

The Emergence of Critical Futures*

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Introduction

This is the story of the emergence of critical futures studies, as developed by Richard Slaughter. Critical futures studies can be understood as studies of futures that take as a primary consideration the analysis and reformulation of the way we know our world (epistemology), worldview and the social construction of reality. To put this in another context, however, critical futures arose as a response to the crisis that has come to face human civilisation during the 20th century. It arose out of the Western industrial worldview that ‘put our civilisation in peril from its own expansion and success.’¹ Thus, this story reflects the commitment of many in creating ‘futures beyond dystopia’ and moving past ‘limited prevailing cultural assumptions’ – primarily the assumptions of the West. It relates directly to the quality of our shared futures, a race for survival in which humans will either: inhabit a world compromised by over-consumption, atomic warfare, and dysfunctional social systems; or open up brighter futures by re-examining the ‘inner’ dimension of the world – perception and worldview assumptions – and act in qualitatively new ways. In his words:

the central point is this: we face a civilisational challenge. The challenge is to grasp our destiny on this small planet and to work toward consciously chosen futures, rather than drift further into crisis and devastation.²

Slaughter spent some twenty-five years taking critical futures studies from an idea he had as a student, researcher and professor, to a focus practiced by many in the field. As such, critical futures studies can be seen as a particular social innovation that has experienced and undergone many of the various stages, challenges and obstacles in the innovation process. Richard Slaughter’s own ‘transformation cycle’ (T-cycle), an ideational (consciousness based) framework for understanding social innovation and legitimation processes, helps explain his development of critical futures studies.³ Slaughter’s development of critical futures goes through four general stages:

1. **Breakdown of meaning** – From Slaughter’s travels and readings, he realised that prevailing assumptions within the Western worldview (and American futures studies in particular) no longer worked in the face of prevailing future-oriented challenges. These challenges compelled Slaughter to search for new and innovative responses; this brought him into deep inquiry and research
2. **Re-conceptualisation** – Slaughter created the conceptual framework for critical futures studies and critical futures education as a response to this ‘breakdown of meaning’, this is encapsulated in his 1982 PhD dissertation.
3. **Conflict and negotiation** – Slaughter tried to work within the English system to make critical futures studies a social reality. Although he met with some success he was repeatedly stymied in his efforts to implement it. *Negotiation* came when he intuited better conditions for critical futures in Australia, and moved there upon an invitation. This coincided with linking up and networking with other scholars and writers around the world who had similar orientations; a community of practice was born.
4. **Selective legitimation** – Efforts to implement critical futures fared better in Australia. Publications also went well, and teaching opportunities opened up; Slaughter was finally

given an opportunity to found the Australian Foresight Institute at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne.

Beginnings

Richard Slaughter grew up in a working class terrace in Southsea, Portsmouth, England. His parents had experienced the Second World War, and married toward its end. Since his father worked such long hours, his mother ran the household. Although money was always short, it was a peaceful home. His mother would take him on outings and treated him well. Despite the fact that they weren't educated in a bookish, academic sense his parents did not accept the limitations of working class life and did much to give Slaughter a broad base of experiences. They took him on numerous local trips and to exhibitions and other events in London.⁴ Encouraged to join the library as soon as he was old enough, he early on developed a taste for fiction, in particular science/future fiction.

By the time he was a teenager his interest in the future was firmly established. But it was accompanied by a slowly dawning realisation that something was wrong. Disastrous futures, dystopias, the predominance of technology, and de-humanised characters disturbed him, and created the beginnings of a profound uncertainty about the future. Notable many years later was Brian Stableford's statement that 'the future was a disaster that had already happened'⁵. The cultural shift toward dystopian visions, noted by many scholars throughout of the 20th century, would later inform his understanding of what he would call 'the civilisational challenge'. He would not, however, take these dark futures at face value. By contrast, there were also sources of optimism. For example, Frank Hampson's *Dan Dare* series in the 1950s boy's comic, *The Eagle*, depicted a world of danger in the shape of the evil Mekon, a small green figure with an overgrown head and an army of Phants and war machines. Yet somehow humane characters, both male and female, always defeated the Mekon and his forces. Hampson created a world of fascination and possibility, with optimistic and human values, where well rounded characters responded to the challenges they faced.

Richard Slaughter's immersion in future-oriented literature was an important catalyst. For example, the appealing future that Hampson created, with its emotive, spiritual or aesthetic power could have been that 'Other' transcendent world that Fred Polak spoke of as a dynamic force in influencing behaviour.⁶ The tension between this utopian literature, and the dystopian catastrophe literature are among the beginnings of 'foresight'. Research has shown that when a desired future is juxtaposed with impending reality, a commitment to act may ensue.⁷ Slaughter began to see that the future was not an abstraction, but that there were many alternatives and challenges, perhaps the beginnings of Polak's 'influence-optimism', an outlook suggesting that the future is not pre-determined, and that we do have many ways to influence it. This imaginative world of futuristic literature provided an inspirational foundation for later life and work. As William Law once wrote, 'perpetual inspiration is as necessary to the life of goodness, holiness and happiness as perpetual respiration is necessary to animal life'.⁸

So while Slaughter was unexceptional in school, with report cards coming home to his family saying 'could do better', 'talks too much', and even 'disgraceful result'⁹, his inner world was rich in colour and life and his fascination with the world, and the future, was steadily growing.

A Breakdown of Meaning

What Slaughter began to discover in the following years, was a deep pathology lying at the heart of Western Civilisation. It was out of this realisation of the extensive dysfunction in the Western worldview, and the subsequent breakdown in the legitimacy and validity of Western ways, that his concept of critical futures studies emerged. While the nature of this breakdown is still a matter of fierce debate today, Slaughter uncovered a long list of indicators. These led to a process of steady disillusionment and a progressive unmasking of the status quo.

Science fiction may have laid a foundation for foresight, and inculcated the openness of the many alternative futures humans can choose, with subsequent transcendent visions. However, it was his discovery of the history of the Southsea Common, in the area where he grew up, and the awakening of his historical awareness that created the beginnings of a sense of crisis.

Slaughter became aware that Portsmouth and the Southsea Common had been much different in the past, in fact filled with ecological richness. He saw the contrast around him, its sterility through human development, and realised that what was around him did not exist in static continuity, but had come to be through a long process of change. The fate of the Southsea Common would be put into context by his subsequent experiences and reading. He would find that it was simply one part of a larger phenomenon.

While studying to be a teacher in college in the 1960's, he came across Edmund Leach's, *A Runaway World?*¹⁰ It described irreversible environmental damage on a planetary scale and showed societies heading toward anarchy, war, starvation and ecocide. Slaughter found that his own education as a teacher in training did little to address these issues. He began to wonder why the educational curriculum was so static, given that most of the children he was being trained to teach would spend at least half their lives in the twenty-first century.¹¹

If Slaughter's understanding of the global challenges facing humankind was gradually awakening in England, his experience living in Bermuda between 1969-1975 became a catalysing force and a major turning point in his life. He and his wife moved to the island of Bermuda so he could begin work as a teacher. He was at first impressed by the beautiful sub tropical chain of islands, a complete change from the cloudy skies of Britain. Slaughter had a strong desire to be close to nature, and in fact wrote (and photographed) his first book there called *Birds in Bermuda*.¹² But, looking below the surface, a tragic story began to emerge. Like Portsmouth, what was once an ecologically rich environment had been decimated by human development. The colonies of seabirds famous in earlier times; mentioned, for example, in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, were all but gone. The thick cedar and palmetto forests had been cut back or had died of imported cedar blight. To have such a strong love of nature, and to see it being compromised, was heartbreaking. The six years Slaughter and his family spent in Bermuda had a powerful effect on him. Distinctions between layers of reality, life as a process of historical change, and the gulf between image and substance were highlighted and became increasingly real. On the surface, Bermuda appeared to be a tropical paradise. But below the surface were underlying socio-economic conditions that suggested a very different reality: one that was excessively materialistic, overdeveloped, and hostage to a 'diminished ethic of consumerism.'

