

Macrohistory and Timing the Future as Practice

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Abstract

This article is written in four parts. First, macrohistory as it relates to the study of the future is defined. Second, the role of macrohistory, or the timing of the future, is located in the “six pillars” approach to futures studies. Third, case studies of macrohistory as practice are presented. Finally, the article concludes with insights from the practice of using timing.

Keywords

macrohistory, six pillars, futures studies, patterns of change, cyclical, linear, pendulum, spiral

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Macrohistory and Macrohistorians

In earlier work, I have focused on theories of time and the future, particularly the role of macrohistory and structured patterns of the future. Johan Galtung and I defined macrohistory as the study of social systems, along separate trajectories, through space, time, and episteme, in search of soft laws of social change (Galtung and Inayatullah 1997). The main hypothesis was that grand patterns can be used to rethink the future and, more fundamentally, gain a distance from the present so as to be able to change it.

I argued that macrohistorians had much to offer futures studies (Inayatullah 1998). By providing the deep patterns that shape history, macrohistory could lend weight to futures studies, ensuring that scenarios and visions were not

fanciful but framed by historical understanding. By gaining insight to what has not changed, or what is not likely to change, foresight could become focused on the plausible. This is not to say that the disruptive is lost sight of but that the disruptive is framed by the question, “Have we seen this before?” If so, what can we learn by answering this question? Moreover, macrohistory can help us understand what changes over time are merely ripples, what changes are large waves, and what changes change the nature of nature. Macrohistory also helps us frame the very long-term future, articulating meaningful trajectories over the next one thousand years (Inayatullah 2012).

Although there are many grand macrohistorians who can inform our thinking, my focus has been on four grand thinkers. One among them is Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), who developed a cyclical theory of change, particularly the politics of decline. For Khaldun (1967), history is the history of men, it is a tragic history of power, it is a history of the rise and fall

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of dynasties. The rise aspect of the equation comes from the outside—the “bedouins.” For him, a dynasty is created through the group feeling (*asabiya*) of desert people. They live, fight, and work together, and do not have the luxurious nor lazy attitudes of those in cities or those habituated to power. But once a people have conquered others and come to power, then, they pass through a variety of stages. Initially, their unity is strong; once in power, it gets stronger as power is consolidated and competing tribes are vanquished. After consolidation, there is a fruition, the elite build monuments, and money is invested in culture and the arts. By the third or fourth (final) generation of power, the group feeling has decreased as the original conditions of victory have changed; instead of prayer and fasting (hard work and organizing in modern terms), there is drinking and looting. The unity of the group declines, luxury increases, and with senility, there is a change of rulership. The bedouins—those outside of power—challenge the dynasty. In general, the cyclical approach draws its inspiration from nature—the seasons and the biological life cycle. Cyclical macro-histories look to the rise and fall of peoples and civilizations. In modern times, of course, business, commodity, and political cycles are more relevant.

Although Khaldun is most useful for understanding the cyclical, it is with Auguste Comte (1798–1857) that we can best understand the linear. Comte (1875) offered three historical stages: the theological (characterized by the supernatural being the cause of natural and social events), the philosophical (characterized by the belief in abstract forces such as “nature” or “essence” as causative), and finally the positive (characterized by the scientific observation of reality). The scientific is the final stage in history. In the linear approach, getting “there” first is crucial as one can then dominate the trajectory of others. Historically, the rise of the West predetermines the possibility of others. It was with Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) that the linear became linked with the laws of evolution, thus providing the metaphorical backbone of capitalism—the notion of the survival of the fittest. Science and progress would create the perfect future, and

those unfit, unable to adapt, should be left behind so that others can move ahead. However, crucial is that the future is pulled forward via an image of progress; it is a vision in which the world can be made better and humans have the ability to bring this about.

However, from the view of the cyclical, we should be wary of the promises of the linear; of this time, it is different. They are seductive but ignore other aspects of macrohistory. Khaldun (1967, 267) writes

At the end of a dynasty, there often also appears some [show of] power that gives the impression that the senility of the dynasty has been made to disappear. It lights up brilliantly just before it is extinguished, like a burning wick the flame of which leaps up brilliantly a moment before it goes out, giving the impression it is just starting to burn, when in fact it is going out.

