

# book reviews

“the future of  
futures studies”

## futures for the third millennium: enabling the forward view

Richard A. Slaughter

*Prospect Media, St Leonard's, Australia, 1999, 381 pp, A\$39.95*

Richard Slaughter's appointment as Foundation Professor of Foresight at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne is just reward for over twenty years of leadership in the futures field. The University is to be congratulated first, on having the imagination to create the Chair and second, on appointing Richard to the post. It is doubly fitting that this book of his writings, selected from his output from 1984 on, should appear coincidentally with his appointment.

Over twenty papers are reproduced, several from *Futures* but others from what to many would be less accessible origins. The volume provides a clear picture of the main strands of Slaughter's thinking. Section 1, which contains two papers from 1996, examines the argument for 'Futures studies as a disciplined enquiry', putting the case for a longer view and arguing that, 'engaging with futures problems is a challenging task which requires long-term thinking, well qualified people, rigorous intellectual frameworks, robust methodologies and decisive, ethical management'. The second paper in this section reproduces the *Futures* paper that initiated the three volume *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* that Slaughter subsequently edited. Two major challenges for the field are posed: its 'arguably too-close' associations with the establishment in business and government

and the danger that western culture will stifle other approaches to knowing and being. These are themes that reappear throughout the collection.

Section 2, 'Context and critique', begins with a critical examination of the 'defective' western world view and moves on to examine the importance of images in thinking about the future. Quoting Popper, Slaughter argues that images of the future pull us forward just as much as the past pushes us, and contends that positive images of the future become much clearer, 'Once we give up the impossible task of trying to predict the future and instead begin to participate in creating it'.

Having spent many years in education it is not surprising that Section 3 is devoted to 'Futures in education'. The section contains papers presenting a rationale for Futures in education and why educational institutions themselves should be using Futures tools to become more proactive in their management. A further theme in this section is a critique of the images of the future presented to young people by the media. Referring to such 1980s phenomena as Transformers, He-Man and Thundercats, Slaughter contends that the images presented to the young are too often violent, sexist and dominated by technology. Similar attitudes are presented in many non-fiction approaches to the future, which are little more than technologically dominated extrapolations of the present. There are other visions of the future to be found in the writings of Le Guin and others but too many concentrate on fears rather than the potential for creating a better life; no wonder negative views of the future tend to dominate

adult life. The section ends with two papers devoted to the development of more positive views of the future and the role of critical futures study in this process. The emphasis of the approach is the word, critical, in the sense of careful analysis through an understanding of the interpretation of discourse and theory.

Section 4 is devoted to 'Foresight institutions and practices' with two chapters examining Australian experience. The first draws lessons for future foresight activity from the Australian Commission for the Future which operated from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. Slaughter draws a number of important principles concerning purpose, funding, quality control, methods and staffing among others. More recent foresight efforts could do worse than consider his conclusions, which are developed in the second paper that proposes a national foresight strategy for Australia that clearly has relevance further afield. Also in this section are a discussion of some of the barriers to foresight and the role that it can play and a paper on the promise and issues raised by the development of nanotechnology.

The futures field, Slaughter suggests in Section 5, extends from futures research and forecasting, through futures studies, where scenarios and speculative writing feature among other areas of activity, to the future movement, which is concerned with creating alternative lifestyles and humanistic and transpersonal psychology. It is a broad scope and it is clear that Slaughter sees the role of critical futurism as questioning established attitudes in language, meaning, power, ideology and conflicting interests. He has little time for what he regards as the 'pop-futurism' of writers such as Toffler and Naisbitt favouring the more 'critical' examinations of Henderson and Meadows and the 'epistemological' work of Ogilvy and Inayatullah. A clear normative strand is apparent too in concern for sustainability, stewardship, a new science that reflects interconnectivity, the re-birth of the sacred, and valuing native cultures, alongside the benefits of systematic foresight. These are needed in place of, 'Market economies (which) do not have an intrinsic interest in the future, and market signals (that) operate retrospectively'. There is also an outline of the

uses and limitations of selected futures methods and a more extended discussion of the Futurescan method of environmental scanning.

The final section argues for the development of futures studies from the innate ability of human beings to speculate about the future, through the use of futures concepts, tools and processes, to a social capacity in which long-term thinking becomes a social norm. This would enable us to move away from the 'business-as-usual' attitude to the future which cannot continue to a more preferable and sustainable direction. Reproducing a paper from the period of the Cold War, Slaughter examines the role of visions in creating more positive images that contrast with the dystopias and inevitable futures that have tended to dominate the literature. A final paper draws on the writing of Ken Wilber in advocating the need for cultural recovery and transcending the 'flatland' of trends in western society that are not problematized and consequently carry us into an unsustainable future by default. The role of futures as a dissenting voice is emphasized in a brief conclusion, but as Slaughter points out this is not without cost. 'The dissenting futurist may face a double penalty: one for being a futurist in the first place; another for taking dissenting positions within Futures Studies... (but) there is now as never before a number of cogent reasons why dissent can be regarded as one of the responsibilities of the futurist'.

As with any collection of papers written over a period of time there are a number of recurring ideas that if read from cover to cover may appear a little repetitious and I must admit to a slight disappointment that *Futures for the Third Millennium* contained little new writing, but these are small complaints. The main value of the book is that it brings together a collection of papers by a writer who has done more than most to develop a cogent argument for critical futures both in an academic context and as a practical approach to the issues that confront humanity in the 21st century.

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