

New Thinking for a New Millennium (1996)

Introduction

Richard A Slaughter

The end of one millennium and the beginning of another is a time of great cultural and symbolic significance. Inevitably there arises the difficult task of looking back at the last millennium and attempting to come to terms with its long and tangled history. Again, there is the equally difficult task of shifting our view out of what has been to what may be. It is fascinating to note how relatively well equipped we are for the first task, yet how poorly for the second.

Yet as the 20th century comes to a close there exists a brief historical opportunity to redress the long-standing temporal bias in Western culture toward the past. I am in no way anti-historical. Yet it strikes me as odd that our universities are equipped with many Departments of History and legions of historians but very, very few futurists. H. G. Wells complained of this in a 1932 BBC address called *Wanted, Professors of Foresight*.

Yet it must now be obvious to nearly everyone that, as Lester Milbrath once put it, 'Western culture cannot maintain its trajectory.' So, far from forging into the future with confidence and elan, we now know that to achieve a viable future means that collectively we must change course and strike out in a new direction. It's in this sense that we require *New Thinking for a New Millennium*. It's not that the ideas are all new - some have ancient roots. But the pattern, the basic paradigm or 'story' of Western culture no longer works. So the shift to a new millennium, while in one sense merely an artifact of a numbering system and calendar, does provide a genuine opportunity to take stock and re-think, re-imagine what it is all about.

Already a flood of books purporting to summarise the 20th century are appearing. As with the 1,000-year view back, so with the 100-year view back. Humans need to make sense of where they have collectively been. They also need to know where they are going. So the attempt to come to grips with the 20th century necessarily prefigures the attempt to understand the early 21st. In strict empirical terms this could appear to be a problematic enterprise. Fortunately, however, the empiricist view of reality is not the only option. In direct contrast with everyday conventional wisdom, the collective view of futurists around the world is that much can be known about the near-term future. Such knowledge is not factual. It's not the knowledge sought by scientists and deployed by engineers. Rather it belongs to the realm of 'interpretative knowledge.' That is, knowledge that is arrived at by careful thought and examination of the evidence - in a word, by *scholarship*.

While many people still misidentify futures studies with crystal balls, prediction and the futures market, a new tradition of enquiry has been quietly developing during the latter part of this century. While futures studies were first dominated by military and commercial interests, these instrumental concerns could not

begin to fulfill the potential of the area. Since the 1960s, a significant number of scholars, activists and social innovators of many kinds have themselves looked into the field, drawn on its not-inconsiderable resources, and helped to forge a new enterprise. Essentially this is about the identification of viable human futures and the pathways toward them.

While government, business, education and other such entities continue to operate on implicit business-as-usual assumptions, futurists, young people and many others know that this is a sham and a delusion. Futures studies has become an essential discipline in the late 20th century because the future already presents us with enormous challenges and will clearly be very, very different from the past. So where do we go from here? That all depends on how soon we address the future as a central and substantive concern and how quickly we can facilitate the emergence of all that is meant by 'futures thinking' from its present somewhat esoteric status. In the 21st century futures thinking needs to be as accepted and commonplace as thinking about the past and present is now.

The present volume is like the tip of a much larger iceberg. It is one of a number of publishing initiatives that aim to make futures concepts, ideas and methods much more widely available. The futures literature is a very rich one. Indeed, I would venture to say that solutions to virtually all the major dilemmas we face are, in one way or another, contained within it. Yet for this volume I've had to rigorously pare down the many contributions to it that I would have wanted to include. I've therefore tried to select material that provides a number of related snapshots into the best of contemporary futures thinking.

Part One begins with a very accessible introductory piece by Professor Wendell Bell of Yale University, one of the most respected scholars in the field. He looks at the origins of the field, its assumptions, methods and uses. This is followed by a longer piece by James Ogilvy. I am well aware that some will find this chapter difficult. Yet the perspective it outlines is absolutely central for the further development and application of futures studies. What Ogilvy does with great skill and clarity is to show that the latter should not be 'knocking on the door' seeking academic approval, so much as to be seen as the fulfillment and culmination of certain key developments across the humanities and thus a central and vital area of enquiry. The scope of the subject dictates the length of the piece; however the attentive reader will be richly rewarded. It is followed by a very direct and readable introduction to 50 key works in the futures literature by Norwegian futurist Kjell Dahle. For those unfamiliar with futures, this is a fine starting point.

Part Two makes the connection between futures study and education explicit. It begins with a short piece by Jim Dator, professor of Politics at the Manoa campus of the University of Hawaii. This considers the role of futures thinking in the context of higher education. A different focus is taken by Nicholas Albery who outlines the work of the London-based Institute for Social Inventions. This organisation is both educational and futures-oriented in every sense of those words. Next, Jane Page considers the role of futures in schools. Her chapter suggests that students respond well to such work, but that there are familiar barriers to implementation. This theme is echoed by

Richard Slaughter who looks at the way 'critical futures study' has been, and can be, implemented as an educational strategy. Finally, Frank Hutchinson takes a fascinating and more detailed look at one aspect of teaching and learning about futures: the attempt to decode and move beyond images of violence in young peoples' media. Together these five chapters illustrate some of the ways that futures thinking, methods and approaches have the ability to transform educational thinking and practice.

Part Three takes up the theme of social learning for a new millennium. Professor Allen Tough of the University of Toronto suggests some ways in which the knowledge base of futures studies can and should be more thoroughly developed. Lester Milbrath then takes up one of the most central issues facing all cultures and nations: the nature of a transition to sustainability. This fascinating paper brings great clarity to this question and suggests a range of practicable responses. John Hinchcliff's chapter serves to support and amplify the previous one. He looks at the decay of many of our standard 'industrial' assumptions and shows clearly how our ways of thinking and knowing are challenged as never before by the prospects ahead. Finally, one of the most productive and respected futurists in the world, Hazel Henderson, provides a detailed overview of social innovation on a broad, worldwide canvas. As ever, her account provides a sense of qualified optimism and hope, as she reveals how organised creative work around the world undermines old realities and creates new ones.

This is, as I stated above, only the tip of the iceberg. A careful look through the futures literature, through journals such as *Futures*, bibliographic guides such as *Future Survey* or the *Annotated Futures Bibliography*, or the mail-order catalogue of the World Future Society demonstrates that there is no shortage of fine, clear and relevant material about the human predicament and the many ways it can be addressed and resolved.

While many more limited and bounded fields continue to play earlier games of exclusion and boundary-maintenance, futures study and research is among those who are changing the rules and embarking on other enterprises. Only time will tell how successful they will be. If this book helps to move us on from a taken-for-granted past and present to a challenging, but yet to be constructed future, it will have served its purpose.

Richard A Slaughter
Melbourne, Australia
April 1995

Note

There's a minor 'back story' to this book. I'd initially approached the publisher with a proposal for a three-volume *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*. But they turned that down. So *New Thinking...* was proposed – and accepted – instead. (I went on to find another way to publish the KBFS, subsequent versions of which are still being used many years later.) The same title was later picked up by a certain E. de Bono and employed for somewhat different

purposes.

SLAUGHTER, R.A. *New Thinking for a New Millennium*, Routledge, London:
xiv + 242pp (1996) ISBN: 0-415-12943-5

Out of print.