Slaughter saw that the very things that made the island interesting and unique were being destroyed by what he termed 'a cynical economic machine.'¹³ The underlying dysfunction of the place and the contradictions in the conventional wisdom of a materialistic consumer

culture, were all too clear. Bermuda existed for most as a fantasy island. The reality below the illusion suggested that it was ‘one version of dystopia’¹⁴. In substance, the tourist dream had already shown itself to be breaking down, socially, ecologically and spiritually unsustainable.¹⁵

An encounter with Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, illustrated even more concretely the destructive effects of the commercial-industrial system on every aspect of the environment.¹⁶ In her book, she showed how industrially created chemicals were systematically wiping out whole species of wildlife and degrading the quality of human life. Carson highlighted the interrelated nature of the ecological system humans were part of, and pointed towards the need for human sensitivity and new knowledge about ecosystems and the environment.¹⁷

Man has lost the ability to foresee and forestall. He will end by destroying the earth.¹⁸

In the face of such widespread ecological challenges, Slaughter began to see more clearly the contradictions and obsolescence that characterised the British educational system. Upon returning to university in England, and with Bermuda still very much in mind, it was apparent that current education practice was out of touch with the new realities that he had recently read about and experienced first hand. Instead of preparing students to deal with the challenges facing their society and future generations, education was backward looking, working one-sidedly from knowledge of the past.

This was highlighted in a geography course that presented the subject without an understanding of how the land had changed, without any historical awareness, as though the landscape was merely a ‘static’ feature of reality. He realised that in England and elsewhere ‘schooling assumes a broadly static frame of reference. That is partly why it finds it hard to look ahead’¹⁹. The educational establishment’s claim to ‘objective’ and ‘value-free’ knowledge also became suspect.²⁰ This led to a greater understanding of his dissatisfaction with his own education as a youth and teacher in training: there was a very wide gap between a static education assuming an unchanging world and the need for a dynamic education incorporating a futures context.

Slaughter began to question the style of teaching that was being offered. Everywhere he looked education was prescriptive, students had little or no opportunity to decide their learning path and objectives. From this point on, as a student and educator, he would take a facilitative approach to education.

Living in Bermuda was more instructive than many years spent in formal education because while the latter exists to promulgate the dominant myths and stories of a culture, the former showed that such myths and stories (about progress, standards of living, growth) often serve limited or irrational interests which do not readily yield up their secrets and hidden agendas.²¹

Slaughter decided to study at the University of Lancaster, in a new School of Independent Studies (SIS) in which he developed a program called ‘Science, Technology and the Human Future’. SIS welcomed mature aged students who had focussed ideas on what they wanted to study. Here, he began to explore many of the areas that had become urgent, and which would inform his later work: environmental studies, alternative futures and the sociology of science.

The freedom to design his own course of study, and degree program, was another breakthrough in his education. Indeed, the intimacy he gained with his subject matter would be a light of inspiration for many years to come.

During the Bermuda years, American historian Lewis Mumford had started to inform Slaughter's understanding of the crisis facing modern societies. In *The Pentagon of Power*, Mumford uncovered the dehumanising effects of large scale technologically driven societies, from as far back as ancient Egypt to the modern 'megamachine' of the US military-industrial-technological complex. Mumford showed how the centralisation of power in modern society, accompanied by absolutism, militarism and mechanisation, gives rise to technological obsession, giantism, the return of Divine Kingship (hero worship) and the immortalisation of idols. This system, the 'automation of automation', is kept in place by an autocratic technocracy that alienates large numbers of people. The end result is frequently homicide, biocide and even genocide.²² Mumford also revealed the technological bias and obsession in our language and conception of history showing how our conceptions of historical eras have highlighted technological factors: be that in an agrarian era, an industrial era or a so-called information era. Modern societies continue to be biased towards framing much of social reality in technological and/or economic terms. By extension, notions of progress couched in absolute technological terms, become problematic if one accepts that technology is not the only measure of change or progress. In fact, Mumford showed that technology is not a neutral force, but is used for particular ends by political and social interest groups.²³

After achieving a first class Bachelor of Arts Honours degree, he took a scholarship in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster. His supervisor, John Reynolds, became a mentor and tutor who taught him the meaning of 'critical' and led him through the social, psychological, and epistemological frameworks and theories he would need to develop the notion of 'critical futures.' Slaughter relates that without Reynold's help, he would never have been able to develop critical futures studies, and all that has stemmed from it.²⁴ Thus aided by a 'critical' perspective and with a newfound interest in, and commitment to futures studies, Slaughter began to review and critique the wide body of available futures work. While working on his PhD, from 1978 to 1982, Slaughter began to see futures studies as a mixed bag of elements and ideological interests, many of which were non-reflexive; that is, epistemologically blind to their own grounding and their own framing assumptions. Futures work emerging from the US seemed particularly blinkered by its own way of seeing the world and its 'situated-ness'. In short, despite their frequent grounding in empirical observations, he found that futures researchers' ways of knowing were largely assumed and had not been examined from other cultural or epistemological viewpoints.

At the top of this list were hyper-optimists, researchers and writers such as Herman Kahn and others from the Hudson Institute in the US who took a 'technocratic/managerial' approach. Kahn's, *The Year 2000*, set out roughly deterministic 'multi-fold trends' projecting:

- continuous economic growth,
- the adoption of Western economic system by the developing world
- the continuous rise of a bourgeois/ bureaucratic/meritocratic elite
- continuous increases in scientific and technical knowledge
- continuous institutionalisation of technological change
- steadily increasing military capacity
- continuous Westernisation/modernisation/industrialisation of the world
- increasing affluence and urbanisation

- the emergence of a 'knowledge industry'
- increasingly rationalistic, innovative and manipulative social/cultural/political engineering
- population growth
- the increasing centralisation/concentration of economic and political power
- the universalisation and increasing tempo of all of these changes.²⁵

In short, this vision forecast the universal maintenance of the status quo. Problems with this projection of the future, according to Slaughter, included its naïve assumptions regarding:

- the capacity of the world's environment to sustain such growth
- the desirability of the Western model of development and 'progress' from the perspective of the non-West
- its under-valuation and systematic distortion of 'counter-culture' social movements
- its elitist approach
- its failure 'to deal with the ideological aspects of innovation or its inherent ambiguities.'²⁶

In some respects, the optimistic 'The Year 2000' mirrored Mumford's pessimistic 'The Pentagon of Power' in content but with a positive, albeit dehumanised, face.

