During the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a brief period when new modes of futures engagement emerged within several mainly Western societies. They helped to support various initiatives, projects and a rich literature that opened out alternative views of social trajectories, of dreams and goals that could be explored. Within a very few years, however, many of these were extinguished, set aside and forgotten. Of the many reasons for this the most central is arguably the way that the rich and powerful were able to ensure that their own very particular vision of the future took precedence above all others. The rise of neoliberalism, as it came to be called, launched new world-spanning organisations, installed a powerful new code of behaviour, imposed a range of widely accepted economic prescriptions, and insisted on a rigorously exclusive set of values that quickly became dominant. Many promising initiatives disappeared.

Half a century later, however, it’s evident that the neoliberal future is not merely unsustainable it now represents a classic ‘failed future.’ In other words, the key trends that define neoliberalism - growing inequality, conflict, resource depletion, a sixth extinction, emerging waves of high-tech devoted to ambiguous or openly dangerous ends and finally, the slow but steady increase of global temperatures - show that neoliberalism became its very own nemesis. Moving from the global to a societal scale what other evidence is there for such a view? We only need to recall what happened to various future-oriented organisations such as the Congressional Clearinghouse on the Future, the Office of Technology Assessment in the USA and the Commission for the Future in Australia, each of which was undermined by right-wing politicians committed to ‘smaller government.’ Nor should we forget the continuing uphill battle to establish futures in education as a core component within school and university systems. Anyone who has been involved in such efforts will have seen the same process repeated again and again. In each case the results clearly demonstrate highly positive outcomes. Yet even now, as global upheavals creep ever closer, such programs remain vulnerable and rare.

During these decades academia has been a passive and largely unwilling partner. Yet organisations like the World Future Society, the World Futures Studies Federation and, more recently, the Association of Professional Futurists, along with a broad and very diverse field of practitioners continued to work and evolve their field of enquiry and practice. At all times a small, but widely distributed, number of scholars and practitioners have moved things forward regardless of obstructions. The two authors whose books are reviewed here are both members of that select group who have worked for the further development and application of futures studies. It’s not an easy path and, thus far, the rewards have been few and far between.

It should also be noted that books about ‘the future’ clearly present writers with major challenges since the subject appears intangible, existing only as subtle traces within human minds. The future, by definition, cannot be experienced directly, but only through images, thoughts, feelings and the multiple ways these are subsequently expressed in the outer world. It begins, therefore, as an essentially interior phenomenon. Hence studying ‘the future’ cannot be divorced from how human beings think, perceive and act. Viewed in these terms it’s regrettable that in our time forward thinking is most commonly associated with entertainment and high-tech innovation.

Clearly futures studies has long been a paradoxical enterprise that has often made it vulnerable to misunderstanding and misuse. From time to time, however, a work appears that freshly reinterprets the current ‘state of play’ for wider audiences, thereby
helping promoting wider understanding and greater traction. H.G. Wells, Alvin Toffler and Bertrand de Jouvenel all achieved something like this in their own time and place. Now John Urry has provided us with a further welcome example. It is to some extent a consequence of, and development from, his earlier work on Societies beyond oil with its compelling subtitle - Oil dregs and social futures (Urry 2013). It's worth quoting from the blurb of this earlier book in which he is said to show:

how the twentieth century created a mirage of unlimited future growth that masked its limits. He considers the nature of an oil-dependent world facing energy descent and what lessons can be learnt from past energy-constrained societies. With no large-scale plan B to energise and mobilise societies, Urry assesses the likelihood of some very different futures for this century (Urry, 2013, back cover.)

In the subsequent book he articulates a key concern that many others, including myself, have also expressed, namely that 'futures are incredibly contested, saturated with conflicting social interests.' His focus, therefore, is to 'mainstream' and 'democratise' futures. He is interested in where the power to influence futures originates and therefore rejects any notion that the future is 'empty.' Viewing it as such 'makes it ready for exploitation since those in the future cannot get their own back for the future world they will inherit.' So it almost goes without saying that this book does not hesitate to challenge key aspects of the status quo. For example 'social futures problematise both autonomous markets and the march of technology.'

The first section deals with a fairly conventional 'brief history of the future' showing how it has been interpreted and used over centuries, as well as a familiar range of futures-related literature from the last couple of hundred years. Then, after paying close attention to several Dystopian works he proceeds directly to summarise the sources of what he calls the 'new catastrophism.' He sees this partly as a consequence of impossible commitments to unending economic growth, the consequences post-2001 military and political upheavals and new waves of Dystopian products in literature, film and related sources. Perspectives and theories regarding social collapse are also discussed along with a fascinating section on what he calls 'catastrophic cascades.' These relate to the series of 'well-known systemic risks that various texts show catastrophically reverberating against each other in this century.' 'Taken together these generate 'much systemic instability.' To his credit, however, Urry completes this section with a warning about the dangers of catastrophism.

Part two takes up the issue of 'complex systems and the future.' In some ways it can be viewed as the core of the book since it mediates productively between Urry's longstanding commitment to understanding social phenomena with an equally deep appreciation of the core concerns of futures studies. Time, complexity, systems and networks all receive careful attention en route to discussions about what innovation and progress may mean in this new and unstable context. A section on methods starts by admitting that some of them have themselves 'been turned into commodities that are bought, sold and circulated.' It's significant in this context that the only 'mainstream' methods considered here are 'scenarios' and 'extrapolation.' Clearly for this writer techniques per se come second to questions of value and meaning. These are explored by way of 'learning from past visions of the future,' 'studying failed futures,' 'developing dystopic thought' (not Dystopian) and the uses of Utopias. All, he rightly argues, are 'performative.' That is, affect what subsequently emerges into practice. Part three then uses simple but effective scenario methods to explore alternative futures for fabrication (formerly manufacturing) transport within high-density cities and, finally, climate change. In each case four futures are briefly, but effectively, portrayed both in terms of
key features and cameos of what life would be like under various circumstances. These all showed that the author was well versed in practicing and workshopping this key futures method. By applying some of the insights from earlier sections in this very effective way this section of the book takes on a certain human, lived quality.

The conclusion summarises key points and, in particular, how what the author calls 'powerful futures' are 'almost literally owned by private interests, rather than shared across members of society.' It follows that 'power should be viewed as significantly a matter of uneven future-making.' One can only hope that other social theorists will pick up and respond to this idea as valuable work in progress. In common with other futures writers the author seeks to 'reclaim' and 'mainstream' the terrain of futures studies. As Wendell Bell and others pointed out some years ago, the latter do need to be fully integrated within the social sciences. In the final paragraphs the author brings it all together in a very effective closing statement. He writes:

> Given long-term processes in much of social life, anticipating futures is absolutely essential. And once one is undertaking futures thinking, then public bodies are central to that process. Indeed, they are often the key coordinator of the future-making process. So I suggest that futures thinking is a major way of bringing the state and civil society back in from the cold, especially if the focus is upon social and not just technological futures (Urry, 2016, 191).

Taken together these two works provide a first-rate introduction to, and overview of, futures studies as a vital and evolving domain of enquiry and action. As such they will be of significant value not only to help equip newcomers but also to inspire seasoned scholars and practitioners. All will appreciate the freshness and relevance of these fine additions to the literature.

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