Indeed, this is one reading of the victory of Trump, signaling not the further linear rise of the United States but its ultimate decline, moving from exceptionalism to an ordinary nation. The third major relevant shape is the pendulum. Although the cyclical generally is derived from the observations of nature (rise and fall, birth and death, and the seasons), the pendulum focuses on movement from one pole to another. It is with Pitirim Sorokin (1957) that this approach finds its most sophisticated treatment. Social forces always move toward the extreme until the principal of limits are hit and the pendulum reverses. What is crucial is that social change does not occur due to mere external factors but as with Sorokin because of the principle of immanent change. For Sorokin, “change is imminent in any socio-cultural system, inherent in it, and inalienable from it. It bears in itself the seeds of its change (633).”

Finally, there is the spiral most elegantly described by the Indian philosopher P. R. Sarkar (1921–1990). He argued that reality is cyclical but that it can be transformed into a spiral through leadership and foresight (Sarkar 1967). For Sarkar, societies endlessly go through the following cycle: (1) worker, the people, or, in bureaucracies, the staff (the internal proletariat, to evoke

Marx, and the taxpaying public, the external proletariat). The workers remain happy with day-to-day activities and are exploited (made to feel inferior) by all the other classes; (2) the warriors or those that use coercive and protective power. This is the police, the military, the kings, and knights; and (3) the intellectuals or those who use normative power (the power to define what is real or, at the micro bureaucratic level, set the agenda) to remain in control. There are numerous types of intellectuals, the various priests (in present-day language, the attorneys and the economists), the ministers (who often have actual control during the rule of the warriors), and, of course, the professional class, who want to pursue pure theory but are forced to sell their ideas to the fourth category, namely, (4) the capitalists. This fourth group accumulates power through the appropriation of wealth. In this last stage, the other classes all lose their original ways of knowing and are forced to become workers: each and every person, thing, or idea becomes a commodity. The markets define what is real, true, and beautiful.

Finally, and most recently, in the past ten years, I have focused on the works of Nikolai Kardashev (1964), who notes the contradiction between our needs for energy, which are universal, and our governance systems, which are tribal. His approach is linear but with dramatic possibilities for a transition to a “thrival” civilization (global governance plus renewable energies) or planetary failure and collapse.

Six Pillars of Futures Studies

Although the details of their theories of macrohistory are published elsewhere, for this article, I wish to describe how their work is used in mesoresearch, in attempts to transform the futures of organizations and institutions. The framework for this work is the six pillars approach to Futures Studies (Inayatullah 2015). The first pillar is mapping, which seeks to create an initial map of the future. It uses as its core method the futures triangle. The triangle has three aspects—the pull of the future, the imagination of what can be; the push of the present, the critical drivers; and the weight of history. It is derived from the work of Fred

Polak (1973). The second pillar is anticipation. The core method used is emerging issues analysis, developed by Graham Molitor (2004). The goal is to disturb the map, and discern perhaps improbable and unknown issues that could challenge how the future was being understood. Most organizations that focus on the present are indeed pummeled by it. Emerging issues analysis suggests that there is a need to move upstream toward prevention through identifying issues before they become problematic and opportunities for change before they become mainstream.

However, emerging issues analysis, although focused on disruption, may merely be identifying new technologies that succumb to the hype cycle, and thus a deeper understanding is required. Thus, the third pillar of futures studies in the six pillars approach is “timing the future.” It is here that I work with organizations, institutions, cities, and nations to use macrohistory to better understand the future. Of course, in a research context, macrohistory can be used to better understand the next fifty or hundred years or even thousand (Inayatullah 2012) to ensure that one is not overly influenced by any particular shape of the future, particularly the linear, which assumes that the present will continue unabated. However, in the practice of timing, of macrohistory, it is using time as an asset to create more effective policy and strategy.

After timing the future, I move on to deepening the future via the causal layered analysis (Inayatullah and Milojevic 2015) process, creating alternatives via scenario planning, and conclude with transforming the future via visioning and backcasting.