In Slaughter's view technology, like education, could no longer be viewed as 'value free' and neutral. World War One, which saw millions needlessly killed through such innovations in technology as biological warfare, the machine gun, and accurate long range artillery, transformed writers such as H.G. Wells from optimists to pessimists who now saw human history as 'more a race between education and catastrophe'.²⁷ In 1909 E.M. Forester wrote a fictional satire *The Machine Stops*, depicting a dark future in which human societies had become so dependent on technology that people had deteriorated mentally and physically. When the technological systems that sustain them break down, only those that are outside the system survive.²⁸ While technology had once been seen as a liberating force, with the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 'technology had the power to end civilisation'.²⁹ It also became increasingly clear how technical power was outstripping people's sense of meaning and purpose.³⁰ 'This contrast between destructive power and liberating potential altered the whole aspect of the future.'³¹

According to Barry Commoner in *The Closing Circle*,³² the very success of technology, its proliferation and efficiency, coupled with widespread ecological ignorance, was what underlay the widespread environmental destruction of the twentieth century. But instead of abandoning technology, Commoner advocated a view that technology should be brought into a closer balance with ecological principles. In examining environmentalist perspectives on the future, Slaughter found that Commoner failed 'to develop a proper critique of science and technology'. 'What Commoner was struggling to say cannot be properly articulated from within the positivistic tradition in which most of his work was carried out'.³³

Work such as Jay Forrester's systems dynamics, Dennis and Donella Meadows and the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* articulation of a 'global problematique', made the breakdown of human technological advance and the assumptions of endless growth, in future oriented terms, even more absurd. They concluded, through their computer models, that no finite system could sustain exponential growth and that the current trajectory of industrial growth and population growth would lead to an ecological breakdown of global scale. By challenging the

‘expansionary ethos of the technological civilisation’, systems theory, computer modelling and simulation, helped to articulate the need for ‘limits’. Again Slaughter found, that systems theory had its own limits by way of its dependence on over generalisations, aggregated data, its legitimacy partly derived from the prestige of using computers (veiled scientism), and reliance on quantitative data that can obscure underlying assumptions.

In his PhD work, Slaughter also examined the Interfutures study, *Facing the Future*, which looked at aspects of the world economic system through the lens of a futures oriented approach. The study showed the dysfunctional nature of the modern economic system. World economic and developmental perspectives and future outlooks were becoming problematic, as decades of post-World War Two aid to the ‘Third World’, saw the number of people in poverty around the world increase. It depicted a world moving into ‘a radically new stage of history, with its institutions, governing elites and populations ill prepared for the stresses and strains of the transitions.’³⁴

It became clear to Slaughter, that the world economic system was maintaining extreme inequalities and might well be headed for political and economic disaster. Yet while he found a development-focused approach to futures valuable, with its emphasis on the inter-connectedness of phenomena from local to global, much of this work in his view was reliant on partial economic frameworks that again ignored social, political and geographic contexts. Further factors included the use of statistics that obscure human welfare; confusion around models of economic growth, and the way the framework ‘accepted as unproblematic, a neutral screen through which to view the world’.³⁵

Ecological and decentralist movements, as portrayed in books like *Blueprint for Survival*,³⁶ offered visions of sustainable futures often involving ‘small self reliant communities based on agriculture and craft industries... interlinked in global awareness’.³⁷ While these movements emphasised the breakdown of large dehumanising state systems, and critiqued current social structures and relations, ‘implicit in their view was is the belief that society can be regarded as a collection of “things”, that can be re-arranged at will. In addition, “power relationships”, ideologies and “social life-worlds” are either reified or ignored.’³⁸

On a very personal note, his father’s death from an industrially induced disease only re-enforced his disillusionment with the industrial system.³⁹ His father had neither smoked, nor drank, and had led a hardworking life. To see his life taken away prematurely was sad, disturbing and Slaughter was filled with a sense of outrage.

Re-conceptualisation: the raw material

Futures studies, in the broader sense of the discipline, had begun to deal with the challenges of the modern world in ways that most other disciplines were not prepared or willing to do, and that the industrial age educational system could not even begin to comprehend. It seemed to be a discipline particularly willing to deal with the very rupture in people’s faith in the future and that was able to respond to this. Indeed, the emergence of futures studies may have marked the obsolescence of spatial and temporal provincialism – the belief in a static and uniform reality – calling upon a new need for ‘an unprecedented extension of human concern and imagination.’⁴⁰

Yet, Slaughter found the field rife with contradictions, distortions and confusion. In much of the futures literature he found mystification, an un-necessary complication of meaning, the

‘obscuring [of] questions of power, value and purpose’.⁴¹ Likewise he found the distortion of meaning emanating from covert or non-reflexive interests and ideologies.⁴² Much American work was ‘marred by exaggeration’ and an ‘over-optimism about the potential for social change’⁴³ both emanating from an instrumental mode of communication for ‘transmitting messages at a distance for the purpose of control.’⁴⁴ Much of the work made grand claims about ‘THE’ future and ‘THE’ state of the world, but was ignorant of context and ‘out of sync’ with perceptions and worldviews from other cultures. Furthermore, claims of objective and value free knowledge in the field, counter-intuitively, undermined the very credibility of this ‘knowledge’:⁴⁵

Phenomena not amenable to direct observation gain their meaning only in relation to other theories, making such a claim about the future that much more dependent on a theoretical and inter-subjective context.⁴⁶

Through gradual familiarisation with the field, Slaughter began to see how knowledge about the future was particularly ‘situated’ in cultural contexts. Most were not consciously situated, but ‘operating out of unexamined worldviews’. Furthermore he found that ‘far from imagining a universe of alternatives, futurism in general – and forecasting in particular – has in the past appeared to play a significant part in the support of the status quo.’ This rendered much futures work ineffective.⁴⁷ The bulk of futures literature came out of the US and was shaped by American culture, and reflected the ideological interests of the knowledge communities there.

This pointed to problems associated with standard notions of scientific knowledge, especially in dealing with the new challenges associated with technology, society and the future. In this respect, sociology of knowledge and science was another key element that became a keystone in the formulation of critical futures.

Michael Mulkay, an English philosopher, and one of the leading historians of knowledge, considered how the notion of knowledge and science had been defined and redefined through time. Mulkay’s work critiqued ‘standard science’, the notion of empirical, objective and value free knowledge, showing in essence how much of what we call scientific is actually a product of a social life-world (a particular ‘inter-subjective’ cultural domain), influenced by a knowledge producing community’s political, economic and cultural context and interests.⁴⁸ Mulkay uncovered assumptions of a ‘standard science’ within the scientific communities that appeared to be false. While scientific communities assumed:

- a uniformity of nature (that universal laws could be derived), Mulkay found disjuncture between the various scientific disciplines and their incommensurability (for example the paradigmatic differences between the physical, biological and social sciences)
- a separation of fact and theory (that speculation is independent of language and observation), Mulkay found that facts take on significance only in relation to an observer and his or her intentions / perception
- that observation is independent from the creation of meaning (that cultural resources are not used), Mulkay found that scientific observation is an extension of cultural resources
- that the scientific enterprise is uniform, what is called scientific (and is broadly defined across many domains), he found to be different from knowledge community to knowledge community.⁴⁹

John Goldthorpe, in a seminal article called ‘Theories of Industrial Society: Reflection on the Recrudescence of Historicism and the Future of Futurology’, unmasked what he terms ‘crypto-historicist’ characteristics in futures studies, long thought vanquished by Karl Popper’s masterpiece *The Poverty of Historicism*.⁵⁰ In reference to historicism Popper stated:

It will be enough, if I say here that I mean by “historicism” an approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their principle aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the “rhythms” or the “patterns” the “laws” or the “trends” that underlie the evolution of history.⁵¹

Objections to historicism included:

- the ethnocentric and ‘deliberate restriction of the imagination’
- the negation and invalidation of alternative futures
- poor and incomplete explanations of causal mechanisms in history, and
- assumptions regarding the ability to extrapolate from past to future (the ability to see the future as a simple extension of the past)⁵²

The ‘technocratic historicism’ Goldthorpe detected in some futures research at that time, instead of ‘envisaging what the future could be’, attempted to forecast ‘what the future will be’ and made ‘talk of ‘alternative futures’ and of ‘enlarging the range of choice’ empty rhetoric’.⁵³ Not only did this work against the spirit of democratising the future by making futures studies about a determinable future with an evolutionary trajectory, it also undermined the legitimacy of the discipline:

Already claims are to be heard that future studies are merely an instrument whereby powerful groups, states or nations seek to impose their own image of the future, to create self fulfilling predictions in their own interests, and to undermine the hopes and confidence of those attracted to different visions of what the world might be.⁵⁴

Ian Miles carried this argument further, accusing futures studies of ethnocentrism, scientism, technological determinism, mystification and elitism. He saw futures studies as being in danger of ideologically supporting powerful political and economic interests through the propagation of ethnocentric images of the future.

