

## The Substantive Knowledge Base of Futures Studies

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Futures, special issue, 25, 3, April 1993

The study of futures may be problematic in some respects but this is no cause for concern. Over the last few decades, significant arenas of uncertainty have opened up under science and mathematics, and a new interpretative sophistication has developed across the humanities. The world is no longer as simple as it was. Which is no bad thing. Our understanding of the social construction of reality, of cultural editing, of worldview analysis and the formation and dissolution of so-called 'disciplinary paradigms' has provided many potent insights. It is a context in which Futures Studies (FS) has a clear, and I would argue, a central role to play. Its knowledge base is no more challenging, no less soundly based, than many other fields. The knowledge base of FS has *appeared* to be more problematic than it really is for a number of reasons.

For example, 'the future' has been widely misconstrued as an 'empty space' rather than as an active principle in the present. Futures work has also been over-identified with prediction, forecasting, 'think-tanks' and Western, corporatist, positivistically inclined 'futurology'. Again, the highly visible work of pop futurists, along with media stereotypes and a range of visually compelling, but often spurious, pseudo-'futuristic' imagery (which often has more to do with present-day marketing practices than 'the future') have diverted attention from more substantive options. Finally, there are not yet enough scholars working in the field to achieve a 'critical mass' of practitioners. But there will be for one simple reason: *there is a growing structural need for high-quality futures work.*

With the late industrial system, classical economics, international trade, 'trickle-down' development, the mechanistic worldview and the global environment (to name but a few aspects of the global problematique) in profound crisis, the need to critique past practice, to institutionalise foresight, reconceptualise cultural and political assumptions and to 'steer' more carefully is clear. Regardless of the difficulties involved (and there are many) futures study is a necessary enterprise in a fragile, interconnected world poised over the gulf between eras. While we unquestionably remain caught up in a vast web of institutional and learning lags, the problems addressed by futurists and others in associated fields will not go away. They will become more urgent and pressing as time passes. (This can be said with confidence because we have sufficient insight into the underlying *structure* of the coming decades - regardless of detailed events - to know that this will be a most challenging and difficult period.)

Along with this confidence in the role of FS, however, there should also be a certain modesty in the face of future uncertainty. For the future is most certainly open and unpredictable. Indeed, most informed observers agree that futurists should not try to predict. It is an impossible aspiration which, if fulfilled, would logically cancel out the active role of humans in shaping history. What they can do is to help develop individual and collective foresight (which I take to be primarily a widely shared human capacity, and only secondarily a professionalised technique). One result of good foresight work is a *well-developed decision context* embracing aspects of past, present and possible futures. The futures field may or may not be a discipline in the narrow sense. What is incontrovertible is that it produces working knowledge and supports disciplined enquiry. Another term for this is scholarship.

Hence it's time to shed the confusion, mystification and myth-making that has surrounded some aspects of FS, and to set out accounts of the core, or knowledge base of the field as clearly as possible. While it is part of the new world picture that no account can be free of the implicit frameworks (cultural assumptions, presuppositions) of the observer, models of the core can certainly be defined. They can also be taught, learned and reconceptualised. The field is anything but static. It can be continually re-constituted, in part through a dynamic, evolving core. Yet it is unwise to claim the latter as exclusive territory, for it overlaps, and participates in, many others. Rather than a single unitary core, there are a series of overlapping accounts of it. One has been used as a framework for this special issue of *Futures*.

The issue had its origins in the comments of Norwegian futurist Kjell Dahle at the World Futures Studies Federation conference in Barcelona in September 1991. Dahle pointed out how the lack of a common knowledge base greatly complicated the tasks of those preparing courses, teaching and developing FS projects. It is hoped that this issue will go some way towards resolving these issues.

### **A model of the knowledge base**

FS can be described as a substantive interdisciplinary field of enquiry. The fact that it is richly interconnected at the margins with many other enterprises and fields means that the boundaries cannot be clearly defined. Accounts of a core, however, can be more clearly described. We can say that such a core is comprised of several identifiable overlapping layers or elements. For analytic purposes it is convenient to separate them. However, in reality they are interconnected and functionally inseparable. In this approach, a viable model emerges from the 'layering' of core elements. That is, the 'bringing into a coherent relationship' of elements of the field. As noted, some of these elements are certainly shared with many other fields and enterprises. But where they overlap, an internal synthesis can be identified. Similarly, an external synthesis is always possible through lateral connections with other fields such as long-range planning, policy-studies, development studies and so on.