In timing the future, I have the clear goal and broadening temporal views of the research consultancy, workshops, methods and tools course, or strategy day. Phase 1 of this pillar is to prod stakeholders to think long term, thirty years out. In the next phase, I go back into history and detect not just trends or emerging issues but deeper historical patterns. Finally, I move to insight—what have I learned from thinking forward and backward—and how can I apply these insights in my organization, institution, city, or nation. The conceptual frame is

to shift the mind-set of participants from being data driven to information rich to insight or even wisdom centered.

In this journey, I explore the four core patterns of macrohistory—the cyclical, the linear, the pendulum, the spiral, and time permitting, Kardashev's (1964) cosmic approach.

After explaining each pattern, I ask the participants to explore how these patterns fit into the futures of their organization or institution. Some select one pattern; others go deeper and use all patterns.

Examples of Timing in Practice

In one city council, the organization had been focused on ensuring that their transport planning and overall city approach was based on sustainability. They were pedestrian focused, with one city councilor going so far to say that “the car is the enemy.” They intended to move toward changing city design to make it public-, bicycle-, and train-friendly, creating the “walkable city.” However, after the election, there was a major swing to the conservative party, which was entirely focused on building more roads and tunnels. Sorokin's pendulum helped them understand that these are natural swings in politics and institutional behavior. They had gone too far toward sustainability for citizens, and there had been a dramatic swing back. Timing the future suggested that they had to be patient and not “hit their heads against the wall.” Frustration could be reduced with strategy focused on what was doable while awaiting a pendulum shift. And not surprisingly, seven to eight years later, there has been a swing back, with discussions returning to sustainability, the carless city center, and futures-oriented policymaking and strategy.

One group used “timing of the future” as part of their incasting in the scenario process. For example, once they identified a scenario, they added one of the temporal shapes—“Is the scenario part of the Khaldunian decline? Is the scenario part of a linear rise? Is the scenario merely a pendulum swing? Or is it a deeper spiral into a different type of system

that keeps part of the old even as it creates the new?” They found this useful as the scenarios were now no longer frozen but moving through space and time. The scenarios had temporal movement built into them.

The work of Ibn Khaldun ends up being relevant to all participants, particularly the issue of who the bedouins are. This question is asked to help participants understand how the world they think they know could dramatically change. For a global energy producer, the bedouins were at one level the companies that provide renewable energy, but deeper are those who can create platforms for energy cooperatives, home-to-home energy trading. Thus, the deeper bedouins are not those in the current energy game but those outside who promise to change the rules. This was similar for banking. Obvious bedouins include Islamic banking; but far less noticeable are peer-to-peer banking systems that use new distributed finance technologies such as blockchain.

Sorokin provides deep insights into how what seems novel is merely an instance of *plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose*. One Asian national energy company noted that there is a back and forth movement between the centralized energy debate and the decentralized (self-sustainability). The linear aspect was increased prices of energy and heightened demand, especially in non-Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (non-OECD) nations.

For most businesses, the obvious cycle is the business cycle between growth and consolidation and seasonal demand.

In most large organizations, the obvious pendulum pattern is centralization and decentralization. In the centralization phase, rules and regulations are enforced, compliance is critically important, products are reduced and power is centralized in the board and the CEO. However, after five to seven years, productivity goes down, and managers become far less attentive to the voice of stakeholders (employees, customers, other competitors); instead, they are convinced that they know the future. Often after a crisis, a rapid move toward decentralization occurs. Products are increased, and power and profits are shared. And again after a few years, the

accountants and compliance officers note that they are losing track of the bottom line. Discipline is eroding, and a new CEO is hired to get everyone “back into shape.” In government, the pendulum swing is often between the government and the private sector delivering services. It moves back and forth between these two nodes. The former ensures equity but may be inefficient, slow, and bureaucratic. Critics argue for privatization. Although this may increase efficiency after a few years, inequity seeps into the system, and the public good may be lost, and thus a reversal to government delivery. Timing the future can thus help create more effective and robust strategy. If one understands the pattern, one may be able to—using other tools such as causal layered analysis—accelerate the pendulum process or slow it down.