Futures researchers have so far largely failed to challenge the dominant interpretation of world economic relationships as being mutually rewarding to rich and poor countries alike.... The scale of human misery involved in underdevelopment is so vast that any contribution, material or ideological, made to it by futurology requires careful scrutiny.⁵⁵

These ‘dominant interpretations’ (serving powerful interests and bureaucracies) were supported by ‘scientism’, the use of science through systems analysis, computer modelling, mathematics, or the ‘mystique of flow charts and complex arguments’, in order to give added weight and legitimacy to the research. Often the outcome of futures research would lead, by extension, to recommendations for technological development. This technological development, would serve the interests of existing vested interests, rather than a consideration for the ‘mass of people whose lives are to be reshuffled in this [technological] change’.⁵⁶

Finally, Miles found that much of futures research discouraged popular participation and sometimes created the false impression of open-ness through pseudo-participation.⁵⁷

In Slaughter's view, it was the 'critical and eclectic' futures research that began to show the way out of this trap by revealing assumptions within the Western worldview that underpinned much of how empirical, developmental, environmental and other futures work was framed. The 'critical/eclectic' strand of futures work revealed the larger historical patterns at work, as well as the inter-subjective conditions that shape our perceptions of and action upon the observable world. For example, in *Small is Beautiful*, EF Schumacher⁵⁸ pointed to the impoverishment of the Western view of reality and aspects of Western culture such as: 'materialism, scientific reductionism, dualism, organisational gigantism and prevailing conceptions of economic rationality.'⁵⁹ Hazel Henderson, in contrast, revealed a Western civilisation in transition through a growing counter-culture movement challenging assumptions regarding gender, ethnicity, economics, ecology and science.⁶⁰

Dissonances in cultural assumptions, disciplinary understanding and conflicting perspectives regarding the future (the various types of alternative futures research covered in the PhD) and the problematic nature of much of this work, represented a core source of a 'breakdown of meaning' within future studies itself. An integrated perspective regarding the human future was simply unavailable. On the other hand, critical futures studies held out the possibility of navigating through this sea of contentions and claims. Yet Slaughter also recognised that this wide range of eclectic influences in the alternative futures debate pointed to 'implicit or explicit criticisms of aspects Western industrial culture'.⁶¹

Western people have, on the whole, become alienated from the Earth which supports them, to the waste and destruction associated with the expansion of the industrial system and to alternative values, ideas, and ideologies regarding what may be considered 'desirable', 'good', or 'progressive'... [Yet eclectic influences] challenge prevailing notions of 'progress', and rescues the debate from ethnocentricity and technological determinism...By challenging cultural assumptions and paradigms they also help to shift discussion toward the metatheoretical level and thus serves to link it with other approaches – critical theory and hermeneutics...⁶²

Cultural Recovery: new philosophic ground

During this time Slaughter and his wife were also raising two children. As leaving the workforce and returning to study made money scarcer, it was a challenging period. He felt so overwhelmed at times that his studies would stall for long periods. Over a summer, as Slaughter recalls, his wife took the children to Bermuda for several months during which time he was able to finish a whole section of his PhD. The rest of the time, he would simply have to put in time here and there, just trying to keep the research and the PhD moving forward little by little and piece by piece, though it often seemed to crawl forward at a snail's pace. However, over time the ideas began to take shape.

The renewal of educational curricula was a centrepiece in Slaughter's own attempts at re-conceptualisation. In his mind the implications for education were clear. Education had to begin to embrace the futures dimension, not as a simple continuation of the past, but as 'a dynamic field of potentials compounded of chance, existing structures and human

intentionality'.⁶³ It needed to move from short term, instrumental modes of education to a longer view in which people's intentions and decisions could be put in a broader context. Education should not treat technology as if it were 'value free, inevitable or necessarily desirable' and it should actively help open up a wider range of futures than the dominant 'technological optimism' then prevalent.⁶⁴

While much education focussed on enabling technical competence in dealing with isolated problems, new understandings of the interrelationships between man and nature, local and global, and the complexity and interconnectedness of modern problems and pathologies necessitated 'move[s] away from considering problems in isolation, to a more global, holistic emphasis'.⁶⁵ The increasing alienation of the public in decision making, meant participation in the debate on the future of society also needed to be widened to a greater number of people, and futures education could help do this. Finally education, currently dominated by empirically oriented study, needed 'to shift emphasis away from dramatic external events to a more critical appraisal of belief systems, values and paradigm assumptions that underlie them'.⁶⁶

Like John Goldthorpe, Slaughter saw how an overemphasis on technical futures methods such as systems modelling and forecasting in the field had tended to obscure underlying biases and presuppositions. The need for data, and an obsession for quantifying through numerical and statistical approaches, ignored a good part of what was worth looking at and overlooked much of the potential for cultural renewal. This would begin a life long process of evaluating and developing a wide range of foresight methods. It began with 'speculative story telling', 'the Transformation cycle' and Boulding's '200 year present'. It continued with *Futures Tools and Techniques*⁶⁷ and other methods through to the present with 'Integral Mapping' and a new approach to environmental scanning based on Ken Wilber's four-quadrant model.

The West's impoverished view of reality needed to be enriched, and Slaughter would later proclaim; 'We need grounded visions, designs, if you will, of a world that has experienced a recovery of vision, meaning and purpose'.⁶⁸ Speculative imagination, not reductive science, would help individuals in 'imaginative constructions [to] take the human mind out beyond the boundaries of currently constituted reality – beyond trends, forecasts and the like – and feed our capacities for speculation, imagination and social innovation'.⁶⁹

Slaughter found that the need for an epistemology for foresight dovetailed with the critical theory of Jurgen Habermas. Habermas, a German philosopher and a second-generation member of the Frankfurt school of critical theory, was a student of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. While grounded in a Marxist tradition of critique, he broke away from strict empirical notion of knowledge and incorporated wide-ranging influences from modernity and antiquity. The theory of cognitive interests is one of Habermas' most enduring contributions, and a central piece in Slaughter's conception of critical futures. Habermas, like others before him from the Frankfurt school, critiqued positivism, instrumental rationality and industrial society's one dimensionality.⁷⁰ He did not, however, entirely reject instrumental rationality, but rather located it in the broader production of knowledge that arises through different types of rationality, or 'cognitive interests.' He identified three, a technical interest, a practical interest, and an emancipatory interest, each necessary for human well being.

The technical interest, which is the first and most basic, creates a 'capacity for purposive – rational control of the conditions of existence' and is 'acquired and exercised in a cumulative learning process'.⁷¹ Habermas was basically situating the technically oriented sciences that

allow for large-scale capacities for control and production, and also any scale of production and control capacities within a given group as a necessary precursor for survival. Empirical-analytic knowledge formation processes are systematically exploited for their ‘technical control over objectified processes.’ Habermas argued, however, that this form of knowledge was only one of three.⁷² In fact, he argued that the technical interest relied upon a more fundamental form of cognition – the practical interest, i.e. intersubjective meaning making and sense making through communication.

The practical interest is distinguished from the technical interest because it involves the ‘interpretation of intentions and meanings, goals, values and reason’, and is not concerned with knowledge created through ‘empirical-analytic inquiry’.⁷³ In other words, the life context in which we all live in can be understood through ‘cultural sciences’, and cannot simply be reduced to instrumental action. This domain is primarily linguistic, hermeneutic, and phenomenological – semiotic interpretation and communication – even including the meanings of peoples’ actions, facial expressions, intonations etc. This involves an examination of the symbols and their meanings that populate our lives.

