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Towards a Critical Futurism

Part Two: Revising and Refining a Futurist Perspective

by Richard A. Slaughter

Continuing his assessment of the futures field today, begun in the July/August issue of the *Bulletin*, Richard Slaughter questions whether accepted notions of science provide appropriate models for futurism, examines some underlying ideological issues, and discusses ways in which futurists may re-interpret their own roles.

There can be no doubt about the importance of the questions posed, and the understandings sought, within the futures field.

Some such attempt to achieve a syncretic and prospective overview has now become a necessity. Hence, neither the scale and complexity of the issues involved nor weaknesses in theory and approach should obscure the fact that futures research, in its widest possible sense, represents a search for adaptive responses to uncertainty, rapid change, and quite new dimensions of hazard. However, any attempt to increase the critical power of futurism must proceed from an understanding of present weaknesses. We therefore draw here upon insights from the sociology of science and critical/hermeneutic disciplines to understand more clearly why much futurist work appears ineffective and to distinguish the outlines of a more firmly grounded approach. Three major themes, or areas, are involved:

1. a re-assessment of the "standard view" of science;
2. an analysis of ideological commitments and constitutive interests;
3. critical/hermeneutic refinements in futurists' self-understanding.

These are by no means exhaustive, but they cover sufficient ground to permit a view of critical futurism in part three.

Reassessing the "Standard View" of Science

It is entirely proper that those involved in the development of a new field should seek recognition and support. But when this takes the form of hopes for a "general science of the future" or claims to "scientific" status, futurists should exercise caution. Implicit within such claims is a desire to draw on the

prestige and authority which have become associated with the empirical or natural sciences. However, this misconstrues the uncertain, and open-ended, nature of futures problems and may perpetuate assumptions about the nature of scientific knowledge that are now in doubt.

The futurist appeal to science appears to be grounded in what Mulkay terms "the standard view." In this perspective:

the natural world is to be regarded as real and objective. Science is concerned with providing an accurate account of the objects, processes and relationships occurring in the world of natural phenomena. It reveals and encapsulates in its systematic statements the true character of this world. . . . Basic empirical regularities can be expressed as universal and permanent laws of nature. [and] unbiased, detached observation furnishes the evidence on which these laws are built.¹

Thus, science has been regarded as somehow being independent of individual subjective factors and of social and cultural influences. In this view it "stands above" everyday social processes and embodies a claim to objective, value-free knowledge. Hence, its authority is, in part, supported by notions of *predictability, certainty, and control*. But the optimism inherent in such a view has never been wholly persuasive. In a very broad sense, feelings of pessimism, threat and *loss* of control have helped stimulate a reassessment of this accepted model and the premises upon which it is based.

Mulkay identifies four central assumptions common to the standard view of science. The first of these is the assumption of the uniformity of nature, from which it has been claimed that universal laws may be derived. But Popper and others have noted that such a principle cannot be verified empirically or in theory. Strictly speaking, observed regularities

are not generalizable. The principle is thus "not an aspect of the natural world, but rather an aspect of scientists' methods for constructing their accounts of that world."²

A second assumption is that facts and theories are separate, and the former are theoretically neutral. This, Mulkey suggests, led to the view that facts can be "expressed in a language which is independent of theory and formulated in a way which simply represents the observable realities of the physical world."³ But the distinctions between factual and speculative propositions (concerning, for example, phenomena not amenable to direct observation) could no more be sustained than the claim to objectivity that this view propounds. It is clear that observations and

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theories gain meaning only in relation to other theories and assumptions. Hence, Mulkey concludes that "it is simply impossible to identify a separate class of factual statements constituting the bedrock on which scientific knowledge is built." Indeed, "if all terms obtain their meaning through their location in a framework of concepts and propositions, then it seems that no statement of fact is theoretically neutral. . . (Hence) all empirical statements are 'theory laden.'"⁴ Even technical terms "acquire their scientific meaning from the linguistic, theoretical (and perhaps social) context in which they are embedded."⁵ Clearly, in this revised view, scientific activity of any kind is intimately bound up with wider cultural meanings and assumptions which are part of the common heritage. It follows that, if empirical science cannot "stand above" social and cultural processes, then it is extremely doubtful if futurism, with its many inherent uncertainties, can hope or claim to do so.

