

The Futures of Futures Studies: Where Now for Futures Studies?

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For those who have been associated with the field of Futures Studies (FS) for some time the outlook early in the third Millennium is ambiguous. On the one hand there are all the globe-spanning activities that make it a stimulating and ever more productive area of work. On the other is a sense that, by now, it should have done more, gone further. This ambiguity, however, lies as much in the minds of those who are interested in the progress (or lack of it) of FS as it does in the external evidence. For if there has been one key lesson in recent decades it is this: the world 'out there' is framed, understood and conditioned through the world 'in here'. It is a significant step toward disciplinary maturity for so many futures practitioners to have discovered this and to be applying it in many different ways.

The earlier practice of declaiming from an assumed position of superior insight about the ills of the world and the remedies for them no longer commands widespread respect or support. Instead most futures writers, teachers, consultants and practitioners are keenly aware of the ways that language, culture, ideology, worldview and so on are universally complicit in our ways of knowing. The result is that there is no objective account of the world, no privileged heights of Olympian understanding to attain, no way to disentangle ourselves from processes of cultural framing and cultural production. This is why many of the early classics of the field have become dated. They were written before the post-modern revolution and the rise of the interpretive dimension in futures work.

Another insight into why things have moved on is that, inevitably, much of the formative work in FS was conceived and written out of the unregarded 'flatland' of industrial era modernism, Western style. In fact it is possible to see the main thrust of FS in the 60s and 70s, for example, as yet another expression of the modernist project to subdue cultural difference, conquer nature, remove limits, promote economic growth and support the expansion of science and technology into ever wider domains. Such tendencies have not disappeared: they remain tensions within FS. One can still find many confident expressions of the modernist project in, for example, pop futurist tracts about 'the future of the motor car', 'the industrialisation of space' and the likely wonders of nanotechnology. Such tensions will remain because FS is an ever-expanding field of insight and action. It neither belongs to, nor is it controlled by, those who are most centrally identified with its attempts to achieve social and intellectual legitimation.

Like any other discipline or social movement, futures-related issues, themes, projects and the like are taken up by a vast number of actors and organisations and put to their own varied uses. Who knows how many pop futurist clones now profitably swing through corporate corridors? There are many who have captured a fragment of futures methodology which they tenaciously market to the uninformed. Who knows how many believe that scenarios are merely inert 'pictures of futures'? But 'flatland' and its pop

futurist offspring are, and will remain, forever disappointing. One simply cannot get to a 'better world' by that route.

It was interesting to see in early 2000 a polemic by a noted computer scientist warning of the dangers ahead from some of the new technologies now in the pipeline. In a piece called 'Why the Future Doesn't Need Us' Bill Joy argued for a moratorium on nanotech, AI and what he termed 'robotics'.¹ Joy pointed out that these bestowed upon humanity a vast new capability of 'transformative power' that we are manifestly under-equipped to deal with. That was, of course, no surprise to most futures workers who have known this for a long time. But these unfashionable views led to Joy being pilloried by many of his contemporaries. Such can be the fate of prophets, critics, those who take the long view, especially when they contravene the prevailing sense of 'the way things are'. And that is the point.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century 'the way things are' is riven with ambiguity and contradiction. There seems to be promise and peril in every step forward. This insight was dramatically brought into focus for many people with the release of the blockbuster movie, *The Matrix*, which portrayed humanity as helplessly asleep in the middle of a technological nightmare.² The metaphor has clearly had a pervasive impact. No doubt many readers of *Futures* will have read articles and essays that refer to the post-normal times we are in where what seems to be true is false, and what is false is widely thought to be true.

What has this to do with FS? Everything.

The more I have tried to understand and come to terms with the global predicament of humankind, the more I have seen how vital it is to clear away the 'fog' of conventional perception and understanding in order to gain any clarity on what is happening in the world and what might be done about it. When this passage was first drafted an emergency vessel was racing on a hopeless mission to rescue survivors from a sunken Russian submarine in icy northern waters. The entire world knew of its plight and the fate of the doomed sailors within. Yet the whole situation was riven with contradiction. What kind of view of the world makes it necessary or 'sane' for *either* side to continue to play re-runs of cold war games in the Baltic Sea? On a recent trip to Russia I saw for myself how poorly the new Russia can afford these futile diversions. When those who could so easily be termed 'enemies' set out on a rescue mission to save those who would yesterday have been prepared to destroy them, should they now be seen as 'friends'? Is it not time that this kind of charade was well and truly over? Of course. But old habits die hard and powerful entities have continuing interests in maintaining the way things were.

The most powerful organisations in the world are trans-national corporations. They should not be demonised. They are legal entities. But their single-minded pursuit of market dominance and shareholder value is, perhaps, the basic force behind the compulsive drive for endless technological innovation. They are creating a world that, as Joy noted, is increasingly out of balance with the needs of men, women and ecologies on this imperilled planet. I had thought this was a fairly esoteric insight; that most people

were happy to purchase the next round of digital marvels and retire to watch the latest reality TV offerings. But no. A Melbourne taxi driver told me that he could not understand why we were subjected to a never-ending flood of high-tech goods that, in his view, no-one was asking for. I could hardly believe what I was hearing: critique of technological determinism from a taxi driver? But why not? People are not stupid. At some level they know that a huge confidence trick is being played upon them. The bright diversions of affluent consumerism are not now, nor will they ever be, a substitute for meaning, purpose and fulfilment in long-term socially valued ends. Hence the underlying appeal of *The Matrix* as a metaphor for our times. Hence too the creative conflict within FS about where it is and where it is going.