The cultural disciplines did not develop out of the crafts and other professions in which technical knowledge is required but rather out of the professionalised realms of action that require practical wisdom.⁷⁴

Finally Habermas articulated a third interest - an emancipatory cognitive interest. This can also be termed ‘critical’ consciousness, a consciousness that strives for self-formation through stages of reflection, energised by historical self-understanding, and generating new attitudes through insight. Central here is the reflection upon, and repudiation of, dogmatism and the ‘form of false consciousness and reified social relations’ that inhibits us from a fuller realisation of a good society.⁷⁵ Critique is a vital tool in challenging the dogmatism expressed through ideology. Thus Habermas, drawing on Freud’s concept of illusion (religion, worldviews, ideals, art, ideology and value systems that uphold existing orders that create suffering, dysfunction, oppression and inequality), saw systematic distortions that required critique.

In the interest in the independence of the ego, reason realises itself in the same measure as the act of reason as such produces freedom. Self-reflection is at once intuition and emancipation, comprehension and liberation from dogmatic dependence. The dogmatism that reason undoes both analytically and practically is false consciousness: error and unfree existence.⁷⁶

Slaughter had recognised, of course, that although futures research was good at outlooks on the future, it was very poor at ‘inlooks’ on the future, i.e. approaches that examined both the intersubjective/communicative aspects of foresight, and the need to critique existing reified social arrangements. In fact futures studies, as an interdisciplinary domain with Time as a guiding theme (history, evolution, macrohistory, development, progress, and other temporal notions), provided a fine disciplinary platform for historical self-awareness and the critique of reified social relations. In *Towards a Rational Society*⁷⁷, as Slaughter discovered, Habermas even ‘specifically argues for an interdisciplinary, future-oriented research capable of looking beyond the status quo’.⁷⁸ Applied to foresight Habermas’ three cognitive interests might read:

- Instrumental - what is a future oriented problem, and how can we solve it?
- Practical – how can we achieve communication and understanding regarding the future(s)?
- Emancipatory – how has our future(s) been colonized, communication systematically distorted and how can we liberate ourselves?⁷⁹

Becoming ‘critical’ therefore suggested a pathway toward emancipatory futures thinking. In general, ‘critical’ would come to work in two ways. First, it would be used as critique in the generic sense of the word providing a way of, in Slaughter’s words, ‘clearing the fog’. That is, a ‘ground clearing, diagnostic phase, a prelude to the exploration of new territory...[it is] also about standards and quality control, both of which are vital to an emerging discipline.’⁸⁰

Second, ‘critical’ would be understood in terms of critical theory – a way out of the trap of a ‘monological’ and ‘technical-instrumental’ approach to the future – one capable of breaking people out of the perpetual slumber of the status quo. Being ‘critical’ was a way of renegotiating meaning at a deep philosophic level, opening to the possibility of exploring other paradigms, epistemes, and culturally situated ways of knowing. Critique could be seen as the praxis of problematising existing social arrangements and assumptions regarding the future. ‘Critical’ would be a way of breaking the mould of historically reified ways of being, to open up alternatives futures otherwise obscured. In short it would be the basis for emancipatory social innovations and creativity for cultural renewal.

The best (i.e. 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.⁸¹

The early stages of this work ultimately culminated in Slaughter’s PhD dissertation on critical futures education. It was an exhausting process, but Slaughter felt he had expressed something significant. In terms of critical futures, he had articulated a vision of futures studies that could be self critical in examining embedded ideologies, worldviews and other commitments. The same vision might also bring self-reflective futures thinking into education, where students would be enabled to deal critically with images, statements and projects concerning the future, as well as articulate their own views and participate in worthwhile conversations about the future. Working out a basis for critical futures studies, its implementation in education, and being awarded a PhD for it, was a consummate accomplishment for Slaughter. He had articulated a vision for transforming education to meet the needs of the future, and future generations. He had developed a vision for critical futures studies that would support human emancipation from dehumanising and reified social forms. These, in turn, would support social innovation and wider participation in creating viable futures.

Conflict and Negotiation: from England to Australia

While Slaughter was the first to articulate a basis for critical futures, there were already many at work in varying capacities on this project. Ashis Nandy, Zia Sardar, Johan Galtung and the Manoa School of Futures in Hawaii, to name a few, were all in the process of developing varied aspects and approaches to critical futures. This simultaneity of perspective, an intellectual-historical wave, and the historical context that all of these thinkers and writers shared, would help carry critical futures studies forward. But before Slaughter could experience this, he would have to endure more challenging times, including intellectual isolation, and undertake the move from England to Australia.

The next few years were difficult. Even with his PhD, he found it impossible to find work in Britain and even went on the dole for a while. It was a bitter pill to swallow. He and his family had sacrificed for some years, and now he found being on the dole demeaning. There was little reward for his hard work and there were no jobs for ‘futurists’ available anywhere. But a strong sense of purpose had steadily developed over the years, particularly after Bermuda and during the latter period of study.

Though some see a PhD as a purely academic exercise, for me it was also intensely personal. For it had allowed me to discover why my own experience of schooling had been so unsatisfactory and, furthermore, to sketch out a program which opened out new options.⁸²

Thus he continued to work at it, despite feeling a real sense of isolation. One bright spot was the publication of an extract from his PhD dissertation entitled ‘An Outline of Critical Futures Studies’⁸³. This twenty-five-page paper encapsulated many of the core ideas that emerged from the PhD. Its publication in the World Futures Society Bulletin gave a glimmer of hope that these ideas might gain wider attention.

The low point for me was when I had finished all this foundational work and felt this tremendous sense of relief, delight in having actually explained why I had found my schooling so arid, and knew I’d done something significant – and was unemployed, because there was no work. That was a major contrast, feeling so good, so satisfied, productively pleased with what I’d done – and then having nowhere to go with it. Just completely stymied at the level of work, jobs, income. And my family, I wouldn’t say suffered, but we certainly didn’t have a lot of money at the time. It had been pretty damn hard, and having finished it, to get no answering recognition or income was really hard. Going on the dole was not exactly what I had planned. So that was really tough. But like other tough experiences, you find that that is when you learn what you need to know. Out of the suffering of being on the dole, with a newly minted PhD in critical futures studies, I really started to learn some of the practical applications of what Huxley and Wilber and others had been writing about – which was that you had to adopt some practices your our own life to cope with and transcend the living circumstances in which you found yourself. That was incredibly powerful. So it was tough going, but it led to a very productive outcome.⁸⁴

It was during this time that one of the most profound spiritual experiences of his life occurred. At a personal development retreat he had a healing experience that cannot really be related through words. Suffice to say that the experience changed the course of his life, and opened up a new dimension of understanding for him. The experience could not be explained by anything he knew at that time, and so he began a new search.

It was after Slaughter came across Ken Wilber's book, *No Boundary*, that the penny dropped. In this book, Wilber explored the nature of consciousness, including the kind of experience that Slaughter had undergone. The book dealt with identity and the boundaries that constitute our identities – including the dualistic thinking involved in such consciousness. It also articulated a path for human development focussed on expanded consciousness.⁸⁵ It was important for Slaughter, in that Wilber showed that an inner journey and inner growth was a vital but neglected aspect of modern life. While the futures Slaughter had critiqued focussed almost exclusively on the outer dimension of reality, brain enhancing drugs, the technological society, next wave infrastructure and so on, the inner dimension of the individual – consciousness – had been treated as something to be ignored, repressed or looked down upon. But Slaughter saw that an individual's sense of self/other, moral training, ethical learning, meaning/purpose, perception, unconscious desires, and the individual's need for an expansion of consciousness were of no less importance in the search to create a better society and world.