A third assumption arises from the fact that "observation in science has been seen as a plain recording of the unembroidered evidence of the senses and as being quite separate from the creation of meanings."⁶ However, this has failed to withstand a series of discoveries which show that perception is an *active* process in which the observer utilizes cultural resources (such as language and history) to *construct* images of the world. "Scientific observation," concludes the writer, "is fundamentally dependent upon language."⁷ He adds, "scientists necessarily take for granted a wide range of background assumptions [which] are normally used as unproblematic resources for organizing observation and for giving it scientific meaning."⁸

The final assumption relates to the assessment of knowledge claims within science. Mulkey shows how scientists use a variety of criteria, including "agreement with the evidence, simplicity, accuracy, scope, fruitfulness and elegance," which relate to

"quite different dimensions." They are, in a word, incommensurable, and appear to "vary in meaning in accordance with the context in which they are used." The writer concludes that such criteria therefore "cannot be regarded . . . as providing a means of assessing knowledge claims which is independent of specific analytical commitments."⁹ Significantly, from the viewpoint of this inquiry, he adds,

we are never in a position where we can measure an isolated and simple theoretical statement against an unmediated natural world. Scientific knowledge necessarily offers an account of the physical world which is mediated through available cultural resources, and these resources are in no way definitive.¹⁰

This summary has necessarily been brief, but it does have important implications for the futures field. In the first place, it is evident that empirical science does not constitute an appropriate model for futurism. Even at the "hard" pole of futures research, the revised view suggests that the search for universal laws (permitting any form of prediction), for objectivity, neutrality, and the disinterested pursuit of truth are extremely problematic. Observed regularities are never conclusive in nature, and this is even more the case with social phenomena. The interpretation of meaning relies upon, and is mediated by, extra-disciplinary sources: language, culture, and tradition. Furthermore, dichotomies between facts and values (or facts and theories) cannot be sustained, partly because what *counts* as a fact requires prior judgments and validations from sources in the wider culture. It follows that, in this view, the pursuit of objectivity or neutrality gives way to a recognition of "situatedness," an understanding that no investigative or advocacy activity can be impartial or unmediated.

Second, we have seen that the epistemological foundations of science are less sure than has commonly been supposed. Indeed, aspects of physics are notable for recognizing uncertainty as a central principle. Thus, futurists lose little in *not* claiming to be scientific. Quite the opposite. The futures field tends to embody rather different intentions. With the exception of some of its more professionalized manifestations, it does not generally evince a concern for the disinterested pursuit of truth or of knowledge for its own sake. Rather, it is committed to openly normative projects such as those involved in the development of human potentials, global cooperation, and the construction of desirable and sustainable futures, which are founded more directly on ethical and ideological preferences.

To summarize: it is evident that neither scientists nor futurists can substantiate claims to "stand apart" from sociocultural processes. All science, all futurism is committed. It is articulated by and through various presuppositions, ideological commitments, and interests that demand a high level of reflexivity. Consequently, a fundamental task for futurists is to avoid emulating science in the pursuit of a spurious objectivity and to work to deepen their own self-understanding.

Table 1
Summary/Outline of Habermas's Theory of Cognitive Interests

INTEREST	LIFE DIMENSION	FORM OF KNOWLEDGE	KNOWLEDGE CRITERIA	TYPE OF PROBLEM
TECHNICAL	'Work'	Empirical/ Analytical	Economy, Efficiency, Effectiveness	Technical/ Instrumental
PRACTICAL	Interaction	Interpretive	Achievement of Communication and Understanding	Interpretive Understanding and Practical Choices
EMANCIPATORY	Power	Critical	Achievement of Emancipation and Liberation	Normative: Critique of Domination, Repression, Mystification, Institutions and Distorted Communication

Source: Habermas, J. *Towards a Rational Society*, Heinemann, London 1971.

