

The Role of Critique in Futures Work

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In early 2002 I received a letter from a senior American Futurist. It took me to task over my critique of the 'Future Survey Super 70' selection of bibliographic extracts. The letter also purported to detect a strong 'anti-American ethos' in my work and suggested that I be more positive. Around this time I'd started working on the outline of a new book (Futures Beyond Dystopia) and had again been reconsidering the role of critique. Over the years I've written critiques of so-called 'megatrends', the 'future shock' thesis, the 'long boom' scenario, the Millennium Project, Future Survey and many other Futures books and products.

Critique and critical futures methods

Critique per se and Critical Futures methods have both come to play an increasingly central role in my thinking and work. They are interrelated but different. The former is to some extent a ground clearing, diagnostic phase, a prelude to the exploration of new territory. It's also about standards and quality control, both of which are vital to an emerging discipline. Critical Futures methods go far deeper. They refer to a set of powerful tools and frameworks that allow us to look 'beneath the surface' of social life, social being, and to actively deal with the hidden realities and commitments that are found there.

The best (ie. most positively useful) critique operates self-consciously out of these deeper layers of Critical Futures work. That is, the writer or speaker functions as a human agent who is fully conscious of his/her immersion in, and debt to, particular sets of cultural resources. Embedded cultural assumptions cannot be objective, are not provable and never final. We are all and always complicit in non-objective ways of knowing. Moreover, different ways of knowing reveal different inner worlds. One conclusion is that there is never any final interpretation. Radical uncertainty lies at the heart of everything because everything is socially constructed.

The cost of this view is that it renders empirical surfaces highly problematic. It removes the false certainties of naïve realism – a loss that some merely find uncomfortable but others will avoid at any cost. The benefit is that one is confronted with social realities that both have to be acknowledged and that, properly understood, open out quite new options for understanding and action. That is partly why critical approaches are so vital in Futures Studies (FS) generally.

Hence a primary role of critique may be to facilitate the opening up of all utterances, organisations and products to this deeper, richer world. Futures work that avoids this engagement may function as a diversion, as entertainment, but is otherwise largely

without value. It misses the ‘main game’ and is not to be taken seriously. This is part of the basis for a critique of what I’ve termed the ‘dominant empirical American tradition’.

During the late 1970s, when I began my journey into FS, the central methodology appeared to be that of forecasting. I also became aware of many books describing the ‘global predicament’ out of largely unregarded cultural contexts. Only later did I begin to understand that, in a sense, language and culture actually ‘speak us’. That is, what we can say can only be said at all through these very complex, symbolic and power-laden processes of cultural construction, decay and renewal.

Another function of critique is that it removes the taken-for-grantedness of culturally derived meanings and helps us to locate ourselves, and our products, within these very social processes. The question of whether a book, an organisation or a product ‘helps’ or not depends on how we see it and how we locate it in the wider matrix of cultural knowing and not-knowing. It’s fascinating how the latter is systematically overlooked in the over-confident discourses of techno-progress, marketing and, yes, in empirical futures work. Dealing with phenomena at this level quickly becomes a matter of critical judgement, interpretation and depth understanding. I well remember people laughing when I was working on my PhD: “what has hermeneutics got to do with anything?” Well, as it turned out, a great deal. It’s about how you derive meaning from eg, texts, when you are looking at them from different locations in culture, space and time. It raised questions about why forecasting was considered more central than judgement and interpretation. Did not the former absolutely depend on the latter?

‘Inner’ precedes ‘outer’

Critical Futures methods bring factors like these to the fore. Put simply they suggest that we can know nothing much about, do nothing much in, the outer world without the prior achievement of a highly organised inner world (of identity, culture, language, value and purpose). Lewis Mumford made precisely this point some years ago in his book The Pentagon of Power.² That’s partly why Wilber’s four quadrant matrix (of inner/outer and individual/collective) is so useful. It directs our attention to the mutual necessity of each domain. Hence, Futures work cannot just be about the outer quadrants, ie, the physical world, infrastructure, technology and new generations of technical wonders. These overlook the inner worlds (of human knowledge and ingenuity) from which they spring and out of which they are largely constituted. That is why I equate Wilber’s left hand quadrants (inner) with ‘Futures literacy’ and the right hand quadrants (outer) with ‘Foresight strategy’. The latter looks pretty thin without the former. But the former is still widely overlooked.