This began a long association with Wilber's work, partly through which Slaughter began to create practices that helped him deal with the challenging circumstances in his own life. In this way he began to seek a balance between the wisdom of the 'inner' world of the human heart and consciousness, essential to his own happiness and fulfilment through daily practice, and the more conventional outer forms of knowledge taught in all the schools throughout the West.

Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* would also be a major source of wisdom and insight that complemented this evolving and developing understanding of consciousness and an 'inner' dimension of life.⁸⁶ In this book, Huxley assembled the lessons and words from mystics of many traditions, Christian, Sufi, Buddhist, Hindu and others. Huxley's book proved to him that there existed a deep source of collective wisdom that could provide part of the basis for inspiring futures beyond despair. Referring to the aforementioned experience he said:

I realised that such experiences can yield new interpretations of personal and social futures. That is, *paths of development which lead up and away from the abyss: away from disaster, meaninglessness, and despair*. Here are the sources not merely of sustainable economies, but of truly *wise* cultures. That is, cultures which may be founded not on the instrumentalities of politics, economics or science and technology, but on *the evolving perennial wisdom of humankind*. From these sources I began to draw a deep stream of inspiration...⁸⁷ (emphasis added)

As Slaughter acknowledges, this was another turning point in his life and, as if to confirm his newly grounded sense of being, new opportunities began to appear. He would later reflect that he needed to undergo the hardship that he did, to learn the lessons that would allow him to move forward. Hence the post PhD hardships and explorations were catalytic and brought him in contact with the 'perennial wisdom' that would later have many beneficial and lasting effects.⁸⁸

Soon after this he received a three-year fellowship with the University of Lancaster in which he began to apply some of the conclusions in the Doctorate. He developed and taught a master's option called 'Futures Studies and Curriculum Design', that received excellent feedback from students, proving that there was, and is, a 'latent' demand for this work. At the time, however, it was also looked at suspiciously by other staff members. He was able to publish materials that became foundational to his later work, design workshops and explore the practical implementation of other futures methods.⁸⁹

In many respects, the three years Slaughter spent teaching at the University of Lancaster proved successful. He managed to publish several papers, 'What do we do now that the future is here?' and 'Future vision in the Nuclear Age'. In addition, he produced the first edition of *Futures Across the Curriculum: A Handbook of Tools and Techniques* (later called *Futures Tools and Techniques*). This was a compilation of simple futures tools embracing many areas including perennial wisdom and critical social and environmental issues. The beginnings, in fact, of pluralistic critical/social foresight methods, as had been called for earlier by Goldthorpe and Miles. With the years at Lancaster coming to a close however, Slaughter felt more and more that England would not be the place where critical futures studies would be adopted.⁹⁰

It was on the way to Australia, during a 1986 stopover in Hawaii, that Slaughter first met Sohail Inayatullah. Up until that point, Slaughter had been languishing in near-obscurity, a classic intellectual outsider. The years had worn on him, but had not diminished his spirit.

What Slaughter found in Hawaii was in marked difference to the mainland USA. The faculty in the futures program were neo-Marxist or post-structuralist in orientation, and for a 'futurist' (not a term they universally admired) to make any money at all could almost be said to 'betray the cause'.⁹¹ Perhaps because Hawaii remained a colonial outpost, or because of the geographic distance of several thousand kilometres, there was a marked difference from other centres of futures enquiry.⁹² In brief, Slaughter's whole approach resonated there. In fact, many at the Manoa School of Futures Studies had for some time been developing similar approaches. They included Wendy Shultz, Chris Jones, Rick Scarce, Phil McNally, Anna Wilson-Yue, Wayne Yasutomi, and others. Shultz had employed the work of Baudrillard to explore and move 'beyond orthodox and hererodox, i.e. the doxa'.⁹³ Inayatullah had been developing a typology for futures studies using three epistemological categories, *predictive, interpretive, and critical*, based on the work of Michael Foucault.

The positive response he got from Inayatullah, and others in Hawaii came after many years of feeling isolated from the academic community. It was a powerful confirmation of years of work.

[the response] was very positive, it was like an answering echo from another milieu – that I had hit upon something that discriminating others also thought was valuable. It was really encouraging to me, because up to that time I'd worked pretty much in isolation. As H.G. Wells and others in the UK had complained before, 'there ain't much support for futures work in Britain.'⁹⁴

Building a community and network of like-minded writers also proved to be a major step in the legitimization of critical futures studies. Slaughter would later reflect upon how it was

essential for developing scholars and writers in critical futures to be part of a community that could support innovative work and provide some of the peer critique necessary in an emerging discipline. The emergence of a community of critical futures became a key 'negotiation' step for the emergence and legitimation of its ideas and innovations.

Networks that contributed to a critical futures community had existed since the 1970's through the work of many of the original founders and pioneers associated with World Futures Studies Federation. This included such writers as Eleonora Masini, Ashis Nandy, Johan Galtung, Robert Jungk, Hazel Henderson and many others, who had for some time been developing 'emancipatory' approaches to futures thinking. A new wave of critical futures scholars, such as Sohail Inayatullah, Chris Jones, David Hicks and others, added to the former group of futures scholars and combined talents and resources to form a larger and more dynamic community of critical foresight. In this respect the World Futures Studies Federation, an International Non-Governmental Organisation of future-oriented academics and practitioners with affiliations with the UN/UNESCO, was an important catalyst. It brought together scholars and thinkers who were inclusive of the non-West, and also engendered an activist/socially critical orientation.

Selective Legitimation

Slaughter's move to Australia was another step toward the legitimation and acceptance of critical futures studies. Australia, for many reasons, provided more opportunities to bring critical futures into the social world. For example, a 'Commission for the Future' had recently been created by the federal government in Australia to address emerging issues. In late 1986, Slaughter was invited to give a keynote address for its first conference on 'Futures in Education'. This provided a unique opportunity to work directly with the kind of social innovation he had envisioned for many years.⁹⁵

Barry Jones, a prominent Australian scholar and politician, had launched the Commission for the Future in 1985. It existed for 12 years before being privatised and vanishing into obscurity. Slaughter worked in various advisory roles with the Commission and its four directors over its lifetime. He viewed it as 'one expression of an increasingly universal attempt to come to grips with the near future context and to spread awareness of our many options and choices for the early 21st century'⁹⁶. He believed that Institutions of Foresight (IOFs) such as the Commission, could play a critical role in helping people society wide deal with the 'tsunamis of change' facing societies in the twenty-first century. IOFs became even more critical if one considered the prevalence of short term thinking in governments, education systems and businesses. In his view, societies without the capacities provided by IOFs were more likely to be overwhelmed by the 'on-rushing waves of social, economic, technical and environmental change', and would have little chance of dealing adequately with the 'civilisational challenge'⁹⁷.