Analyzing Ideologies and Interests

The futures literature contains evidence of a wide range of ideologies and commitments. Where these remain implicit, submerged, there is reason to believe that they contribute to mystifying the public, confusing purposes within the field and inhibiting progress toward greater effectiveness. We therefore need to consider the kind of constitutive interests embodied in futurist activities. This makes it possible to propose an entirely positive view of futurist ideology. Progress toward critical self-awareness at this level can be regarded as a central concern of the perspective being developed here.

There are three overlapping areas of concern. They are, first, the implications of a close relationship between futures-related activities and the existing centers of social and economic power; and second, the nature of the fundamental interests articulated by, and within, the field. Finally, there is the question of how the futures field might develop a mode of discourse capable of exposing the penetration of instrumental modes of rationality into culture and everyday life. These issues are clearly complex and cannot be fully explicated here. However, we may try to show why they are important for the further evolution of the field and its wider application in other areas.

We noted in part one that many of the major institutional centers of futures activity have tended to maintain close links with the centers of social and economic power. Futures research, forecasting, and education appear to be dependent upon government or corporate support and hence constrained to varying degrees by given definitions, imperatives, and economic structures. Yet, in principle the futures

field is held to be open to alternatives at every level. There is thus a powerful tension between some of the central concerns of futurists and their ability to articulate these in "the language of social action." Far from imagining a universe of alternatives, futurism in general—and forecasting in particular—has, in the past, appeared to play a significant part in the support of the status quo. The overall diversity of the field suggests that this view should not be uncritically generalized. Radical and pluralist perspectives are emerging, though their impact remains uncertain. However, what appears to be lacking is any coherent attempt to work through, and resolve, the contradictions that have arisen between the emancipatory *intent* of futurism and the largely taken-for-granted social and economic structures which support it. If truly critical styles of research are to be developed, futurists need to be alert to the possibility that aspects of their work may stand in opposition to their ideals and subvert emancipatory potentials rather than strengthening them. A more reflexive approach requires a deeper understanding of underlying constitutive interests and the ways these are promulgated. We therefore turn to the work of Jurgen Habermas.

Habermas's account of "knowledge and human interests" derives from his attempt to develop a "philosophical anthropology." He relates major features of human existence to three cognitive interests which are held to be constitutive of knowledge. The three are the technical interest, the practical interest, and the emancipatory interest, which are summarized in Table 1. Here, technical knowledge corresponds to "work" and the empirical/analytic sciences, which are concerned with production and

control (i.e., the application of technical rules to instrumental problems). The technical interest is, in most senses, the "lowest" of the three, but Habermas does not denigrate it. Rather, his primary object of attack is the view that it is the *only* type of truly legitimate knowledge and hence the standard by which all knowledge is to be measured. In other words, it is the predominance and overextension of technical interests into other areas of culture and life that constitute the major difficulty, not merely their existence.

"Far from imagining a universe of alternatives, futurism in general—and forecasting in particular—has appeared to play a significant part in the support of the status quo."