Seen in this light, critique is an essential part of the picture. It is an attempt to locate and interpret work in this wider context. But if that was all there was to it, it would not be very productive. So, after critique there normally follows the challenging work of synthesis, reconstruction, visioning, social innovation and disciplinary development. Anyone who takes a serious look at any or all of my publications can see this dynamic

clearly at work. For example, of the 30 or so papers I've written for Futures, most are unreservedly positive.

Consequences

What are some of the productive consequences of a Critical Futures perspective? Well, first, I'd suggest that a range of tools and methods has emerged and are continuing to do so. They are part of what I call the 'infinite tool kit'. It flows from immersion in fields and disciplines that are relevant to Futures work: post-modernism, deconstruction, hermeneutics, humanistic psychology, group work, macrohistory etc. Some years ago I derived a 'transformative cycle', (or 'T-cycle' for short) from accounts of innovation and decay. Later I saw how Futures work was layered, how it went from superficial 'pop' concerns to much deeper cultural ones. Sohail Inayatullah took this insight and developed it into the methodology of 'causal layered analysis' (or CLA for short). More recently I've attempted to relate Futures work to Wilber's meta map. I've also suggested ways to reconcile breadth and depth in Futures work – a process that allows us to move beyond mundane and stereotypical results. 3 In a healthy discipline these processes (ie, of knowledge creation) are never ending.

Second, I believe that being able to incorporate depth understandings into Futures work distinguishes it decisively from something quite different that is popularly associated with crystal balls and Nostradamus and reveal it as highly relevant to our contemporary world. Futurists and Foresight practitioners know better than almost anyone else how the prospects for humanity have deteriorated over recent decades such that one form or another of Dystopia appear far more likely than standard anodyne (read economic, market-oriented) outlooks still widely shared by governments and corporations around the world. It is greatly to be regretted that so much pragmatic Futures/Foresight work still operates to support the latter, rather than challenging them and their shaping assumptions. Depth understanding may bring instant incomprehension and obscurity when it is poorly used. Or it may bring life-changing insight and lasting credibility. It can show that we have done our homework. We are not just spouting out of ego or concealed economic or cultural interests. We are aspiring to speak for, and with, humanity as a whole, to articulate human interests over technical interests and those based on unexamined relations of privilege and power.

Third, I believe that Critical Futures work does more than any other approach to clarify future possibilities, both positive and negative. As noted, it can clearly uncover the roots of downbeat Dystopian futures in the current age of 'wild' globalisation and technological narcissism. It can say very clearly why this is not a wise path for humanity. Equally, however, it can also do much more than outline vague hopes and unreal visions for the future. It can attend to the processes of cultural decay and renewal, locate some of the symbolic and actual levers of change and put on the table well thought-out, credible and compelling proposals for innovation and change. This can be done at the mythic level, the level of the 'world story' we are living in and co-creating. It can be done at the worldview level where we can clearly see much of the work that needs to be done. We

also honour the many attempts at the social problem level to re-direct human activity in a thousand practical ways. There is even potential at the pop level - eg, via the internet and in occasional attempts to get new ideas across in the mass media.

The 'real' pay-off of critical futures

Finally, and I think that this is the real pay-off, in a Critical Futures view we can define and explore options that are simply unavailable in more outer-oriented, pragmatic and empirical views. Here we have access to a vast 'inner landscape' of possibility, of social innovations, breakthroughs, new ways of thinking and acting, new cultural forms and so on. Personally I find the notion of a 'wise culture' immensely inspiring. The search to put some definition on this term reveals materials, resources, people, contexts, ideas and principles that provide the means through which we can see pathways through the self-constructed traps that humanity has made.

