

The Foresight Principle

Cultural Recovery in the 21st Century

Preface

The 1990s are significant for two key reasons. The first is that something old is coming apart at the seams, while something new is attempting to be born. The 'something old' is the industrial system which has reigned supreme on this planet for over two hundred years, changed it almost beyond recognition and brought it to the edge of catastrophe (so far as humans are concerned). The 'something new' is a renewed culture and worldview that is struggling to emerge from the ruins of the old. The latter does not yet have a name. It is certainly not 'post-industrial', nor 'the information age' and still less 'the age of leisure'.

How can we know that something new is, in fact, being born? Well, we cannot know for certain. There are no future facts. But the evidence is there for anyone to consider. What has most forcefully impressed me during almost twenty years' work in futures is a developing 'congruence of insight'. It is an insight about what has gone wrong, what implications this has for the present and what the outlines of a viable future may look like. The insight emerges from so many sources: the words of native peoples all over the world, the fears of young people, the views of social critics and the mature reflections of futurists and others.

I do not believe that the future can be predicted. There are no 'iron laws' that govern the process of human and cultural development. There are rules of thumb, fruitful directions, a host of urgent practical measures - but no blueprint. We cannot engineer the human future so much as reclaim it from the abstracted imperatives of power, profit and planetary degradation that have dominated the twentieth century, and then re-direct it in a different mode and a different direction.

The central claim of this book is that, while the future is, in a strictly rational, logical sense, unknowable, that does not leave us helpless. Far from it. Unlike the physical body, the human brain/mind system is not locked into a narrow 'creature present'. It is so beautifully constructed that we are able to roam at will through times past, present and future. What we cannot see directly or deduce, we can model, construct or imagine. The view ahead is certainly not clear in all respects, but neither is it as dark or problematic as many imagine. Once we leave aside the absurd conceit of predicting social futures, we open to a broad array of approaches, techniques, methods and practical arrangements which together provide us with a broad-brush overview of our context in time: past, present and near-term future.

This brings me to my second reason for believing the 1990s to be significant. There is, of course, a tendency to believe that one always lives 'at the hinge of history' because that

is where one is, and hence what one sees with greatest clarity. But viewpoint is deceptive. We always exaggerate the 'mental map' of our time and place. Yet the significance of the 90s is not just a matter of individual biographies or perceptions. Something else has been going on during this time which is a consequence not so much of individual behaviour as of collective impact.

In Victoria, Australia, there is still a small, brilliant bird - the helmeted honeyeater. It used to be common in scrubland and forest in this region. Now there are merely a few dozen individuals left. Twenty years ago I lived in Bermuda and there saw the same story - twenty-odd pairs of Pterodroma Cahow, the Bermuda Petrel, living where once there had been millions. Despite all the many news reports, tv documentaries and activities of countless conservation and wildlife groups, I don't believe that people really understand just how far the human race has gone in unravelling the threads of life on this planet.

It's my belief that 'the man or woman in the street' cares about their family, their standard of living, their job and the kind of car they drive, or would like to drive. But, on the whole, they tend not to care about distant abstractions such as tropical forests, spreading deserts, vanishing species or even - though it promises to affect them directly - the thinning ozone layer. Somehow during our long evolution we adopted the habit of focusing on 'me and my group', 'here' and 'now'.

It is this habitual mode of perception, more than any external threat, that is driving our species to the edge.

The second reason why the 90s are critical is not that we happen to be here at this time. It is due to the fact that by now we have more than ample evidence that the collective impacts and wider implications of industrialised cultures are far more hazardous than is commonly believed. In short, we are confronted with a terrifying choice: either find a different set of principles and practices upon which to erect a notion of 'the good life' or watch the whole thing decay into the biggest mess this world has ever seen.

A bit strong? I don't believe so. A more sanguine view is that 'necessity is the mother of invention', that, in other words, human ingenuity expressed through technical virtuosity will save the day. Yet such a view has, by now, been decisively undermined. We now know with certainty, that technical fixes are limited in their ability to solve systemic problems. We have such a problem: there are too many people living in ways that are too destructive of the global commons. Hence, the global system - the air, the water, the soils, the forests, animals and birds - is sending us the message outlined above.

How should we respond? Well, outright denial is pretty effective, and we've had a lot of practice at it. If we choose this path whole industries will help us to block out reality. A cocky self-confidence is another. There's good reason for it - look at what we have collectively achieved; it's not all bad by a long chalk. Or we can pin our hopes on science and technology. They can always find a better way, right? Wrong. They can help. But they only address a part of reality. They are silent on questions of value, purpose and meaning.