The Commission for the Future was both successful and problematic. The most notable success was The Greenhouse Project, which made the concept of the greenhouse effect a household word. The Bicentennial Futures Education Project was able to create some awareness about futures education, but ran out of time, funding and support. The journal, *21C*, emerged as one of the 'most existing and original publications ever produced in Australia'⁹⁸, which filled the niche for high quality and culturally hip future oriented literature. In Slaughter's view, however, the Commission was poorly designed, inappropriately staffed and, at times, mismanaged. It was a disappointment to see it shut down

in 1997. But rather than seeing this as confirmation that IOFs were not viable, he would later make a detailed analysis of the Commission's strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures. In so doing, he attempted to help codify some of the institutional knowledge that would form the groundwork for a new generation of IOFs. Slaughter was convinced that, no matter how challenging IOFs were to get off the ground, they were nonetheless an idea whose time had come. This bit of foresight would eventually lead him to the founding and directorship of the Australian Foresight Institute.⁹⁹

Slaughter met Frank Fisher in 1987, when they began working together at Monash University in a new Masters program in environmental science. The program had just recently been established, and sought to address the new and growing concern over environmental deterioration and ecological conservation. Fisher was an unorthodox teacher who essentially wanted to challenge his students in two ways. First, through living systems theory, to begin to challenge the view that the environment and the self live in isolation, rather than in a web of interconnection and interaction. Human separation from nature was a 'social construct' he challenged, and living systems theories helped explain how humans are 'nested' within Earth's ecological systems. Secondly, through his main contribution, to take on sustainability issues via an epistemological approach.

Fisher examined how humans socially construct unsustainable worlds, putting in place 'structures' that systematically put the ecosystem on which we depend in peril. The social construction of reality was the meta-perspective that allowed him to challenge 'reified' social constructions that destroy the livelihood of future generations. For him, environmental science was meta-science that led to 'meta-responsibility.' Social constructions were not abstract things that could only be explored through intellectual work, but were simply the norms, standards and structures that we take for granted day to day. He would challenge his students to explore and understand these social constructions, taking them out to the middle of highway intersections to inhale some fumes and noise pollution from passing cars and trucks. He challenged his students to stop taking showers or stop using deodorant, to take public transport, to stop using cars, to unobtrusively clean up litter, to carry out a water usage inventory for one's sink, and to question other practices that put students face to face with the lifestyle/cultural context they existed in. In short, to consider environmental impacts, and to understand the 'meta-structures' that maintain these social constructions.¹⁰⁰

[Social constructions] constitute the intellectual and political air we breathe. They enable our very humanity. Once we are conscious of them, to the point of enabling action, they expose a new domain of responsibility we might call meta-responsibility.¹⁰¹

The social construction of reality also became an important theme in Richard Slaughter's critical futures thinking. Written in 1967 by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* explored how, rather than having a predisposed nature, humans construct their own natures. An understanding of human plasticity, how behaviour is habitualised and directed in activity toward the creation of social orders / institutions, and the legitimation of institutions through symbolic interaction, tradition and 'sedimentation', would help provide Slaughter with some of the intellectual tools to problematise the unquestioned 'natural-ness' of a social order. While the day-to-day world carries with it a reality that is almost impossible to resist, this seemingly natural existence is really a product of complex, hidden, forces and actors.

Whilst this naturalisation or ‘sedimentation’ is necessary for human interaction, role-playing and the development of society with its institutions, it is also constraining, limiting and largely unexamined. The social order may have been a product of social forces necessary at the time, but while it directs human action, it limits it as well. A social order may in fact be dissonant, destructive or harmful to its members, or others outside it, or in an unsustainable relationship with the environment and other cultures. If such is the case, renegotiating the social order becomes a vital key to creating a sustainable society. Such renegotiation will have to take place at a deep level, such as symbolic interaction/intersubjective meaning making, tradition making/breaking, de-naturalising, at the level of institutions and processes of legitimation. In contrast to modernist thinking, which places the modern at the end of history, Berger and Luckman might argue that ‘modernity’ is really a particular construction of social reality, one that is buttressed through ideology and institutions that can be re-negotiated.

Reification is the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is, in non-human [facts/objects] or possible supra-human [divine/natural law] terms. Reification implies that man is capable of forgetting his own authorship of the human world.¹⁰²

The convergence of critical futures practice

To describe part of the social order that Frank Fisher uncovered, he coined the term ‘litany’. This refers to the endless stream of clichés, sound bites, media fragments, exaggerations, outlandish statements, disinformation, advertisement and other distortions that we live with every day. Because of its ubiquity, the litany is at first invisible. It overwhelms us with disconnected ideas and images that are usually accepted without thought. In this view, however, litany is simply the surface layer of a deeper, more substantial reality, which cannot be discerned as it stands, operating mainly as a distraction from deeper understanding. The concept was eventually taken up by Slaughter to describe the focus of pop futurism, and then passed on to Inayatullah where it became the first level in his Causal Layered Analysis, a methodological application of critical futures.

Slaughter would influence Inayatullah’s development of Causal Layered Analysis in other ways. Prolonged exposure in the futures field, along with Slaughter’s critically trained thinking, and his experience in Bermuda revealing image vs. substance, began to show him certain patterns within the field - ‘hidden structures’. He began to see how futures work ranged from popular hype with very little substance, all the way to a deeper work where researchers looked at and evaluated the worldviews and epistemic ground from which images of the future, or statements about the future, derived. Slaughter maintained respect for the practically oriented futures work, but felt that this went too quickly ‘from analysis to global predicament to solution, but speaking and acting out of un-regarded worldviews and with little understanding for the social constructions that had been naturalised in other cultures.’¹⁰³ So while much of the practical, later to be called ‘problem-oriented’, work appeared viable in one cultural context, in others it could be inappropriate or worse. He realised that there was a good deal of trite work, full of empty clichés and wild statements which he would later term ‘the litany’, and there was problem-oriented work, often quantitative and good at examining general trends and issues, with good intentioned yet lacking an understanding of cultural worldviews and assumptions. Finally, at the deepest level, there was futures work that took worldview and epistemic considerations into account. This last category he deemed the most fruitful area of research, as it had not only been largely neglected by most researchers, but he saw many of the futures issues and activity we take for granted actually arising from

worldview assumptions. Rethinking epistemic and cultural assumptions could lead to more fruitful answers to pressing problems, and open up new spaces for creativity and action.

It was at a World Futures Studies Federation conference in Budapest in 1990, during a session organised by Allan Tough called 'Cutting Edge Ideas', where Slaughter first presented his layered typology of futures studies and research. Abstracted from an earlier piece he had published in *Futures* called *Probing Beneath the Surface*, it was a short presentation, only ten or so minutes from Slaughter's recollection, but it essentially laid out a typology from the litany level to that of epistemology. The response was very positive.

By 1989, Slaughter had been hired full-time by the University of Melbourne's Institute of Education. This represented a good opportunity to integrate the critical futures approach into the curriculum of university students studying education. There he designed three course units for the Diploma of Education Program, and two for the Masters of Education. He began teaching these by 1990, and was pleased that most of the students found the focus on future studies in education valuable. While students tended to be a bit disoriented in the initial first weeks, by the middle and end of the unit they would feel more at home and would begin developing their own themes and interests. During these years he co-authored a book with Hedley Beare called *Education for the 21st Century*.¹⁰⁴ Yet, in spite of excellent evaluations and a growing reputation, he realised toward the end of his five-year contract that his time at Melbourne University was coming to an end. Those running the Institute for Education did not see the connections between future studies and education that Slaughter did. Despite his evident success, an attempt at promotion failed. It became clear that certain paradigmatic differences were simply too great to surmount.¹⁰⁵

Like most universities, [Melbourne] had a history department and some other innovative courses focusing on the present. But not only was there no department of FS (future studies), there was not even a research presence devoted to the area. In fact, I was the only individual on campus explicitly teaching FS. Later, when I left, these course units were discontinued. It is a familiar story: on the one hand clear evidence from students, colleagues and others that FS had 'come of age' and could contribute in many ways to personal and educational goals and, on the other hand, professional jealousy and bureaucratic indifference.¹⁰⁶

Yet one of the insights he had during this time was that *futures concepts* were key building material with which to think about and teach futures. This provided the impetus for him to begin collecting and refining key futures concepts that he would also seek to amplify through graphic representation. He later put together a resource pack of these called *Futures Concepts and Powerful Ideas*,¹⁰⁷ so that this symbolic resource could have a lasting and permanent influence. This resource pack became a companion volume to *Futures Tools and Techniques*, both of which ended up being widely used around the world. Both volumes carried forward humanistic understandings of the future and put into question many of the assumptions and contradictions we live with on a day to day basis. In their own ways they carried critical futures forward another step.