An executive from a major bank noted that the pendulum in banking is from product to distribution. In one phase, the main focus is on creating new products, innovation. However, after a period of time, there is a shift toward enhancing and increasing the distribution of these products. The linear trend affecting the entire banking industry is the increased use of new technologies.

The pendulum can also be used to understand political swings between political parties. Once in power, they tend to believe—as they are only able to see data that reinforce their worldview—that they will remain in power forever. This perspective continues until there is a dramatic loss in legitimacy, and they are voted out. In some nations, as in Pakistan, the pendulum goes back and forth between the rule of the military and rule of the political parties via the landlord class.

To explore the spiral approach to the future, clearly the most difficult concept for participants to understand, I use the Sarkar game. As explored elsewhere (Inayatullah 2015), the game uses four types of props (building tools for workers, guns for warriors, books for intellectuals, and money for capitalists) to explore power. Each group sequentially (worker, warrior, intellectual, and capitalist) enters the game and interacts with others. The goal is to end the cycle of power over others and create a partnership society either through all groups

working together or certain individuals taking leadership and acting for the system as a whole, seeing benefit for future generations not just for their individual tribe. Sarkar argues that the cycle of history—from worker to warrior to intellectual to capitalist—is an evolutionary pattern, a soft law, but it can become a spiral if all work toward the greater good and not for short-term rewards. As argued elsewhere, the Sarkar game can lead to numerous insights.

In one national Federal Department of Agriculture, scientists understood that although they perceived themselves as intellectuals, those in the ministry—senior bureaucrats—had adopted a capitalist worldview and saw them as workers (Inayatullah 2014). The insight allowed them to understand why they felt undervalued. One senior scientist said, “Now I understand. I see myself as an international scientist. But the Minister sees me as his lackey worker.” This insight helped the scientist rethink his strategy when approaching the Minister and his staff. For intellectuals, this is often the greatest insight. They need to find ways to influence others in the system—the capitalists who have the funds and the warriors who control the system of compliance—so that solutions for the greater good can emerge. Intellectuals, often, however, overly theorize and preach, and thus quickly lose the interest of the other groups. For them to be successful, inquiry is a first step. Next steps include understanding the other archetypes and noticing which phase in the social cycle the organization is currently in. These can lead to high-impact strategies. However, intellectuals often stand forcefully against corruption, refusing to be bought by the capitalists. In a recent game in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, for world Muslim youth leaders, this dimension was pronounced. The intellectual group ensured that corruption did not occur. Moreover, when the capitalists tried to argue that by definition their religion ensured that they were corruption free, the intellectuals reminded all not to use religion as a weapon.

The greatest insight for organizations was that the Sarkar game aids in exploring what aspects of leadership are missing and need to be nurtured. It offers an understanding of the

dynamics of power. Most significantly, the Sarkar game offers a way forward in changing history and future in understanding how the wheel of history is turning and who may be next in power.

The game is also an excellent way to explore one's own leadership style, and one's own repressed, projected, and disowned selves. A gentle CEO quickly became a killer during the Sarkar game. He felt threatened by a number of government departments whom he believed were taking away funding from his hospitals. In this stressful environment, potential strategic friends appeared as enemies, and he eliminated them. It was obvious on reflection that he was tired of always being the pleasant negotiator. He needed to learn warrior-like skills to become a better leader, to learn how to command power instead of demanding power. A gentle Taiwanese facilitator became surprised at how easily she used the gun to silence other perspectives. She did not know this about herself, and this became central to her self-discovery process.