Some will suggest that FS is too diffuse to be described in this way. But, to repeat, this is a model. It is not reality. The model outlines a structure of understanding, an interpretation. It is not empirically verifiable. If the interpretation is useful, however, it may help to integrate elements of the field in a more systematic way. For example, foundation courses in FS could do worse than use something akin to the following structure as a starting point. It provides one way of bringing clarity to an area that tends to be confusing to newcomers. Some such model (or models) is needed as a starting point. Yet there's no need to reify them, to see them as 'real'. All models are provisional, and this is no exception. Those who want to take issue with it, to propose other models and to engage in a continuing dialogue about the question of a knowledge core in the field are encouraged to do so. This is, in many ways, a first step. In time, a more authoritative account could, perhaps, be developed.

What are the key elements, or layers, of FS? A brief overview follows.

### **Language, concepts and metaphors**

The language, concepts and metaphors of the futures field can be regarded as primary intellectual and symbolic resources. The very concepts of 'future' and 'futures' point toward one of the distinguishing criteria which provides the possessors of a human brain/mind system with a

unique vantage point in time, i.e. one that is not restricted to the 'creature present' of other species. Concepts such as those of 'alternatives', 'options', 'agenda for the 21st Century' and 'sustainability' provide the means with which to think about futures. Metaphorically-speaking, they are 'springboards' or 'building blocks' for understanding which, when developed and explored, permit otherwise vague and provisional notions about the future to take on greater clarity and form. Metaphors have particular applicability in futures, in part through the active ways in which they organise and shape our conceptual structures. While their power to shape discourse tends to take place invisibly, they can also be used deliberately to further conscious intentions.

### **Theories, ideas and images**

The symbolic building blocks outlined above can be assembled into structures of great power and insight. For example the idea of 'worldview design' or that of a 'wise culture' bring with them a whole series of propositions that can be used to clarify important aspects of contemporary, or future options. The field as a whole generates a web of interconnected theories, ideas and images that serve to contradict the popular and false notion of the future as merely an 'empty space'. As such it presents human beings with a wide range of options, alternatives and dilemmas. Far from being merely problematic, the challenging, open-ended nature of the subject is exactly what the human mind and spirit thrives upon. The future can be explored through many avenues, and not least through theories about evolution, progress, chaos, stability, sustainability, permanence and new forms of society. Some are best approached through visual or literary images.

Images of futures are both ubiquitous and yet under-studied. They are being continuously negotiated at all levels of society. They are consciously deployed, for example, in attempts to gain social support for major projects. They may also be unconscious or obscured by ideological uses. Images of futures in the late 20th Century tend to be either technophilic or dystopian. Both can be usefully explored, critiqued and compared with, e.g. those emerging from speculative fiction (SF), art and non-Western cultures. As noted below, the futurist ignores such sources at his or her peril. They complement and extend the mostly rationalist operations of professional forecasters and others. But, more importantly, they foreshadow the often-eclipsed possibility of a wider range of futures traditions based on other epistemologies and 'ways of knowing.'

### **Literature**

The futures field has a rich literature. Familiarity with it provides access to the substance of the field. Obviously, this literature can be studied like any other. It can also be critiqued, explored and extended. One could not be a futurist without some knowledge of at least part of it. One could not train students to become professionals in the field without it. Teaching and research are heavily indebted to it. There are at least two main branches. In my view the core of the professional futures literature resides primarily in some 200 key books by authors from around the world (but predominantly from Europe and North America). The journals also play a significant role. When people have enquired about the intellectual foundations of FS, I have sometimes suggested that they consider some back issues of *Futures*, *Futures Research Quarterly* or, more recently, the Australian journal *21C*. No one could consider such publications without coming away with a clear impression of substance and quality. The concerns raised in these publications are not trivial.

The other branch of futures literature is that of speculative writing, or SF. This is seldom produced by futures writers *per se*; but the corpus of written (and pictured) SF can be regarded as significant for the field. Whereas much futures work is based on rationality, logic, extrapolation and scholarship, SF draws on different sources - primarily imagination, game-playing (such as 'what if...?' games or alternative histories) and creativity. As such, and at its best, it expands or fills out the medium, and the long-term, future with a wide range of possibilities. I. F. Clarke, among others, has demonstrated how speculative literature has affected social, cultural and technological processes over a very long period. It remains an important resource for those looking beyond the near-term future.

### **Organisations, networks and practitioners**

There are a number of core organisations and networks that have helped to define the field. Two are centrally placed. The US-based World Future Society (WFS) and the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF). Both are distributed widely across the globe. The Federation is a true international network with an activist, cultural, political tradition and a broadly facilitative outlook. The WFS, on the other hand, is perhaps an order of magnitude larger but is more popular, conservative and corporatist in orientation. Together, these two organisations cater for the broad interests of most practicing futurists through publications, projects and meetings. They both have local or national branches in a number of countries.

