

## Seizing Tomorrow

### An Interview with Richard Slaughter

Liz Else, New Scientist

Ask most people and they'll tell you they take the future very seriously. Ask a politician and they'll bore you into the ground with a 50-point action plan. Hopeless, says Richard Slaughter, who's just become president of the World Futures Studies Federation. He's a professor of futures studies based at the Australian Foresight Institute within Swinburne University of Technology, and he reckons the way we think about the future is all wrong. What we should do is study the future systematically if we are to stand the faintest chance of avoiding the disasters that are coming at us thick and fast. For him, understanding the future may also be the best way to change the present. Liz Else caught up with him recently

*Liz Else: Could anyone predict what happened to the World Trade Centre?*

Richard Slaughter: It's been clear for a long time that many people have anticipated that large scale terrorism was "inevitable". But such warnings tend not to be heeded. The real point is what we learn from it. We have to reorganise our tenancy of this planet to ensure that the root causes of this disaster are fully dealt with. Otherwise the same things will happen time and time again.

*So we're not very good at learning then?*

No. The fact is that people mostly operate on a very short time frame that they are not really aware of. And it seems that there is a dialectical relationship between foresight and experience. People won't change their modus operandi if they only suspect it might be off. They have to know it from harsh experience.

*For example?*

The outbreak of foot and mouth disease in Britain. It's pretty clear that the whole industry should be reorganised on the basis of this learning experience. People had been talking about the dangers for 30 years, but that didn't matter. You need the experience to make social change. That's the dilemma we face. The trouble is that the potential level of losses that we are facing are so great that to have that experience becomes counterproductive.

*You're painting a rather bleak view of the future?*

Humans have reached a stage where they are a major force on the planet, equal to many geological forces or greater than some of them. So the future doesn't unwind naturally from processes humans have unconsciously set in train any

more. It becomes more and more a consequence of all the decisions and actions that we take. So the emergence of futures as a field of study is a consequence of understanding that, rather than drifting and ending up who knows where, we have to try to direct our development in order to reach a future that is worth living in. Paul Ehrlich had a wonderful simile. He said the future was like going up in a plane with a bunch of rivet poppers. As you fly along you keep popping off the odd rivet. The plane keeps flying for a very long time. But you know it is eventually going to fall out of the sky even if you can't say when.

*But what future do think is most likely?*

Unfortunately, the most likely futures are pretty awful- scenarios that no sane person would wish to live in. This is based on continuing human impacts on the global environment. Global warming is bad enough, but there's also the impact on other species, on wildlife extinctions, on soil loss, on tropical forests - basically, gross and sustained simplifications of Earth's life support systems. We have to learn to reign in this growth. But growth is the engine of a capitalist economy so this is a very tough question - how to move to a form of development which satisfies human needs, but doesn't wreck the life support systems while we are doing it.

*Hence the need for futures thinking?*

That's part of it. There are two aspects. First, there is the fear of reaching futures that are unpleasant and lead to the end of the human experiment. That's the stick. Then there's the carrot - the desire to create a better world. In its most advanced form, futures inquiry is very much about understanding the nature of the civilisation we live in, about understanding the present which means understanding history. So one aspect is about avoiding dystopias. The other is not exactly about creating utopias but about designing the kind of world that makes sense to those who have to live in it.

But what's different about your kind of futures thinking and the futurology of the RAND Corporation in the 1950s?

RAND was spawned by the military and was mainly concerned with techniques of predicting, modelling or forecasting the future of warfare. It tells us a lot about the thinking of that time but not that much about the future. It was a search for forecasting accuracy that was akin to some aspects of science. But that effort foundered because people with no training could get as good results as people who invested large amounts of time and energy. What happened was a shift from forecasting accuracy to readiness for change, or the exploration of diverging possibilities. This is when scenario building became popular. You make various assumptions and track them through into different worlds, so you had an array of possibilities. The point is to challenge our preconceptions about how things will

develop - not predict the future, but to give an array of future worlds that seem to flow from these these assumptions.

*Then what happened?*

Recently there has been a much more powerful development which brings in an area of sociology developed in the 1960s called social construction. This provides access to a way of understanding the “constructedness” of society, and the interests that are embedded in it. With that depth of understanding you can begin to try to create outcomes you want. So if you follow the shift from forecasting to scenarios to social construction, then you can see a move away from impossible aspirations to useful productive work to deep engagement with a very sophisticated analysis of our society. It's from here that the notion of 'design forward' gains substance and reality.

*How do you deal with uncertainty in the data set of many areas?*

Uncertainty is unavoidable in the forward view. But there are ways of dealing with it – environmental scanning, for example. It's exactly parallel to what an organism does. You're walking down the street, you come to a crossing. Do you charge across or do you scan the environment? You see people walking on the pavement-why don't they bump into each other? It's a scanning loop – looking, interpreting, acting, checking, looking... Environmental scanning allows us to employ that scanning move at an institutional level, doing what an organism does, intuitively, very rapidly, repeatedly. So there never is one final route to the future, it is constantly refreshed.

