

Quartet: Richard Slaughter's Four Key Texts and the Rise of Critical Futures Studies

Alex Burns, *Overviews, Towards a Wise Culture*, CD-ROM, FI, 2005

I first discovered Richard Slaughter's work in 1996 when *21C* publisher Ashley Crawford gave me some back-issues during an afternoon editorial meeting. Crawford and I were brainstorming story ideas for the Australian cultural and science quarterly magazine. I glanced at Slaughter's interviews with eco-futures author Hazel Henderson and social activist Robert Jungk, and then turned to a more recent *21C* issue with a brooding apocalyptic cover. I was unaware of Slaughter's pivotal role in establishing Critical Futures Studies (CFS) as a trans-disciplinary field and would continue to be.

Four years later I met Peter Hayward during a Spiral Dynamics® training seminar. After learning of my search for postgraduate studies Hayward handed me a book and told me about a new course he was in at Swinburne University. The book was Johan Galtung and Sohail Inayatullah's *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians* (1997) and the course was something called Strategic Foresight. Hayward suggested the course suited my interests and that I contact its convener and foundation professor, Richard Slaughter, for an interview. I took Hayward's advice, looked up 'Richard A Slaughter' in La Trobe University's library catalogue, and plunged into the three-volume paperback edition he had edited of *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* (1996). Although familiar with some authors and topics, for me the *KBFS* opened up a whole new world of symbolic language, and reframed my undergraduate studies in cinema, philosophy and political science.

Slaughter's core work is collected in six key texts. His 1983 PhD thesis used critical sociology to evaluate the Futures Studies domain and show how CFS could regenerate educational curricula and institutional goals in British schools. *Recovering The Future* (1988) introduced the Transformative Cycle ('T-Cycle') methodology; showed how CFS assisted in cultural reconstruction; applied CFS to education, children's media and New Wave science fiction; and ended on an oblique note with a fictional story. *The Foresight Principle* (1995) was the CFS manifesto for life beyond the industrial era: a critique of instrumental rationality that called for the creation of a 'wisdom society'. *Futures for the Third Millennium* (1999) remains, for me, the best single volume survey of Slaughter's central themes, from his explanation of critique and blueprints for 'Institutes of Foresight', to the role of education and social imaging. *Futures Beyond Dystopia* (2004) deepens this CFS frame to critique Dystopian (negative utopian) social imagery, scope the possibilities for Social Foresight, and introduces Integral Foresight

based on Ken Wilber's model of human consciousness. The aforementioned *KBFS* gives an overview of Futures Studies institutions, methods, debates and key practitioners.

In writing this reflective overview I found myself revisiting our initial interview. We talked about our different *21C* experiences and why Dystopian imagery had a cultural dominance in youth media. We had distinctive experiences of the 1982-83 nuclear scare and the environmental crisis. Yet I had also grown up shaped by certain texts that Slaughter had critiqued and reached different conclusions. Therefore, this article is more a reflective overview of themes in Slaughter's four key books than an objective summary. At several points I will suggest alternative viewpoints to Slaughter's contentions and fill in some other details. I also mention several magazine and journal articles that highlight the evolution in Slaughter's ideas. My own interpretation has its biases and blind spots so readers should read the original texts, reach their own conclusions and understand the nature of critique.

On critique

Critique remains one of the most powerful yet misunderstood tools of discourse analysis. It has led to bitter 'war-of-words' between Futures Studies practitioners, accusations of professional betrayal and even claims the field does not exist as a viable discipline. As Slaughter has noted, critique is more than 'criticism', as it 'surfaces' hidden assumptions. What CFS now needs are nuanced skills in 'appreciative critique' that exalts incisive critique whilst jettisoning the emotional negativity that has exemplified some exchanges.

First, any critique reflects the critic's agenda, biases and perceptions. This is why Slaughter cites semanticist Alfred Korzybski's insight that 'the map is not the territory'. Joseph Voros' model of 'cross-level analysis' is used in Australian Foresight Institute classes to consider this, whilst hermeneutics (the soft science of interpretation) and reader-response theory also provide useful interrogative tools.

Second, the majority of CFS critiques (including this article) are of artifacts. The critique offers the critic's viewpoint on the author's intentionality but is at best a snapshot of a longer process. Books have their own creative tribulations, consultancy reports are rewritten due to the politics of client and group compromise, conference summaries may be subjective without cultivated attention, and media reviews can become echo chambers. Commercial pressures may intrude and publishers will take editorial and reader feedback into account. Yet few critics take these factors into account, as is readily apparent in book, film and literature criticism. Attunement and empathy can be valuable additions to the 'critical' attitude.

Third, this combination of internal filters and external hazards should make the critic more reflective before they make inferences about authorial voice and worldviews. CFS critique however may disparage authors who don't hold the 'right' worldview or who fail to dissect a paradigmatic issue deeply enough. This internecine conflict stratifies the CFS domain into false divides between academic theorists and real-world practitioners who have dissimilar reference points. It leads to clashes and dominance hierarchies that arguably prevent Futures Studies from reaching a wider audience. Part of this tension is because the legitimization of a new school may require the delegitimation of an earlier

dominant tradition. A meta-framework like Integral Futures enables the reader to initiate an inter-subjective dialogue and to situate authors, texts and critics.