So do I think that Future Survey is a 'bad' publication? Not really. Am I truly 'anti-American?' In no way. Some of the people I most admire worked, or work, out of the US context (eg, Lewis Mumford, Willis Harman, Ken Wilber, Duane Elgin, Elise Boulding, Wendell Bell and many others). Some of the best work ever done is American. Some of the best conferences ever held were held in America or Canada. We are all better off as a result. What I am against is the kind of second-rate, taken-for-granted hegemony of ideas and possibility that reigns there. It is there in the literature. It is there in the name of the WORLD Future Society. It is there in the so-called 'Super 70' collection that, unfortunately, was uncritically reproduced around the world by lazy editors who overlooked the hegemonic implications.

I owe to the American tradition some of the starting points for my own journey into FS - for example Ed Cornish's early introductory text The Study of the Future.⁴ I remain grateful for this and other similar works. But the assumption of superior insight out of unregarded cultural commitments and the 'othering' of the bulk of humanity simply cannot be tolerated. It is anathema to the true spirit of Futures work. A Soviet academic is said to have declared that "American culture is a mile wide and an inch deep". (One might say the same of Australian culture - which some suggest is an oxymoron and 90% American anyway.) The point is that, like it or not, the US stands in a position of cultural, economic and military hegemonic power. The ramifications are vast. Those, in particular, working out of that context need to understand the full implications and come to terms with them. Some have. Others have not. Nor has the deep resentment been fully recognised that develops elsewhere when questions of wealth, power and privilege are constantly occluded, put out of sight, dismissed. Whatever else may be read into them, the appalling events of September 11 are a stark reminder of that.⁵ So I want to finish with a directly relevant example of positive critique.

Critique with respect

During mid 2002 a book called Why Do People Hate America? by Zia Sardar and Merrill Wynn Davies was published in the UK. 6 It considers some of the ways that the US has operated in the world to maintain its own interests above all others. Many of these processes operate in the financial and trade domains, others in cultural and military ones. The picture painted by Sardar and Davies does not reflect an innocent nation caught up in the machinations of evil ‘others’. It is, rather, a picture of a nation profoundly compromised by double standards (eg, in relation to the UN, nuclear weapons, the Kyoto treaty, the International Court etc) and yet aggressively pursuing its own interests without regard for the costs. The direct result is that power and wealth accumulate in one direction while poverty, decay and death accumulate elsewhere.

For such an analysis to succeed it is clearly essential that the approach and ‘tone of voice’ adopted is clear, analytic and forceful without being aggressive. In my view, and to their great credit, the authors achieve this. They carefully peel away the layers of self-understanding (and self-deception) upon which the US is founded and consider both founding myths and their latter-day reflections in policy, practice and popular culture. In other words, this is critique with respect. It directs attention to inconsistencies, to issues of power and to long-standing structural issues that are among the root causes of hatred towards the US. The final section looks at ‘transcending hatred’. Overall, this is a courageous book – one that digs deep to reveal truths that need to be dealt with at the structural level, not that of rhetoric, PR and continued self-deception.

Conclusion

I have long held the view that it’s way overdue for us collectively to wake up from the ‘American dream’ that has truly become a nightmare. The traditional Western myth, the basic ‘story’ endlessly marketed to us day and night, based on growth, materialism, rapidly advancing technology and linear progress, Western style, should be seen for what it is: a destructive, radically divisive, out of balance and – hopefully – a temporary phase in humanity’s development. It is becoming ever clearer that the current path is one that will cost humanity dearly unless it is questioned, critiqued and changed. The truth is that beyond Dystopia lie other states and stages of civilisation that can be reached by people of intelligence, humility and good will. Books like Why Do People Hate America?, along with Critical Futures work in general, help us to be increasingly clear about what our passage from here to there really entails.

In summary, critique is no longer merely an option. It has become a necessity in a fundamentally compromised world.

References

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