Despite the setback at Melbourne University, Slaughter found new ways to move the project forward. Around this time he revived a business name that he'd earlier set up called The Futures Studies Centre. Working in this capacity gave Slaughter new time and vigour to pursue writing and research. Several concerns in the future studies field came to his attention

and he began to address them in his literature. Thus, after the demoralising experience at Melbourne University, came the publication of several books that further explored aspects of critical futures studies. This rebound and resilience comprised a definitive victory in the road to legitimisation, as literature is one of the main forms that legitimisation may be gained. Three publications stand out in particular: *The Foresight Principle*, *Futures for the Third Millennium* and the *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*.

The Foresight Principle set forth core principles such as the innate human capacity for foresight, and the need for future-oriented wisdom in modern day institutions and society-wide. Slaughter examines tools, concepts, ideas and methods critical in developing this social foresight that not only makes clear the challenges ahead, but that it can help people take a more healthy and human route into the future. He also explores key aspects of the defective Western worldview, and the seeds of a renewed worldview that can lead to more sane futures.¹⁰⁸

The *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* (KBFS), which ultimately became a four-volume CD-ROM collection of essays by foresight practitioners and futurists from around the world, began as a special issue of *Futures* published in 1993. This issue provided the first attempt to bring together wide-ranging perspectives. Slaughter himself identified several core aspects of futures studies:

- concepts and metaphors
- theories and ideas
- images and imaging processes
- literature
- organisations and networks
- methodologies and tools
- social movements and innovations¹⁰⁹

The feedback on this special issue was good, so he tried to get a larger compilation published through a mainstream publisher. While he wasn't able to get broad support for this, he was able to get a single volume anthology published called *New Thinking for a New Millennium*, where some of the papers intended for a KBFS ended up. From this he embarked on a long consultation process with colleagues around the world to put together the foundations of what would become the KBFS. Finally, he linked up with a local media group. Fifty or so manuscripts were finally edited into a high quality and 'coherent series without extinguishing the unique voice of each author'¹¹⁰.

First, its emphasis is more on FS (future studies) as a process of scholarly work which attempts to create 'interpretative' or 'surrogate' knowledge about the future, than on the methodologies through which part of this knowledge may be derived. Second, it contains within it a notion of critique and of the provisionality of all knowledge that is informed by, but not founded upon, post-modern insights. (It therefore lacks the overconfident prescriptive tendencies and culture-bound rhetoric that afflicted some earlier works.) Third, it is truly multi-cultural in emphasis and content. Thus it aspires to be the first truly global statement about the state of FS in the early 21st century¹¹¹

Finally, in 1999, *Futures for the Third Millennium* laid out the basic elements of a critical futures studies and education. This book focused on case studies, such as Australia's Commission for the Future, The Futurescan process, a critique of Megatrends 2000, and examples of futures in education, futures images and popular literature. Outlines and frameworks of key critical futures theories are given, such as the Transformation Cycle, critical futures, environmental scanning, and individual to social foresight processes, as well as 'Transcending Flatland', his incorporation and adaptation to foresight of Ken Wilber's 'epistemological rescue operation'¹¹².

Back in 1994 Slaughter had written an initial paper about the possibility of an 'Australian Foresight Institute'. Over the next several years he began meeting regularly with Adolph Hanich, then a consultant with Deloitte, discussing how foresight and strategy might be integrated. The two had proposed some seminars for the Australian Institute of Management, when it transpired that Swinburne University of Technology was seeking an innovative millennium project. The two were commissioned to write a 'feasibility study' for a foresight program or entity at the University. They spent a considerable part of 1998 working on the project.

In 1999, when Slaughter was emotionally finished with Melbourne and academia, and after a brief time in Brisbane, the Vice Chancellor of Swinburne offered Slaughter a 'professorial fellowship' to initiate an Australian Foresight Institute at the University. He couldn't pass up the opportunity to 'implement, embed, (and) institutionalise the foresight work I'd spent most of the last 20 years working on'.¹¹³ So, despite the irony of having recently left Melbourne, he returned in July 1999 to begin work on creating the first Australian Foresight Institute (AFI). A 'second generation Institute of Foresight' had finally emerged through vision and sustained determination.

Slaughter had learned many lessons in his experience with the Commission for the Future and took these into the creation of AFI. The sweat and work to make AFI a world class Institution of Foresight, and to open up spaces for sustainable social paths continues to this day. In terms of the legitimization of critical futures studies, AFI, and what it may accomplish during the life of the institution, represents a capstone achievement, forming a platform for critical futures oriented education and research that can contribute and pioneer human and social foresight for many for years to come.

Conclusion

The contribution of literary criticism and 'post-Saussurean' writers¹¹⁴, the critical theory of Jurgen Habermas, the meta-theory of G. Radnitsky and the sociology of science / knowledge from writers like Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckman, and Michael Mulkey were major contextualising influences in the development of critical futures. Slaughter's PhD dissertation on critical futures in education drew on many of the ideas in this epistemological revolution. These writers would help provide the theoretical and philosophical foundations for Slaughter's later conception of critical futures. As Slaughter acknowledges, critical futures could not have been developed without the revolution in thinking that was already under way. Therefore, while his initiative in articulating a radical agenda for education was central, this took place in an intellectual-historical context. The latter may be said to be a post-World War Two nuclear age where technology not only was being used to overdevelop and systematically destroy nature, but could obliterate everything in a matter of minutes - an age out of balance and fundamentally unsustainable. The intellectual context might be said to be a

wholesale / seismic critique of the Western worldview, logical positivism and the technical instrumentality that underpinned Western civilisation and its characteristic ways of knowing, which had given rise to this context. Furthermore, Slaughter saw how current education blindly furthered the same static thinking about the nature of the world and the status quo. Slaughter's experience in Bermuda, coupled with his realisation that he had experienced a kind of education that would not enable future generations to deal effectively with future oriented issues, fuelled him with a tremendous sense of urgency and vision for a critical and future oriented educational system.

Slaughter's critical futures is not about 'blueprints' for the future, but about opening up spaces to alternative epistemes, cultural worldviews, discourses and hence about opening up pathways to substantively alternative futures beyond what's currently offered through mainstream 'pop' and 'problem oriented' futures work, scenarios and the like. Critical futures moves us away from 'the future of the world' – as a future narrowly defined, predictive and culturally reductive – to enabling 'world futures', an approach to foresight that is inclusive (and critical) of many futures, from many cultural contexts and perspectives.¹¹⁵ Critical futures points away from reductive visions of futures, also away from predictive and epistemologically idiosyncratic and / or naïve approaches. It points toward holistic and integral visions that are interpretative, emancipatory, epistemologically pluralistic and inclusive – indeed a pathway to planetary thinking and planetary civilisation. Critical futures becomes meaningful in the context of creating world futures and planetary civilisation beyond the hegemony of an out-of-control economic, military and scientific order that threatens the very existence of human life. By incorporating traditions of human wisdom as the sustaining core of futures studies it opens the future to culturally diverse possibilities – a radical yet much needed human and social foresight – one more step toward a 'wisdom culture.'

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Note*

This essay is extracted from Ramos, J.R., *From Critique to Cultural Recovery*, AFI Monograph Series # 2, 2003, 1-31. Further details about this and other AFI monographs can be obtained from the AFI web site at: <http://www.swin.edu.au/afi>