

# Futures Beyond Dystopia – Author Reflections

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Like *the Foresight Principle* before it, this work began as a paper for *Futures*.<sup>1</sup> It was published in 1998 and set out some of the key ideas that were later to take on greater resonance and meaning. The paper fell into three main sections. First, a critique of some futures methods and a couple of works of science fiction. Second, a brief overview of Siddhartha's insight (that 'meaning and reality are not somewhere behind things, they are in them, in all of them') and Wilber's four quadrant framework. Finally, a section linking Berman's notion of 're-enchantment' with that of 'worldview design.' It was a fairly straightforward piece that came in under 5 500 words.

I thought no more of it until a couple of people mentioned in passing how much they'd enjoyed the piece. It was this, I think, which sowed a seed that the topic might be worth returning to later. The chance came when, over a period of several years, I'd continued to write on a number of associated themes and found myself with several essays that were relevant to this territory. As I assembled the papers the outlines of a book began to appear. The problem was, however, that there were very many significant gaps. Clearly this was not going to be merely a collection of essays; it had to be something more.

A large part of the underlying drive to write FBD derives most centrally from what I call 'the great refusal.' What I mean by this is a deep sense, shared no doubt by many futurists and others, that current trends in the world do seem to lead to a terrible and diminished future for the human race. Instead of finding this merely depressing, my response is to do everything I possibly can in the here-and-now, with others, to moderate the slide toward disaster. The other motivation is my belief that FS is one of the few fields of enquiry and action that specifically concerns itself with understanding what might be called the 'foundations of the next civilisation.' This is heady stuff, indeed, and it balances what could otherwise be an unhealthy preoccupation with death and disaster on an unimaginable scale.

That said, there are three unifying themes in FBD. The first emerged from a growing conviction that what I call the 'American empirical tradition' had been in decline for some years. The second was a sense that what might be called 'the integral paradigm' could provide a way forward and even re-establish the discipline on a more secure basis. These two themes took on greater reality when, at the Australian Foresight Institute, I had the chance to design and teach a number of post-graduate course units leading to a Master's in Strategic Foresight. The utility of the approach emerged steadily. What stood out – so plainly it could not be ignored – was that critical futures

work and integral enquiry were indeed further steps in the evolution of futures studies (FS). Moreover, they were not merely theoretical but practical steps that led directly to a greatly enhanced capacity for advanced futures/foresight practice. This first became clear through essays and assignments, and then later in the nature of actual projects that people were carrying out in the field.

The third unifying theme is that of 'creating social foresight.' Clearly this is a development out of the suggestions put forward in *the Foresight Principle* some years earlier. Now, however, much had been clarified, the old conflicts between inner and outer, and between (for example) empiricism and hermeneutics, had been resolved. Suddenly (or so it seemed) we were looking at, indeed successfully using, a much expanded, broader and deeper framework. This meant that we could understand complex situations (in organisations, cultures, etc) and have more than an inkling about what was going on. It also meant that we could address the wider process of methodological and disciplinary renewal. The focus on social foresight grew out of these elements and took on a powerfully integrating role.

We were fortunate to win a grant from the Pratt Foundation in Melbourne that, over an extended period, allowed us to take a long and careful look at this subject. It meant that we could assign researchers to various topics, engage a professional editor and issue a series of monographs.<sup>2</sup> Through this process we were able to go back and look both at the grounding of foresight in everyday life as well as its extensions through various 'stages of capability' through which it can be built up to an 'installed social capacity.' Somewhere during this process one of the students 'Googled' the term 'social foresight' and suggested that I may, in fact, have been responsible for coining it! That could be correct but I have to say that I was unaware of it at the time. The term, and what it stands for, emerged steadily over a period of years and it was not until later that its inherent power became clear.