Given these clarifications, what does Slaughter's body of work reveal?

Key influences

One word that sums up Slaughter's body of work and lifeworld is Reconstruction. This begins with a 'de-centering' of the normative tradition in Futures Studies, which Slaughter identifies with pop forecasting, the 'marketing imperative', instrumental thinking and a positivist worldview. In its place Slaughter outlines the symbolic foundations of Critical Futures Studies, which replaces technocratic control with inter-subjective dialogue. CFS is aligned with the 'emancipatory interest' espoused by philosopher Jurgen Habermas and the progressive values of the post-World War II environmental and nuclear disarmament social movements. Finally, beyond the dystopia of 'normal accidents' and technological alienation Slaughter posits a reengagement with the natural world, the maturity of a 'wisdom culture' and the expansive capabilities of human potential and ethics.

The intellectual roots of Slaughter's work span critical sociology, cultural studies theory, hermeneutics, the politics of temporality, environmental ethics, consciousness studies, science and technology studies and critical pedagogy. These interdisciplinary fields have constellated into cultural ideas and themes in his writings that continue to evolve and mutate. *The Foresight Principle* (1995) and *Futures Beyond Dystopia* (2004) feature extensive and annotated bibliographies that provide much of the background, critical tradition and life-world context to understand Slaughter's perspective and values. The World Futures Studies Federation's (WFSF) internationalist outlook is also essential to understand Slaughter's ideals and norms. 2

Amongst the key texts that informed Slaughter's early CFS writings are Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* (1946), Jurgen Habermas' *Legitimation Crisis* (1973), Morris Berman's *The Re-enchantment of the World* (1981), Lewis Mumford's *The Pentagon of Power* (1970), EF Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* (1973), Jonathan Schell's *The Fate of the Earth* (1982), Ursula Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* (1985) and Ken Wilber's *No Boundary* (1979). These influences resonate with the period of geopolitical crisis in the mid-to-late 1970s during which nation-states endured oil shocks and energy crises. This de-legitimation of Western authority informed the various issues-based activist movements that had morphed from 1960s student protests, and the revitalisation of depth therapies and transpersonal psychology. These wider cultural battles provide some background context to understand Slaughter's broad critique about the crisis of meaning in Western modernity and the spectre of global 'overshoot and collapse'.

Cyclical patterns of Slaughter's body of work

Furthermore, as Jose M Ramos notes in his definitive biographical sketches of Slaughter and colleague Sohail Inayatullah, the insights from these fields have been crystallised by various life experiences and crises. 3 This is where the alchemical work of Futures

Studies becomes a vehicle for self individuation. 4 Four cyclical patterns become apparent to me:

- The first cycle begins with Slaughter's experience of Bermuda's tourist economy and the subsequent environmental devastation. The perception gap between the tourist paradise and the ecosystem's breakdown causes Slaughter to reflect during his postgraduate studies on the industrial worldview's assumptions and its fractured social imaging. This signifies the 'call to adventure' in Joseph Campbell and Christopher Vogler's storytelling of self-initiation into deep knowledge and cultural wisdom. Slaughter's PhD *Critical Futurism and Curriculum Renewal* (1982) signifies 'crossing the first threshold' in this first cycle, and was likely a tribulation of its own.
- The second cycle begins with a period of consolidation as CFS theory is expanded to knowledge domains and tools including the 'T-Cycle' are refined. *Recovering The Future* (1988) collects the best writings whilst *Futures Concepts and Powerful Ideas* (1991) and *Futures Tools and Techniques* (1993) show how he translates complex sociological theory into classroom use. A range of book reviews and conference reports critiques apocalyptic thinking, the crucial difference between futures of education and futures *in* education, and the importance of the solar economy and the sustainability ethic. Experiences at Monash and RMIT universities, and with the early Commission for the Future, capture the difficulties of creating a viable 'Institute of Foresight'.
- The third cycle begins with a series of articles and debates in the journal *Futures* that spotlight the importance of social imaging, futures concepts and the 'foresight principle'. It suggests Vogler's 'approach to the inner cave'. CFS gains an easily graspable focus with *The Foresight Principle* (1995) which mixes together strands of critical theory, environmental ethics and cultural transformation models. *The Knowledge Base of Studies* (1996) further legitimates CFS by highlighting its many contexts, histories and creative voices. The anthology *New Thinking for a New Millennium* (1996) showcases various CFS practitioners who have applied CFS in educational curricula and other institutional settings.
- The fourth cycle begins when Slaughter is invited to become the foundation professor for the Australian Foresight Institute at Swinburne University. This opportunity signifies the 'supreme ordeal' and provides the institutional infrastructure for a dramatic broadening and deepening of CFS. The two key books of this period, *Futures for the Third Millennium* (1999) and *Futures Beyond Dystopia* (2004), have a maturity and epistemological depth that rival the impact that Fred Polak, Robert Jungk, Eleonora Barbieri Masini and Elise Boulding had on the previous generational cohort of critical futurists. In his assessment of the Australian Foresight Institute's first five years Slaughter outlines the challenges and difficulties faced in creating a second generation 'Institute of Foresight'. 5 During this period Slaughter advocated Ken Wilber's philosophical meta-framework, particularly as summarised in *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* (1996) and *Integral Psychology* (2000), as an excellent foundation for emerging futures studies work.

