

Futures for the Third Millennium: Enabling the Forward View (1999)

Richard A. Slaughter

Introduction

Futures for the Third Millennium does not attempt to anticipate, forecast or predict the unfolding of the next thousand years. It is not a macro history of the future; rather, its focus is on the creation and use of futures-relevant knowledge - knowledge that can help individuals, organisations and, indeed, humankind as a whole, navigate within this complex and ever-changing environment.

For some years the field of Futures Studies (FS) was inhibited by inadequate methods, superficial language and a lack of commonly accepted standards and foundations. These problems have now been largely resolved and the field is becoming a mainstream intellectual and applied discipline. As such it has trodden the same path of legitimation that attends the progress of all new fields. It has developed an impressive range of methods (both 'hard' quantitative ones and 'soft' qualitative ones); it has developed a rich, deep and truly global discourse; and it has a shared evolving knowledge base. The tools and methodologies of FS have been taken up and applied very widely, particularly within business and corporate contexts. Here, the analysis of trends, the development of scenarios and the merging of strategy with foresight have proceeded apace. But in the rush to explore or even 'colonise' the future, to derive new products and market share, or merely to protect organisations against future contingencies, some of the more vital and substantial aspects of 'what FS is about' have been overlooked. For one thing, remarkably little futures work has been carried out in the public interest. Most government foresight programs began with, or were motivated by, the economic implications of developments in science and technology. For another, the symbolic grounding of all futures work has been widely ignored in favour of methodologies.

Yet if this book has a central claim it is this: *it is of enormous practical value to grasp the way futures work is grounded in particular forms of knowledge, and also to know when and how these may be legitimately applied in various contexts.* Finally, there remains a vast and unsustainable disjuncture between the needs of all societies for conscious commitments to meaningful purposes and goals, and the so-far minimal investment in creating and applying the forward view by public bodies and leading institutions. As a result of this oversight we continue to plunge into a most unstable and difficult time without the tools of understanding that are needed to deal consciously with it. I call this the 'civilisational challenge.'

In this latter connection there are many otherwise well-qualified people who call themselves consultants, strategists, leaders (or even 'futurists') who are proceeding on the basis of worn-out concepts and tools and thus walking an essentially business-as-usual path. My view is that there is no chance whatsoever that such an approach can work for the simple reason that we no

longer live in normal times. That is why some of the most capable and far-sighted people in the world are calling not merely for a change of direction but a fundamental and systemic re-conceptualisation of humanity's place on this shrinking and imperilled planet. *Futures for the Third Millennium* therefore evokes and exemplifies the four 'layers of capability' that can arguably support the most significant shift of perspective we can now envision: the shift from a society and culture that is essentially driven by the past to one that is increasingly responsive to the near-term future. Those layers are as follows (and are described in more detail in chapter 6.1).

1. The human brain/mind system, which supports a mode of consciousness that inhabits a broad spatial and temporal arena, embracing past, present and future.
2. Futures concepts, which, from simple starting points, support ideas, visions and frameworks of understanding of enormous sophistication and power. Taken together these constitute an advanced futures discourse. All substantive futures work is nourished by and depends upon this symbolic 'layer of capability.'
3. Futures methodologies that increase, or 'step up', the power emerging from the above and allow the use of complex data sets to address broad, ramified, problems and extended possibilities.
4. The implementation of the above in purpose-built organisational niches or, indeed, purpose-built organisations (what I call Institutions of Foresight, or IOFs).

When all the above are working in a productive and coordinated way, and only then, we will see the development of social foresight on a wide scale. It will be an emergent capacity, a new force in organisations and society, that flows out of re-focussed and re-directed human effort and skill. Properly understood and implemented this collective force will have the ability to re-direct history away from its presently catastrophic course and to prefigure more advanced stages of civilised life.

Hence, the purposes of this book are four-fold. They are, first, to provide a basis for actively considering the Third Millennium. Second, to explore aspects of an advanced futures discourse. Third, to contribute toward the development of viable forward views. And finally, by deploying some of the most powerful futures concepts and ideas in a coherent and structured way, it aims to open out a productive "mind-space" that ventures beyond the decline of the industrial outlook and its associated machine-led, image-saturated, dehumanising fantasies of domination and power. As such, the book clearly stands within a tradition that leads from H.G. Wells and Louis Mumford in the early 20th century, through Bertrand de Jouvenel and E.F. Schumacher to Robert Jungk and Elise Boulding, and on, more recently, to Hazel Henderson and other colleagues around the world.