Upon receiving a contract for this book I set to work to fashion it into one. As the hard-pressed director of the AFI I had no time or energy during the week to devote to such a task. Thus I ended up returning to the office most Saturdays and putting in several hours of concentrated work there undisturbed. To bring the material from a scattered series of essays into shape as a coherent book took nearly a year. Then there was the usual business of chasing up references, reading through galley proofs, organising publicity and so on. Imagine my surprise, therefore, when on receiving a copy of the finished book I found that the words 'problematic' and 'problematique' had been confused such that in cases where I'd intended the former, the latter had been substituted! Such is the joy of authorship. No matter how hard one tries to cover all bases, it is not uncommon for such mistakes to occur.

The book was launched by Prof Ian Lowe, a close friend and valued colleague, at a local branch of Readings (a Melbourne bookstore) on March 3rd, 2004. The price, however, was a real setback. Unbeknownst to me the local distributor had decided on a cover price of over AUD\$70, or close to twice what it was later available for on Amazon. It was then that I began to look at alternative methods of publication. After a while the reviews began drifting in and, like any author, I was glad to see that most of them were positive. The standout contrast came in one from *Future Survey*, the World Future Society's broad-spectrum scanning newsletter. Back in 2001 I'd published a fairly sturdy critique

of the latter, building on comments by Wendell Bell and others.<sup>3</sup> The review summarised the content, highlighted comments from chapter five (of eighteen) that critiqued US theory and practice and ended with comments about how this 'righteous free-swinging critique from the ivory tower down under' was 'driven by high minded utopianism'. It added 'too bad that everyone, especially in the US, cannot be as bright and critical, with a superior toolbox of methods.'

All of which only goes to show that our 'ways of knowing' are indeed inextricably bound up not only with who we are but where and when we are as well. In an odd sort of way, the review only served to underscore one of the underlying themes of the whole integral perspective. That is, our immersion in particular 'shaping traditions' and the way that our own filters and developmental capacities condition what we perceive and think and do. Possibly the central insight behind the book is that 'it is depth within the practitioner that determines how well any particular approach or methodology will be used.' The converse is obviously true as well.

In the end, therefore, the book tells the story that I intended. It gives due credit to the early American pioneers who made a certain amount of progress for a couple of decades and without whom the field may never have taken off. Critical futures approaches then developed, raised questions and brought into play social phenomena that had earlier been overlooked. Yet, as is the way with such things, this approach also overlooked something else (or, more precisely, intuited it but did not develop it): interior human development. With the rise of integral methods and, in particular the 'integral operating system' this oversight was corrected. By 2004 the beginnings of a new tradition, or era, of futures work had been established. It is one characterised by breadth, depth, balance, and, indeed, respect for what others have done or attempted to do. The mantra that 'everyone is right' is what helps to distinguish this approach from earlier ones. We can now see very clearly the mutual necessity of different modes of enquiry operating in their different, relevant, domains.

The fact that 'not all truths are equal' also remains to haunt us. Hence Wilber's admonitions regarding what he calls the 'calculus of uncomfot.' So long as some forge ahead while others cling tenaciously to the currently known, there will always be stresses and strains to confront and resolve. I am certainly committed to both.

*Futures Beyond Dystopia* is therefore an invitation to all practicing futurists, and intending practitioners, to participate in the further development of this fascinating discipline or domain of enquiry. There is still a long way to go – partly because we have only begun to explore the possibilities of integrally informed approaches, and also because the field itself has yet to gain wider, mainstream acceptance and application.

Meanwhile the world we live in slides steadily toward the very futures we are working to avoid.

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April 2005.

## Notes and references

1. R. Slaughter, Futures Beyond Dystopia, *Futures* 30, 10, 1998 993-1002.
2. AFI Monograph series. Accessible via:  
<https://foresightinternational.com.au/archive/afi-foresight-monographs/>
3. R. Slaughter, The flight of American superego, *Futures* 33, 2001, 891-896. One of the very few disagreements I had with the editor of *Futures* took place as a result of this title. I'd submitted a review with a conventional title. The editor, in his wisdom, decided to 'up the ante' and replace it with a much more provocative one – which he then refused to change. I subsequently wore the fall-out, which continued for some time.