

The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies Volume 1: Foundations (1996)

Introduction to Volume One

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The concept of a 'knowledge base' is problematic in postmodern conditions in so far as it is identified with an unchanging social and epistemological order, and is hence presented as a cultural or epistemological fait accompli. However, that is not what is attempted here; rather, Volume 1 of the Knowledge Base series provides a number of starting points for enquiry. These starting points have clear origins in particular cultures, places, times and epistemologies, but they also move well beyond them toward the constitution of human futures in the new century and the new millennium. Overall, the attempt is to provide an open and facilitative text; one that will nourish the mind, imagination and spirit, and help members of a new generation begin their own journeys of exploration and discovery.

Part one looks at the origins of the field. I. F. Clarke takes us back to the latter part of the nineteenth century and to the broad literature on 'things to come'. The figure of H G Wells stands out here, but it was the combination of science, technology and war that fuelled the popular imagination and which also lay behind the formation of numerous new think-tanks and, later, futures institutes and organisations. Overall, Clarke provides an overview of an area he knows well and has written of at greater length elsewhere.(1)

Peter Moll picks up the story in Europe and the USA from around the 1940s onwards. He locates the origins of North American futures studies in the techniques and interests of strategic planning. These are contrasted with the more 'cultural' orientation of European work, particularly as manifested in individuals such as Gaston Berger and Bertrand de Jouvenel. For Moll, the 'golden period' of futures studies took place from the late 1960s to the late 1970s. During this time, key works were published and some (such as the Limits to Growth) achieved wide public attention.(2) Futurists were in demand and the field grew rapidly. However, failures in forecasting and official scepticism brought a waning of interest in futures. Moll argues that futures studies has recently taken on new roles such as networking and encouraging public participation in social decision-making.

A more wide-ranging piece by Wendell Bell provides a thorough overview. It not only looks at the emergence of the field in the USA, but also at the connection of futures studies with other related areas of enquiry. He then examines some of the underlying purposes and assumptions frequently made by futurists. Bell makes the case for characterising futures studies as a new field of enquiry based on 'conjectural knowledge'.(3) Overall, the papers by Clarke, Moll and Bell locate the origins of the field within historical events, ideas and shifting worldviews, and hence provide a foundation for futures thinking.

Part two tackles a different kind of foundation. Here, it is suggested that

futures concepts and metaphors provide the building blocks of the futures discourse. This approach contrasts with others that concentrate, first and foremost, on futures tools and methods. Tony Judge casts a cool eye over the uses of metaphors in futures, and some of their deeper implications. He draws our attention to the shaping role of metaphor and the ways it subtly affects the discourse. Eleonora Masini provides a necessary corrective to much of the foregoing by examining concepts of futures, time and methodology in non-Western cultures.(4) She concludes that different cultures make different uses of these concepts. Cultural diversity is seen as vital: no culture is complete in itself or can live without other cultures. Finally, Richard A Slaughter suggests that the path to social foresight is by way of several 'layers of capability'. Futures concepts play a critical role in this process by permitting a distinctly futures-oriented quality of understanding. The bulk of this chapter explores a number of such core concepts. The most useful futures concepts are considered to have 'amplitude'; that is, they can be approached on many levels from the simple to the complex. They are therefore a significant educational resource.(5)

Part three provides three 'windows' into futures literature. The latter is perhaps the primary resource and foundation of the futures field, and is an essential starting point for students and others. The centrality of this literature to the resolution of contemporary global dilemmas has been widely overlooked. Many long-term, systemic solutions are explored in this context.

Kjell Dahle summarises fifty-five 'key works' which can be regarded as core introductory books. He groups them into the following themes: 'looking back and ahead', 'trends', 'scenarios', 'utopias', 'the world problematique' and 'change'. There follows a fascinating chapter by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn on the emergence of science fiction and its relationship to futures.(6) The themes of 'overpopulation', 'robots and computers' and 'space travel' are explored in some detail. Lastly, Michael Marien provides a useful framework for considering cultural, futures-related issues from a North American perspective. The themes of trends, troubles and transformations are explored. The author concludes with a timely call for 'postmodern scholarship' in this critical area.(7)

Part four takes the themes outlined above and weaves them into a deeper notion of 'foundations'. Allen Tough suggests seven priorities for developing our knowledge of, and engagement with, the future. He notes that knowledge is developing at a rapid pace, but knowledge relevant to the future is still rare.⁸ Sohail Inayatullah then explores how three basic orientations to futures – the predictive, the cultural and the critical – are expressed through different methodologies and approaches. These are related to topics such as grand theories of social change, the politics of time and futures and deconstruction. James Ogilvy looks at scenario planning as the fulfilment of critical theory. This chapter is best read in the light of an outstanding earlier piece on normative scenarios.(9) Together these works support the view that developments within futures studies parallel some of those that have occurred in the humanities. A reciprocal relationship between these two fields is implied. Finally, Volume 1 ends with a trenchant critique by Ziaddin Sardar on

the dominance and assumed superiority of Western cultures. After pointing out that demographic factors are now working against the West, he explores 'other ways of being, knowing and doing'. Such work is vital for the further development and application of futures studies. The field will be invigorated and transformed to the extent that other 'voices' and other 'ways of knowing' share a transglobal futures discourse. The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies exists, in part, to help facilitate this transformation.

Notes

- 1 I F Clarke 1979, *The Pattern of Expectation 1644–2001*, Cape, London.
- 2 P Moll 1991, *From Scarcity to Sustainability*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt.
- 3 W Bell 1996, *Foundations of Futures Studies: Human Science for a New Era*, vol. 1, 'History, purposes and knowledge foundations', and vol. 2, 'Ethical foundations', Transaction Pubs, New Brunswick, NJ.
- 4 E Masini 1994, *Why Futures Studies?*, Grey Seal Books, London.
- 5 R A Slaughter 1996, *Futures Concepts and Powerful Ideas* (2nd revd edn), Future Study Centre, Melbourne.
- 6 E James 1994, *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, OUP, Oxford.
- 7 M Marien's monthly *Future Survey* (World Future Society series, Washington DC) is an outstanding contribution to such scholarship.
- 8 A Tough 1991, *Crucial Questions About the Future*, University Press of America, Lanham, MD.
- 9 J Ogilvy 1992, 'Futures studies and the human sciences: The case for normative scenarios', *Futures Research Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 2, World Future Society, Washington DC, pp. 5–65. Also reprinted in R Slaughter (ed.) 1996, *New Thinking for a New Millennium*, Routledge, London, pp. 26–83.

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