The book has a clear structure. Parts one and two introduce some of the major themes and ground them in particular ways. Parts three, four and five address the implementation of futures concepts and methods in various environments. Part six addresses the 'so what?' question. What does all this

mean for the way we approach and operate in the third millennium? What future ends should we pursue in this context? *Part one* tackles two themes that frame the book. The first is the nature of the transition from short-, to long-term thinking. The second is the knowledge base that emerged from the combined effort of many in the global futures community during the late 1990s. These set the scene, as it were, for the rest of the book. *Part two* looks at the origins of current pathologies in a partially defective world-view and considers how some of the resulting themes have worked out over the last century. This is essential ground-clearing work. It exemplifies the view that the attempt to look ahead should always be founded on a clear understanding of the past and present.

Part three considers the role of FS in education. It seems hardly credible, but it is in fact the case, that both state-run and private education systems have so far largely failed to understand the significance of the futures dimension, or to embark on the necessary changes in administration and implementation. The stark fact is that futures approaches at every level have been shown to be viable for thirty years. But, while teachers and principals have, in many individual and some collective cases, seen the point of the exercise and done what they could, they remain blocked at the very highest levels by a conservative administrative elite and ministers whose priorities are governed by short-term political agendas. So part three attempts to outline some of the implications that emerge when a meeting is sought between high quality futures thinking on the one hand and educational tasks on the other.

Part four looks at what happens when the idea of foresight is taken up and put into practice. It suggests that foresight can challenge, reinvigorate and also go beyond what is commonly meant by 'strategy.' It considers some of the lessons from Australia's own institutional foray into this territory (the Commission for the Future) and how such learnings can be embodied in 'second-generation IOFs.' The theme is applied to a test case: the emergence of nanotechnology, which promises to overturn entire industries and economies. The notion of a national foresight strategy for Australia is canvassed but, obviously, the idea is one that can be reformulated and applied just about anywhere.

Part five does rather more than merely explore some critical futures methods. It reproduces a lightly edited piece that was one of the springboards for the development of critical futures studies per se. I should make it clear that the methods outlined in the following chapters by no means exhaust the field.

Those discussed have a variety of uses and applications. The piece on strategic foresight takes a very practical approach to implementation. *Part six*, *Beyond the High-tech Wonderland*, is deliberately provocative and openly normative. It is written from the viewpoint, alluded to above, that dominant current trends in the world hold out no hope whatsoever for a transition to a peaceful and sustainable world. The first item looks in some detail at the layers of capability that I regard as the foundations of social foresight. The second looks at the test case provided by nuclear weapons. While public awareness and fear of these weapons have both declined dramatically, the latter still have the power to destroy humanity several times over. Moreover, some miniaturised suitcase devices from the old USSR are

now known to have fallen into the hands of terrorists. So, unfortunately, we have not seen the end of this most devastating and dramatic demonstration of technological hubris and instrumental power.

Such terrifying possibilities challenge us all to reconsider how we reached this point and what we might need to do to resolve the continuing civilisational conundrum that arises when advanced technologies continue to be inspired by, and linked with, some of the more primitive human impulses. The last piece takes the work of a well-known transpersonal synthesist and considers FS and the future of civilisation from this perspective. It proposes a framework which, while not invulnerable to criticism, does suggest a somewhat different way forward to those commonly on offer. As such, it helps to fulfil the promise of critical futures work: to challenge current thinking, to defamiliarise what is too commonly taken-for-granted and to provide real grounds for hope, insight, empowerment and social and organisational innovations of many kinds. I hope that those reading this book will feel stimulated, challenged and inspired. A steady diet of bad news fed to us daily by the mass media can easily lead to a profound and chronic sense of depression. But *to begin to grasp the futures dimension, in all its symbolic and practical richness, is to begin a process of discovery and recovery*. What clearly emerges are many strategies, openings, innovations that can lead us beyond the current historical impasse toward quite different futures to those now in prospect. My view, which I have tried to make clear in this book, is that as the grounds of sustaining and sustainable futures emerge, as the outlines of more advanced civilisations become clearer, so we can, as individuals, families, groups, organisations, nations and as a single integrated world, begin to see the future as truly inspiring - as leading us beyond where we may be to where we might truly wish to go. Properly understood, the futures enterprise engages us at profound levels and taps deeply-felt fears and aspirations to create a better, safer world; one that we can hand on to our children with confidence and pride.

To 'enable the forward view' is to take a significant step away from fatalism and the drift to disaster. I hope and expect that it will be applied ubiquitously as humanity moves into the new millennium and, for the first time, perhaps, consciously faces up to the dangers and manifest opportunities that it finds there.

Richard A Slaughter
Futures Study Centre
Melbourne
Australia
January 1999

SLAUGHTER, R. A. (Ed.) *Futures for the Third Millennium: Enabling the Forward View*, Prospect, Sydney: x + 366 pp (1999) ISBN: 1-86316-148-1 paperback. Out of print.

A revised and up-dated version, with illustrations, reviews etc., is available on *Towards a Wise Culture*, CD-ROM, Foresight International, 2005.