

*Futures beyond Dystopia* - Richard Slaughter (2004), Routledge Falmer, London

In his introduction to this important new book, WFSF president Professor Slaughter says:

“The affluent Western world has become entranced by its own wealth, its success and its ever more compelling technological prowess. But it pays little more than superficial attention to the consequences of its spiralling demands, to the way it constantly transfers costs elsewhere and ‘elsewhen’ into the ever-receding future. Short-term thinking has become the norm and it prevents us from ever taking seriously our collective attempts to consume the future.

“We need to see these phenomena much more clearly because, at present, they are leading us to a world that no sane person would choose for themselves, let alone hand on to their children...a world that is stripped, mined out, polluted, denuded of non-human life and compromised beyond all hope of repair...the most likely futures before us are irredeemably Dystopian in nature.”

So the book is based on an explicit recognition of the global problematique, helpfully summarised in Chapter 17 of the book. First, we live in a materialistic “flatland”, a thin and diminished world in which instrumental reason and the material progress provided by a global infrastructure blinds us to the almost universal spiritual poverty of modern life. It is dominated by the ideology of economic growth, despite growing evidence that the natural systems of the Earth are already imperilled by our level of material consumption. Further growth is not a rational response, given the impact on the natural world of the present population and its levels of material demands, already producing global climate change and a series of other cascading disruptions of natural systems. The industrialised world continues to live as if there were no tomorrow, while actively encouraging the delusion that the entire growing world population can live in our unsustainable ways. Any thinking person is aware that technological change always brings costs as well as benefits, and losers as well as winners, but any serious questioning of the net benefits of uncontrolled technical advance is derided. Finally, in a world in which the consequences of our decisions stretch decades or even centuries into the future, our thinking is dominated by irresponsibly short-term thinking based on next month’s balance sheet or next year’s election.

So the need for futures thinking is obvious. Collectively, we are stumbling blindly towards global catastrophe, driven by economic imperatives, technical hubris, short-term thinking, ecological illiteracy and political irresponsibility. As the book points out, the seven deadly sins of pride, envy, avarice, wrath, gluttony, lust and sloth have been turned by our consumer culture into the seven marketing imperatives, while “a technological dynamic that acknowledges no limits whatever is poised to overrun all human cultures and the world in which they are located”. The broad field of Futures Studies emerged from the contradiction between the disastrous possible futures and the needs of real people. Unfortunately, as this book analyses in detail, our field has been dominated by a narrow approach characterised by superficiality, conservatism and a lack of interest in alternative visions of the diverse futures which are possible. So “critique is no longer merely an option. It has become a necessity”.

The shift from pop futures to critical futures was an obvious imperative. This book mounts a persuasive argument for the second great shift in futures thinking, beyond critical futures to the Integral approach. The central section of the book is an explication of this new way of analysing our options. Ken Wilber's approach is based around four "quadrants of development", each a separate "window on reality". The left-hand quadrants represent interior aspects and the right-hand side are exterior, with the upper quadrants on each side being individual and the lower ones collective. Thus the upper right quadrant is the external development of the individual: "the familiar story of biological development, of body and brain function". The lower right corner contains "the stream of external collective development, the physical/social process that leads through the various stages of physical and technical evolution". So these two quadrants together reveal the contemporary world of science and technology. The top left corner represents the individual's internal development, "each person's own unique inner world of feeling, emotion, thought and being". Finally, the bottom left quadrant represents "the interior development of the collective social being: language, world views etc", the whole broad sweep of cultural evolution. As the book points out, most analysis and discussion of futures is heavily concentrated in the bottom right corner of external collective technical development, with occasional nods to external aspects of the individual. Our inner feelings and emotions are usually ignored, and very little attention is given to social and cultural issues. This is a dangerously limited view, like a monochrome picture or a musical composition using only the black notes on the keyboard. The Integral approach is obviously better.

The book goes on to make a powerful plea for the establishment and proper resourcing of foresight institutes, staffed by properly trained professionals and equipped to explore the diversity of possible futures. Slaughter argues we need this investment to provide us with credible alternatives to the dystopic futures which will otherwise be the fate of humankind.

The conclusion of this book summarises its argument. In its words:

- *The linked professions of Futures Studies and Applied Foresight developed because they were called forth by fundamental human and social needs during a period of rapid civilisational change.*
- *Everyone uses the skills of applied foresight every day of their lives. The foundations of foresight therefore reside in everyday life. To now elevate these capacities into organisational and social forms requires concerted effort.*
- *Foresight implementation has been patchy so far, but enough has been done to demonstrate what entrepreneurs call 'proof of concept'. We know that foresight works. We know what benefits it bestows. We also know that our civilisation may not survive without it.*
- *Foresight for private gain is legal but of questionable legitimacy in the wider context. By contrast, foresight work in the public interest is a vital investment in the well-being of society and its world. It should be funded from the public purse.*

- *To consider futures and foresight work through the lens of an Integral perspective provides new tools, insights and ways of mapping the futures enterprise upon a far broader canvas than anything thus far attempted.*
- *It follows that the development of social foresight takes on greater urgency, substance and meaning. It corresponds to an expansion of awareness and capacity on a very wide scale.*

As an example of the sort of future we could work toward, the book sketches the tantalising goal of living “in a world that has experienced a recovery of vision, meaning and purpose”, “a post-materialist world which embraced stewardship and the needs of future generations”. That would be very different from today’s world, marked by what Slaughter calls “the disastrous conceits of industrialism... the obsession with material growth, the subjugation of nature and the marginalisation of non-Western cultures”. Like others calling for a great transition toward a future sustainable society, he sees the key as “letting go of industrial models, values, priorities and structures across the board and opening to the processes of transformation available through the perennial wisdom of humankind”. So the task is framed in terms of establishing a new and potentially durable relationship between people, cultures, technologies and natural systems.

In ecological terms, I don't think there's any doubt that we're booked on the Titanic and steaming towards the icebergs. Our material demands are changing the global climate and causing other disruptions of the natural systems that are crucial for our survival, providing us with breathable air, drinkable water, edible food, a sense of cultural identity and spiritual sustenance. Unfortunately, those who put their faith in growth are still effectively tipping more coal into the burners and encouraging us to meet the icebergs more rapidly. A group of people who should know better are even now in the First Class bar ordering smoked salmon and the best vintage champagne, secure in the knowledge their cheque will not reach the bank. This book is at least a clear appeal to steer a different course, but I see it as more radical than that. Since those on the bridge are clearly not interested in these arguments, the book effectively incites those of us who form the crew of Space-ship Earth to stage a mutiny! Thinking of future generations imposes a moral responsibility to be working for a sustainable future. This book is both a call to arms and a helpful manual for that task. It should at least be on your bookshelf as a serious futurist, if not in your shoulder holster!

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