In addition, there are a number of more specialised organisations which fall under the heading of 'institutions of foresight.' They include the Institute for 21st Century Studies (Washington D.C), the Club of Rome (Italy), the Network on Responsibilities to Future Generations (Malta), the Secretariat for Futures Studies (Germany), the Institute for Social Inventions (London), the Robert Jungk Futures Library (Salzburg) and the Commission for the Future (Melbourne). There are perhaps a hundred or more worldwide clustered around the core and supporting a wide range of more focused activities. Many are small, under-funded, and often marginal. Yet they are of great actual or potential importance. They tend to be pioneers, or 'leading-edge' organisations that act as seedbeds of innovation. While the wastage rate may be high, their collective impact is significant. It is therefore vital to build links between them and to carry out research into their effectiveness. Overlapping these near-core contexts is a diverse range of futures-related organisations including NGOs, consultancies, government bodies and other international groups often associated with the UNESCO or the OECD. Some overlap with social movements occurs here (see below).

Futures practitioners create, refine and use the formal knowledge that finds its way into the futures literature. Estimates of the numbers of people working full-time in FS vary according to definition, but there are enough to sustain the wide variety of networks and organisations noted above. If it is language, concepts and metaphors that provide the symbolic foundation of FS, it is the practitioners who supply the human, intellectual and applied energy. It is they who are energised by this powerful idea of 'future' and who use it to pursue numerous projects and possibilities in the present. These outcomes of futures work affect social processes in countless ways, but most importantly through projects, enabling structures and social innovations.

### **Methodologies and tools**

The core of applied futures work is methodology. Just as theories create new structures from underlying concepts etc., so methodologies increase the intellectual and applied power of ideas

and theories. Basic methodologies include environmental scanning, scenario analysis, cross-impact matrices, the Delphic survey method, forecasting and strategic management, national and global modelling and, last but not least, positive critique and analysis of discourse. Some elements of the above are combined in useful sequences to create a more sustained and penetrating methodology. Such approaches arguably include Godet's 'Prospective', Coates' 'Issues Management' and the 'QUEST' technique developed by Enzer and Nanus. Methodologies of this extended type are in wide use in some government and corporate contexts, but unfortunately, seldom in education. Futures tools are simple versions of some of the methodologies or practical applications drawn from them. They include timelines, futures wheels, space/time grids, simple technology assessment, strategies for responding to fears and so on. Such tools have been developed and applied over a quarter of a century since the first courses in futures were taught in, or around, 1966.

### **Social movements and innovations**

The extent to which the peace, women's, environmental and other movements are part of the futures field is difficult to determine. However, I have always seen them as closely related to futures work in that they have attempted not merely to discuss and theorise about future societies, they have acted in the present to bring about change. Hence, they align with one of the core purposes of futures work. Social innovations are often overlooked, yet they are ubiquitous and easy to study. The process of creating them can be taught and learned.

### **Conclusion**

This issue of *Futures* provides accounts of several layers of a core. Each has been written by a different individual, or individuals, with long experience of the field. Inayatullah tackles theories, ideas and images from a culturally critical, post-structuralist viewpoint. Garrett makes use of her wide experience in 21st Century Studies to provide an informed and detailed overview of futures methods. Judge considers the role of metaphor and Slaughter looks at futures concepts. Miles outlines the ambiguous relationship between FS and SF. Homann and Moll review organisations, networks and practitioners. Finally, Henderson gives a fascinating account of social innovations and movements.

Given the broad span of the field, there may well be inconsistencies. But this is not necessarily a defect. We recognise that there is a great variety of views about the nature of futures work. So, besides the main papers, provision has been made for ten 'divergent perspectives.' Here, a number of very different observers reflect on how they see the field. Finally, a five part bibliographic section from around the world attempts to sketch in some of the rich variety of futures literature available. Of course there are gaps. They are as much a consequence of missed deadlines and unanswered letters, as they are of inherent ambiguities and the uneven spread of futures expertise in the world.

Finally, I hope that this special issue will be seen as a contribution to the debate about the nature of the field. Though the latter may have fallen upon hard times in some contexts, I believe that the times are ripe for a resurgence of futures work. While we should always recognise the provisionality of our interpretations, the fallibility of our theories, the obscured nature of cultural commitments, we should also have the courage of our convictions. Thus, despite all the qualifications and caveats we might wish to make, I take the following to be reasonable and defensible propositions:

- futures work is valuable
- the forward look is more useful than the backward one
- the future cannot be predicted, but it can be clarified
- people are not helpless, they have great cultural, symbolic and practical power to determine the conditions of their own lives
- the end of the industrial era presents us with enormous challenges, hence,
- the need for high-quality futures work is greater than ever.

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December 1992