A third group of forty or so health CEOs and senior executives in a workshop sponsored by a Department of Health realized that although the goal of the two-day workshop was to create partnerships for a better health system, they actually did not trust each other. In the Sarkar game, the capitalists refused to spend money, that is, invest in and employ workers. The warriors did not protect the system; rather, they threatened and killed others. The workers refused to work, and the intellectuals, instead of understanding others within their own terms, merely kept on reciting the mantra of evidence-based research. From this debacle, they began to focus on the trust-building process. They first articulated old and new metaphors of the system. The dominant metaphorical shift was from "we are all beating our own drum" and "karaoke with the same line but out of tune" to a transformed metaphor of "the patient conducts the orchestra that is in harmony." Within this context, through the use of open space technology (Owen 2008), they developed seven action learning projects where they could work together. After working out the details of the new projects, the chief

operating officer agreed to finance all the projects, and after departmental discussions, it was agreed to as well sponsor and fund the development of their long-term vision of a transformed community-based preventive wellness system (using smart homes, avatars, wearables, for example). Through working together on tangible projects, they hoped they could create trust in the short term, leading to change in the long run. The Sarkar game had illustrated to them that "culture was indeed eating strategy for breakfast" (Inayatullah 2015, 14), and a formal strategic plan would have satisfied their official checklist but not led to real change. Indeed, one participant recently commented (in an email message to the author, November 25, 2016), "There is so much enthusiasm for this work in our region and everyone seems to be working together. I am sure the Sarkar game might have a different outcome if repeated now."

The Sarkar game thus helps organizations and individuals understand the different types of power that flow through the system, the importance of seeing how others see each other, and the necessity for self-reflection in leadership development.

Insights

My main insights from using macrohistory as practice are the following:

1. It is not an easy task. Most participants in a one- to five-day foresight course find macrohistory and timing challenging. They assume one view of history—the linear. Although they understand cycles in government and business, using these intelligently in strategic foresight is far more problematic. Over time, I have noticed that in Southeast Asia and East Asia, it is the linear that is now the most ascribed to. Individuals believe that their children will be more educated, wealthier, and happier, and have more opportunities. Twenty-thirty years ago, this was not the case, as most believed that the cyclical was most relevant. The common narrative was as follows: "Our nation is a

like a game of snakes and ladders. We work hard to climb up and through randomness we can slide back down again.” Multiple methods are required to shift people from seeing the future as linear, business-as-usual, that is, from one future to alternative futures.

2. Relevance is often a major issue. Organizations wish immediate strategies to deal with dramatically changing futures or scenarios that can reduce risk (not transform). Macrohistory/timing requires stepping back from the present, using history—as an analogy, as a pattern—to investigate and create alternatives. This requires research into historical patterns. But going back into history and, for example, discussing the fall of the Roman empire is easy—which nations are overstretched today, steeped in hypocrisy. Far more challenging is to be able to use multiple patterns: to see what is linear, what is cyclical, what is a pendulum, and what is spiral. I insist that participants take time to explore these patterns in their organizations. Once they become comfortable at seeing and using multiple patterns, then agency becomes paramount. How, where, and when do we act to create the change, the preferred future we desire? Macrohistory moves this discussion from mere wish fulfillment to transformative foresight. Although these insights are conceptual, it is in the Sarkar game that insights can become embodied.
3. Participants leave the Sarkar game perplexed, either at their own behavior or the behavior of others. They are often surprised—those that play the warrior archetype—of how easy it is to play destructive roles and how difficult it is to be productive at physical, material, and spiritual levels. They are equally surprised at how they may profess action learning or inquiry, but when playing the role of the intellectual, they preach and rarely inquire. When they are capitalists, they are surprised at

how they waive money around but rarely pass it around. They do not, as Sarkar (1992) has argued for the functioning of economic well-being, keep the money rolling. Workers are surprised at how they actually prefer to strike than work. They are also surprised at how there are different types of power in organizations: the power of labor, the power of coercion/protection, the power of new ideas/dogmas, and the power to create or hoard wealth. More challenging is the practice of becoming an authentic change agent, integrating the four archetypes and thus creating the possibility of transformative change.

In conclusion, I wish to argue that macrohistory and timing are powerful ways to gain insight into organizational and institutional futures. They ensure that plausibility is considered as important as vision. Although imagination is tempered by reminding that there are deeper patterns at play in history, the future can be created: deeper patterns can lead to reversals, linear steps forward, cyclical downturns and upturns, and the possibility of transformation. It is the possibility of change where macrohistory is at its most powerful. Once patterns can be understood, then agency is possible. The preferred future becomes not distant but actionable, realizable.

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