The practical interest relates to human interaction. This is not a matter of technical rules, but of communication and understanding, which, as we have noted, are grounded in language and culture. Thus, all disciplines and communication involve symbolic interactions which draw upon "a set of categories. . . which are richer and more inclusive than those explicitly countenanced by the technical cognitive interests."¹¹

In Habermas's view, the disciplines that focus upon practical interests are the historical/hermeneutic disciplines. These, he suggests,

gain knowledge in a different methodological framework. Here the meaning of validity of propositions is not constituted in the frame of reference of technical control for theories are not constructed deductively and experience is not organized with regard to the success of operations. Access to the facts is provided by *the understanding of meaning*, not observation. The verification of lawlike hypotheses in empirical/analytic sciences has its counterpart here in the interpretation of texts.¹²

Hence, the practical interest is not concerned with manipulation and control (though both are necessary for human survival), but with attempts to clarify the conditions for intersubjectivity and communication. These are seen as interpretive texts requiring hermeneutic skills. While the latter were initially developed to explicate biblical texts, they can now be applied to any communicative process.¹³

The third cognitive interest identified by Habermas is the emancipatory interest. This relates to questions of power and the universal drive for freedom of action. This is important because, paradoxically, it is here that American futurism is arguably at its weakest. Yet it is here in the critique of domination, repression, mystification, institutional inertia, and "systematically distorted communication" that truly *critical* forms of inquiry are engaged. Thus, the particular value of relating this most fundamental human interest to futurism is that it is in relation to just these issues that the field as a whole appears to have failed to live up to its ideals. While

this analysis gives rise to the range of further questions, it is suggestive as it stands for present purposes, taking us well beyond ideologically naive critiques of futurism. It provides a more incisive vocabulary and helps establish the need and indeed the means, of a more analytic and reflexive mode of discourse.

It has been suggested that American approaches unintentionally obscure the emancipatory interest by drawing on a predominantly empirical/analytic social science background and by addressing lower order concepts such as "subjectivity" and "elitism." In his own rather convoluted style, Habermas shows why this is inadequate. He writes,

the systematic sciences of social action, that is economics, sociology and political science, have the goal, as do the empirical/analytic sciences, of producing nomological knowledge (i.e., seeking laws). A critical social science will not remain satisfied with this. It is concerned with going beyond this goal to determine when theoretical statements express ideologically frozen relations of dependence *that can in principle be transformed*. To the extent that this is the case, the critique of ideology sets off a process of reflection in the consciousness of those whom the laws are about [my emphasis].¹⁴

In this view a critical social science is distinguished from other approaches. The former is not concerned to establish "laws" that attempt to control, explain or predict behavior. Rather, the intention is to bring individuals to reflect critically upon the more-or-less arbitrary conditions around them and the skewed power relations underlying them, in order to be able to change them. This is not an invitation to revolution, but part of Habermas's attempt to articulate a critical social science oriented to human emancipation. It is striking how these concerns parallel those of many futurists. However, a major difference is that while futurists tend to utilize theory in an unreflective, implicit manner, Habermas is working at an explicitly metatheoretical level. Hence, this perspective has wide applicability, but it is suggestive rather than definitive. Nevertheless, we can draw several valuable conclusions.

In the first place, the theory of cognitive interests suggests that the futures field—at least in many of its institutional manifestations—may have been unduly dominated by technical interests. That is, by notions of prediction, forecasting, and control which have diffused outward from their earlier, more limited, technical/instrumental contexts, such as war gaming and economic forecasting, to contexts where their pre-eminence may be inappropriate.

Second, we now have better reason to suggest that futurists may have paid insufficient attention to the practical interest in communication and understanding. Habermas's work helps establish a rationale for improving the quality of communication and a critique of some of the impediments to this. As with the revised view of science, it suggests that futurists could improve their communicative competence by recognizing its foundation in a mutually shared intersubjectivity. The brow-beating intensity of some futurist writing, the spurious objectivity in-

herent in warnings and threats, the dissemination of pre-defined "megatrends" or "blueprints of the future" draw on unacceptable models of communication, knowledge, and human personality and are therefore unacceptable. In a truly critical approach these would tend to give way to dialogue, negotiation, greater self-understanding, and a sustained effort to develop genuinely open communities of inquirers drawing on shared cultural resources and oriented toward the common good.