*What about all those bestsellers that sell definite, quantifiable futures?*

We have a lot of pop futurists these days - people who produce articles and books that are frothy, simplistic, easy to digest and perfect for sound bites. That's why the World Future Studies Federation is so critical. It is big enough, broad enough and open enough to bring people into the futures discourse, from many different international cultures, not just the Western culture - or should I say, the American culture.

*Is this bias towards the US a problem?*

Let me give you an example. Recently an academic published a generalist list of what he called the “70 best futures books.” But he failed to mention any that challenged the Western viewpoint. His choice meant completely discounting what many of us think is the most exciting work in this field - works by people like Sohail Inayatullah or Zia Sardar - in favour of works such as the deeply American *Encyclopedia of the Future*. Which means that the dominant views about the future are embedded in a particular context. And busy editors will pick up the list that says “here are the best books”.

*To distance yourself from all this, shouldn't you call yourself something different?*

Yes. I don't like the word futurology. I've never met a futurologist. They don't actually exist now. RAND's Herman Khan was a futurologist. There have been and still are many futurists but most of us don't wish to be attached to an "ism". I prefer the term "foresight" because foresight is something everyone knows about. It's a good, straightforward, word. The future is often portrayed as something distant, abstract. But when you look how people function in everyday life, you see there are aspects of the future embedded in every aspect of the present. If you look at it even more closely, you find that every human act is based on purpose, on intention. These things always refer forwards. Human existence draws on the past, is enacted in the present, and is future-oriented.

*How well can you apply all this? What's your most successful project?*

The last part first: putting together the Australian Foresight Institute because we had the support of the university's vice-chancellor and we ended up with a niche to work from. Terrific! As for applications, foresight work has been funded by governments and corporations for a long time. Corporations invest in foresight to outsmart their competitors. By achieving what they call intellectual leadership and industry foresight, they can reach virgin territory and develop it before others had even thought about it. The Finnish company Nokia used this methodology, and despite its recent vicissitudes, it is still ahead. But there is a huge gap - public agencies that are quasi-monopolies. Here we're virtually deaf, dumb and blind to macro-change. I find that really interesting: business uses of foresight, competitive uses, while the public sector doesn't even know what's going on.

*What do your family and friends ask you about the future?*

They don't ask for predictions. My sons, who are 22 and 24 ask a lot about the state of the world and prospects for their lifetimes. Friends tend to consult me on issues like terrorism, nanotech, developments in electronic media, and unemployment.

*What question is most often asked about the future?*

People ask me "what on earth do you mean by futures or foresight?" This leads to my 5-minute taxi driver explanation: both terms are part of everyday life, and we build on these capacities so they can be used in organisations and socially. Most people seem to get the point very easily. And then they ask "why haven't we heard about this before?" Good point. To which I can only answer: it takes time and Galileo didn't have an easy ride either.

*Sounds like you've got your work cut out trying to explain all this to the millions of people who are, whatever they say, dedicated to living in the present*

Our culture seem to have an obsessive focus on the here and now. But, to a great extent, it is a culture of false solutions. Media, sport, drugs, commercial sex, speed, extreme sports are all sold to people to help them escape, to make things bearable for people who find life really tough and difficult. These false solutions never work. Erich Fromm wrote a book called *To Have or To Be*, where the "having" mode is constantly in need of support and sustenance, whereas the "being" mode, which comes from a more Eastern approach - meditative, connected, calm, centred - can dispense with all that. But those whose focus is on the material economy and the money markets, these people see the "being" mode as threatening. And it is - to them. Commercial interest is profoundly implicated in the alienated, chaotic world - and it continues to peddle false solutions.

*But that's the essence of capitalism?*

Capitalism is perfectly unsustainable and everyone knows it at some level. But that knowledge is repressed and there are very powerful interests keeping this system going, despite the cost. I don't know how long it is going to take for us to learn that but we have to learn it. I don't believe in revolution, I just believe we are in an extremely dicey situation.

*What a can of worms...Do you ever regret getting into it?*

No. Never. I lived in Bermuda for six years, a place that, at that time (up to the mid-1970s) had never really decided what it wanted to be, planned its future. It was drifting down the tide and getting more and more unliveable-in year after year. Far from being an ocean paradise, it was becoming a teeming mid-ocean metropolis. Most of primeval Bermuda was bulldozed in the name of progress. That was my radicalising experience. It showed me that if you let things drift you end up with a world you may well not want. So I came back to Britain, to the University of Lancaster where I took a course on alternative futures. That got me started - and I never stopped. Futures thinking became a way of life.

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