This special issue brings together several contrasting overviews of 'futures for FS'. Each one says as much about the way the writer views the world as it does about FS and its possible progress or otherwise. So here are nine evocations of 'ways of knowing' in FS. Wendell Bell begins with a balanced account of the 'state of play' in FS at this time. He sees many positive features in this 'disputatious community', not least of which is the 'strong overlapping networks of communications... a shared disciplinary matrix, and the growth of a futurist canon.' Eleonora Masini then contributes a more reflective piece that looks at the development of FS over the last thirty years and summarises some of the achievements that the author has been associated with. There are strong cultural, humanistic and feminist themes here. Overall, Masini wants to see the further development of work in culture, education, women's roles and peace.

Michael Marien offers a trenchant critique and summary of where he thinks FS is and provides some suggestions for improving its status and effectiveness. It is fair to say, I think, that Marien is one of the most widely respected proponents and critics of FS in the world. But I know few who share his downbeat view of FS.

Signs of vitality in FS are not hard to find. Eva Hideg contributes a powerfully authentic paper that explores the underpinnings of two new (or newish) developments in underlying theories and methods - 'evolutionary FS' and 'critical FS'. Work of this quality is certainly uncommon, but it makes the point that there is far, far more here than a quick skim of the area could possibly reveal. Next comes Sohail Inayatullah who draws on various sources of insight to propose a series of shifts that can, in his view, carry FS forward. They are: from forecasting to anticipatory action learning; from reductionist to complex views; from horizontal to vertical approaches; from short term empiricism to long term 'grand narratives' and from scenario development to moral futures. Marcus Bussey follows suit with his suggestion that 'critical spirituality' can bring a whole new dimension to what FS is and what it may attempt to do. Essentially he attempts to widen the debate, opening out challenging new options for a field that can so easily fall back into intellectual games or pragmatic consulting. These two papers provide a stimulating view of some of the consequences of what can only be called 'deep futures'.

Then, as a necessary corrective, there is a fine piece by Harold Linstone on planning, forecasting and 'long wave' theory. As a distinguished practitioner and long-time editor of *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, Linstone's article provides a timely and

disciplined overview of a 'hard', almost scientific, approach to futures work. Next, Andy Hines speaks for a new generation of practitioners. He was trained in the tradition of Coates & Jarrett in Washington DC and is fast becoming one of the most authoritative of the newer voices in the field. Hines looks with confidence to the continuing maturation of applied work in the field.

In the last paper this writer picks up the theme of denial and the 'civilisational challenge' and explores some of the strategies that could be adopted within FS to fulfil its potential as a 'civilisational catalyst'. The paper supports the notion of an 'integral agenda' that seeks greater structural coherence in the development of human societies. It is suggested that, whatever its present weaknesses and omissions, FS now plays an historically necessary role.

If FS did not exist we would have to invent it.

Finally there is an exchange between Wendell Bell and Michael Marien which was sparked by their respective essays (and viewpoints). I hope that this debate will continue and will be reflected in further issues of *Futures*.

The majority of the papers presented here suggest that, while FS may not yet have achieved complete maturity as a discipline, it is well past adolescence. It embraces a range of powerful ideas and potentially transformative social practices. In this context the critiques of FS, the clear identification of its challenges and failings, are all necessary steps on its path to wider recognition and full social legitimation. As editor of this special issue I take many of the criticisms that have been made against FS very seriously indeed. But nothing I have heard or read has suggested to me that there is any other sensible future for this fascinating discipline than for it to become a mainstream concern as soon as possible and in as many places as possible. It must now move beyond business contexts and penetrate deeply into education and governance.

What this special issue demonstrates to me is that FS has reached a new level of sophistication and capacity. It is no longer merely concerned with reading empirical trends and making trite, ungrounded and ahistorical statements about 'the future'. It is no longer about privileging particular cultural views or paradigms. It has much more to do with establishing the need and capacity for strategic foresight at three levels: pragmatic, progressive and civilisational. At the pragmatic level there is a range of legitimate ways that foresight can help organisations of all kinds carry out their work more effectively. At the progressive level it can provide support for organisations to contribute to systemic improvements and necessary shifts toward sustainable practices and outlooks. At the civilisational level it can help us actively consider the foundations of the next level of civilisation beyond the hegemony of techno/industrial/capitalist interests.

It is worth ending this editorial with a working definition of strategic foresight: the ability to create and maintain high quality forward views and to apply these in organisationally-useful ways.³ As the head of a new department of foresight practice that makes a great deal of sense. But we will have to wait a little longer to see if it makes sense to sufficient

numbers of people to become part of humankind's *modus operandi*, its continuing search for a future world of peace and prosperity.

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Notes

1. Joy, B. Why the Future Doesn't Need Us. *Wired Archive* 8.04 - April 2000: 1-15.
2. Slaughter, R. The Matrix: a disturbing post-modern puzzle. *Futures* 33 (2001) 209-11.
3. Australian Foresight Institute brochure. Swinburne University, Melbourne, 2000.
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