Third, Habermas's approach is suggestive for the evolution of improved theorizing in the futures field. That is to say, when futurists attempt to deal with social and political problems (or the social and political dimensions of problems), some attempt can be made to distinguish between empirical, interpretive, and critical issues. In the present view, it is important to reconcile, and balance, existing concerns with broadly technical and (to a lesser extent) practical questions, with the explicit pursuit of emancipatory interests.

Other Critical/Hermeneutic Refinements

Hermeneutics has been described as "the science of interpretation." Its task is to "make visible the meaning structures embedded in the lifeworlds which belong to the human expressions under study."¹⁵ It is not concerned, as are the empirical/analytic sciences, to measure, quantify, and control. As Van Manen notes, "from the perspective of hermeneutics there are no such things as stimuli, responses or measurable behaviors; instead there are encounters, lifeworlds and meanings which invite investigation."¹⁶ The central focus concerns "the bridging of personal or historical distance between minds."¹⁷

From such a viewpoint a man or woman is regarded as a "self-interpreting animal." In part this is because "there is no such thing as the structure of meanings . . . independent of his [or her] interpretation of them; for one is woven into the other."¹⁸ Peters stresses that "there is no pure starting point for understanding because every act of understanding takes place within a finite historically conditioned horizon, within an already understood frame of reference."¹⁹ Hence, context-free and value-free knowledge appears impossible. The meanings of all utterances depend upon the language system and context and, hence, upon shared presuppositions which actively shape our knowledge and understanding of the world. It is of enormous significance for the futurist that these fundamental presuppositions are not to be regarded merely as negative biases or prejudices (though they may take that form). Rather, they function "to provide the basic framework or pre-understanding which makes reflective understanding and articulated propositions possible."²⁰ As Peters notes,

the problem is not to discard pre-judgements in order to arrive at an absolutely objective starting point, but rather to determine what distinguishes legitimate prejudices from [those] which obstruct understanding.²¹

This perspective has profound implications for the futurist. It suggests that instead of working from the premise that the observer can somehow neutralize his subjectivity and "stand apart" from what is being studied, he might rather *embrace* his own historicity and work from a reflexive appreciation of it; in other words to consciously regard this as a resource to enrich the quality of understanding.

"The theory of cognitive interests suggests that the futures field . . . may have been unduly dominated by technical interests . . . by notions of prediction, forecasting, and control."

Clearly this is not a particularly easy task, nor does it produce "final" answers. It is to first become aware of the way experience is structured by inherited meanings; second, to understand something of the way these are shaped by language; and last, to take account of the observer's own explanations and interpretations. It is a continuing task and one that seems to correspond to the highest meaning of ideology, i.e., as a practical philosophy which incorporates the observer's own self-understandings.

Pursuit of this socially grounded and historically conscious understanding is vitally necessary within a futurist perspective. Without it we must doubt if emancipatory potentials can be effectively pursued or the field escape a tendency toward instrumental ends. It is possible that some may find the foregoing provocative or abstract. But, given the futurist propensity for "building the future," for "objectivity," and for adopting a stance somehow "above" social processes, it is crucial to the entire futurist enterprise to appreciate that there is simply no neutral standpoint outside history upon which the futurist can stand. Thus, to say anything of substance about the future requires not merely a deep appreciation of history, but also of the inescapability of historicity.

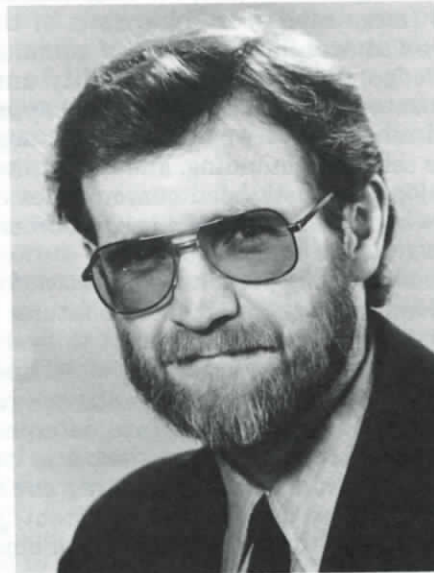
There is one further reason why hermeneutic insights are of particular relevance: within this tradition, "communication is not limited to contemporaries, but includes communication of the living with past generations through the transmission and mediation of traditions." Furthermore, we "philosophize out of a concrete situation by mediating, out of an engagement and out of a projective anticipation of the future, the heritage of tradition." The writer continues,