These cycles are somewhat arbitrary and others will have their own interpretations. As an archetypal journey Slaughter's vision and work also has its cycles within cycles,

encounters with hazard and turning points. This is the field of microhistory, or temporal patterns of creativity and history that unfold over an individual's lifespan. My major point with these four cycles is that far more has occurred in the thirty-year period from 1975 to early 2005 in Slaughter's life than the Western model of Childhood-Education-Work-Retirement. 6

The major themes in Slaughter's work—notably the critical tradition, education, methodological renewal, internal development and the 'wisdom culture'—also ebb and flow, rise and fall throughout these cycles. Earlier ideas, tropes and images re-manifest at greater levels of complexity. Microhistorical patterns and archetypal psychology also have implications for the new generation of CFS practitioners. The existing studies have largely examined ideas and popular theorists who have influenced the past generational cohort. Until *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* (1996) was developed, the majority of such theorists were predominantly Western. Inayatullah expanded this with a fourth volume (2000) of autobiographical narratives that were truly global in scope. Ramos has also begun to apply microhistory in his profiles of Slaughter and Inayatullah, and in archival and historical work for the WFSF. This promises to be a useful sub-field for the new generational cohort. It may also provide an evolutionary step beyond the current reliance in some quarters on early gurus and bestsellers for legitimation.

Finally, a fictional story with autobiographical elements reveals the subjective dimensions of Slaughter's personal vision. The story 'Delicate Immortal Meanings' (1987) depicts the moment of awakening when its protagonist David realises the instrumental nature of life-sustaining technology and its over-extension at a civilisational level. 7 At the moment of his inner awakening David makes a

'commitment to the process of global healing, the formation of an inter-species multiversity, a new dialogue with artificial intelligences, a flowering of Third World Cultures, the decline of war-making impulses and the re-launching of an altogether different kind of space program. All of it lay within grasp. All lay like unfertilized seeds in the multiplex present. If the ruinous conceits of the past could be discarded new beginnings could be uncovered, negotiated, brought to fruition.' 8

There is perhaps no single better statement of the kind of Gaian Civilisation and High Culture that Slaughter would want the human species to collectively aspire to.

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Notes

1. Slaughter, Richard (1988). *Recovering the Future*. Graduate School of Environmental Science, Monash University, Clayton, p. 19.
2. Slaughter, Richard (2005). 'World Futures Studies Federation: Histories and Futures.' *Futures* 37, 5, Elsevier.
3. Ramos, Jose M. (2003). 'From Critique to Cultural Recovery: Critical Futures Studies and Causal Layered Analysis.' *AFI monograph series* vol. 2, Australian Foresight Institute, Hawthorn.
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5. Slaughter, Richard (2004b). 'Road Testing A New Model at The Australian Foresight Institute.' *Futures* (October), vol. 36, no. 8, Elsevier, pp. 837-853.
6. Galtung, Johan and Inayatullah, Sohail (1997). *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians*. Praeger Publishers, Westport CN, p. 222.
7. Slaughter, Richard (1988). *Recovering the Future*, *Ibid*, pp. 164-169.
8. Slaughter, Richard (1988). *Recovering the Future*, *Ibid*, pp. 168-169.

About the author

Alex Burns (alex@disinfo.com) is editor of the Disinformation® site, and a researcher with the Smart Internet Technology CRC. He was a contributing editor with *21C Magazine* (1996—1998). Burns completed an MSc in Strategic Foresight with the Australian Foresight Institute (2004) and began an MA in Counter-Terrorism Studies at Monash University (2005). His major research interests include counter terrorism, risk societies and global media vectors.

Description

Towards a Wise Culture: Four Classic Futures Texts, Richard A Slaughter, Foresight International, 2005, CD-ROM

The purpose of this CD-ROM is to make available four key futures texts, along with some of the supplementary materials that go with them. The four texts are:

- *Recovering the Future* (1988)
- *The Foresight Principle* (1995)
- *Futures for the Third Millennium* (1999) and
- *Futures Beyond Dystopia* (2004).

These four books track a personal and collective journey that took place over nearly two decades. *Recovering the Future* sets out some early themes: education, the futures field, cultural criticism and worldview issues. It might be called 'early critical' in its approach and tenor. The same would be true of *The Foresight Principle* which viewed some of these themes through a

prism of three elements: foresight, wisdom and cultural transformation. Next, *Futures for the Third Millennium* represents a shift to a 'late critical' approach since the themes of the book are both broader and deeper. Finally, *Futures Beyond Dystopia*, demonstrates the 'transcend and include' principle of Integral work generally and explores an 'early Integral' approach.