because you can, but because the way you consume and the things you consume symbolize your social micro group, or tribe – your chosen identity.

At the same time, the varying personal development projects are the few and rare occasions where a person still has a nearly full control over something. For instance, you can control your eating. This does

not mean that for instance the growing problem of eating disorders among young people can be explained inside out through this notion of control. However, some doctors do agree on the idea that eating disorders are associated with the problem of control. The forms of personal development projects are diversified; for example, you can develop your mental and psychical abilities and skills. Start with neo-religious cults, transit trough new-age self-care groups and spiritual growth ideologies and end up in healing or magic or shaman or Asian ceremonies, etc. Or you can worship your own body – there are thousands of gyms in which to exercise, body pump, grow your muscles etc. The models of being and acceptability are formed and passed on to us more and more through the market economy and media. The media feeds young people those models in sweet wrappings with a hidden message: everybody has the right to be like the model – i.e., to be beautiful, fit and acceptable in the way the market has defined and re-defines again tomorrow. The self – one's own mind and body – is therefore created and re-created over and over again. In the end it becomes an experiment lab for new life-styles and roles. In this individualistic consumerism, freedom is very much evaluated, but it is also ostensible and fragile. (Beck 1992; Berger & Luckmann 1995). The responsibility to be successful both economically and socially creates a growing challenge to this controllability and through that, to true and genuine life management.

On the other hand, the challenge of individualization also produces several parallel ways to understand reality, ways that are distributed and shared in real-time in the social media. Different and also contradictory values, attitudes, role expectations, idols, ideals, and norms are competing in and between those messages and dialogue. It is left to the individual to make a choice between those antinomies. (Rubin & Linturi 2001) The traditional concepts and ways of action are not of help to those choices, because there are not even names for many of the new phenomena and things yet, let alone history from which to learn. It is an old truth that only experience creates wisdom. It is through that wisdom that new concepts, models and attitudes can be developed, finally resulting in new institutions, traditions and other tools for managing the reality. However, we do not have the experience or history of the information society, and therefore the tools are only just beginning to develop.

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Anita Rubin, *adjunct professor in futures education, Turku School of Economics since 2002, is the recipient of the first Tulevaisuuspalkinto (Futures Prize) of the Finnish Society for Futures Studies, awarded in 1990. The author of five books as well as 45 research reports and articles in scientific books and journals, her degrees include Doctor of Social Sciences (sociology) and Master of Social Sciences (degrees in sociology, psychology, social policy and foreign literature) from the University of Turku. In addition, she has completed special training courses in futures studies in Dubrovnik, Andorra, and St.*

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POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM *(send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):*

- *Rubin discusses education in the context of both the industrial and the information society, and she discusses the reasons why people learn and study. In what ways will educational institutions in your part of the world change within the next 10 years? To what extent will education be linked to careers? (Also see synopsis of World Future Society Education Summit 2008, published in the* Learning Section Bulletin *in the Fall 2008 issue of* FUTURE*takes.)*

- *Rubin notes, "Interaction helps us to figure out and define how we are different from others…" What are your thoughts on the future of counterpoint-based identity? In what ways will various changes within the next ten years impact notions of individual identity? To what extent will the consumer economy continue shaping notions of individual identity in 2015?*

- *Rubin discusses the alienation of decision-making and governance from everyday life, the proliferation of information, and the increasing complexity of interrelationships (synergies) that make the perception of alternate futures increasingly difficult. What new tools, methodologies, and skills will the futurists of tomorrow need?*

- *(see preceding question) What are the implications of alienation of decision-making for governance itself? How will peoples' outlooks on life be impact by the alienation?*

- *Rubin, quoting Maffesoli, states, that society as we know it is changing into a collection of diverse overlapping tribes. Considering conformist imperatives that are common in many groups, what are the implications for individualism?*

- *In terms of microgroups, Rubin discusses reasons why the experience (entertainment) industry and the lifestyle products industry are the most influential and are sources of wealth. To what extent does this influence manifest in various cultures? In your part of the world, will the entertainment and lifestyle industries be more influential or less influential in 2015 than they are now?*

- *Rubin discusses the symbol economy that is based on entities more abstract than conventional money. Identify alternative economic futures and their possible impacts to the symbol economy*

- *Rubin discusses a notion of "tribal" (microgroup-based) identity. However, some "tribes" to which one belongs can be fluid – for example, one's workplace, profession, neighborhood, associations, or even socioeconomic groups. Which "tribes" will dominate notions of identity in 2015, and how will notions of identity be impacted by the "fluidity" of tribes and tribal affiliations?*