In whatever ways the human race chooses to deal with this difficult time (and I am in no doubt that there are plenty of possibilities) the answer will, I feel, be bound to involve foresight. That is why I have written this book. That is also why I have explicitly linked it with the theme of 'cultural recovery in the 21st Century'. So perhaps I should here try to clarify what I mean by foresight, and why I believe it to be so crucial for our future.

The key thing is this. For a very long time our species has learned painfully through experience. It has dragged itself out of the primeval darkness and constructed an impressive sequence of civilisations. From our present vantage point at the edge of the most powerful civilisation ever, we can look back and see what experience has taught us: how to domesticate cattle, plant crops, make tools, use fire, construct buildings, write and so on. All on the basis of accumulated experience. It has worked so well that we find it hard to realise that we have passed beyond the time when experience serves us well. For that same body of accumulated experience is now sending us spurious messages. It is saying: 'cut that forest', or 'build that power plant' or 'drain that marsh'. But experience is not telling us much about the consequences. Part of the issue is that the age we live in, while sharing much with the past, is genuinely and structurally different.

The Achilles heel of experience, for us, is that it is not strong enough to make us institute system-wide adaptive change. If we were limited to experience, we would have to experience catastrophe before we could prevent it. Clearly this is an absurdity.

Introduction

Foresight is not the ability to predict the future. It is a human attribute that allows us to weigh up pros and cons, to evaluate different courses of action and to invest possible futures on every level with enough reality and meaning to use them as decision-making aids. As will be seen below, humans use foresight every day of their lives. They build and buy houses, they have children, save for their old age and take holidays. All involve foresight. The simplest possible definition of the term is that it is opening to the future with every means at our disposal, developing views of future options, and then choosing carefully between them.

In the early 1990s the whole human species faces a number of choices that will determine not only the character of its future, but even if there will be one. For as the products of instrumental reason have proceeded from the labs to the factories, and from the factories to our living rooms, and as the confidence accompanying this process has caused us to think that we are secure and unthreatened, so, at a deeper level, the collective unconscious knows differently. It knows that now, more than ever, everything is at stake. As the technologies of distraction have become more insidious and compelling, so our proud and powerful culture has steadily moved toward the abyss.

In this sense foresight can be painful. We need to be able to confront the consequences of our collective blindness and not only acknowledge the abyss but look directly into it. Only in so doing will we understand the need for foresight at the social level. In our dangerous post-modern world, where certainty is so difficult to find, we need to consider those dystopian futures where the human experiment fails. Such insights are needed to prompt us into action. Fortunately, they are available. While foresight can

indeed cost money, we don't need to invest vast sums in researching the dynamics of late industrial cultures. Enough knowledge about the ways they may overshoot certain important limits via unregarded exponential growth has been garnered over recent years to provide a very clear picture about where we are and what this means.

Foresight can clearly act as a kind of early warning system saying, in effect, 'this is where we do not want to go'. That is a useful message. What map would be useful without marking clearly areas of difficulty or danger? But there are other, and more creative, uses of foresight. One of them is to begin the process of deciding just exactly what it is we really want, and then putting in place the means to achieve it.

This book is not just about warnings from the future. Threats. Things we must do...or else! It is also about the ways we can define essential aspects of futures worth living in - and then move toward them. Part Three is therefore devoted to the theme of cultural recovery in the 21st Century. Most people would probably be very surprised at the amount of 'leverage', 'steering capacity', autonomy and decision-making power that still resides fully in our hands. But times change, the wheel is turning and we would do well not to assume that time is on our side.

The 1990s then, are a time of crisis and of opportunity. This has nothing whatever to do with the approach of the year 2,000 and the new millennium, important as this is in other, more symbolic, ways. The same crisis and opportunity would be upon us if we called it the year 200 or the year 6,000. However, one thing is certain. We will not get to the year 6,000, or even 3,000 if we cannot re-think, re-image and re-value our place on this small planet in the coming decades.

Foresight, then, stands at the juncture between terror and promise. It permits us to move beyond the conditions and constraints of who we are, where we are and what we may, or may not, have inherited from the past. It says to us something like the following:

Here, look, this is what the stakes appear to be.

What are you going to do about it?

Richard A Slaughter, Melbourne, December 1992

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