without such an anticipation of the consequences of present developments we cannot even describe these significantly. Without risk-taking there is no illuminating interpretation of the present situation. This interpretation is necessary precisely because we never stand at the end of history.²²

These observations are invaluable. They support the view that the meaning of the present can only be understood in relation to both past and future. These can now be viewed as part of the same "text"

or "dialogue" between generations and traditions. Both represent 'alien forms of life' which need to be interpreted, or mediated, unto the present. Or, to change the metaphor, the fabric of history is woven from interpretation *and* anticipation. It refers us back continuously both to what has been and forward to what might be. There is no past in the sense of a completed totality, split off from the present. Equally, there is no future that stands alone, unaffected by what has gone before. Both are constitutive of the present in a process of unending mediation and change. It follows that to the extent such mediation becomes increasingly conscious, and motivated by the highest (emancipatory) interests, then we may indeed aspire to an ethic of improvement and human fulfillment. Equally, by adhering uncritically to understandings, ideologies, and commitments of earlier periods and therefore failing to engage in this process, we may miss the chance to counteract the forces that lead to dystopia.

Thus, hermeneutic refinements highlight ways to revise common futurist understandings. At the same time they throw new light upon the latter and help to confirm the basic validity of futurist concerns. The future is indeed important: "historical consciousness, the self-awareness in which the person becomes aware of himself as an individual development in time and of his participation in a collective history, is oriented toward the future. *It implies a primacy of the future over the past*" [my emphasis].²³ However, in this view, neither language, belief, nor viewpoint is neutral. Each shapes, and is shaped and conditioned by, the structure of inherited meanings. Communication is facilitated not by a denial of historicity, but by a conscious and reflexive appreciation of it. Since a fundamental equivalence is assumed between participants, metaphors for commu-



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nication are not based on notions of transmission, certainty, and control, but on interaction and negotiation of meanings in which final answers are neither expected nor sought.

By seeing the mediation of tradition as constitutive of the present, and drawing both on past and future, hermeneutics articulates the central project of futurism and reveals itself as a necessary adjunct to this.

NOTES

1. Mulkay, M. *Science and the Sociology of Knowledge*, Allen & Unwin, 1979, pp. 19-20.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-29.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 54 and 60.
11. Bernstein, R. *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*, Methuen, 1976, p. 196.
12. Habermas, J. *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Heineemann, 1972, p. 309.
13. See Van Manen, M. "Linking Ways of Knowing with Ways of Being Practical," *Curriculum Enquiry* 6, 3, 1977, pp. 205-228.

14. Habermas, 1972, p. 310.
15. Van Manen, 1977, p. 213.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
17. Reynolds, J. *The Idea of Hermeneutics*, Research paper, University of Lancaster, 1980.
18. Taylor, C. Hermeneutics and Politics, In Connerton, P. (ed.). *Critical Sociology*, Penguin, 1976, pp. 153-193.
19. Peters, T. "The Nature and Role of Presuppositions: An Enquiry into Contemporary Hermeneutics," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 14, 1, 1974, p. 214.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 220.
22. Radnitsky, G., *Contemporary Schools of Metascience*, Göteborg, Sweden; Akademiforlaget, 1972, p. 122.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

Readers who wish to comment on issues raised in these essays, or to discuss the formation of a "critical futurist community of enquirers," are warmly invited to communicate their thoughts to the author.