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# Towards a Critical Futurism

## Part Three: An Outline of Critical Futurism

by Richard A. Slaughter

Having examined the importance of cultural biases and the inherent nature of the processes of value selection and goal setting, Richard Slaughter concludes his consideration of the futures field today by outlining a 'central project' for future studies, and relating this to the work of individual futurists.

In the first two papers we have attempted to develop a particular conception of futurism. This has been termed "critical" in part to declare its relationship to critical theory, and also to suggest a similar ideal of self-reflection and self-analysis. Recourse to aspects of the sociology of science, critical theory, hermeneutics, and, in this paper, to speculative literature provides us with the means to revise and reformulate some of the major existing concerns of the futures field. We may now summarize some of the major implications of this approach. These imply a "central project," which is briefly explored through the work of representative futurists.

Figure 1 outlines our route to a critical futurism and some of its consequences. In this perspective (following Habermas), a presumption is made in favor of the emancipatory interest and hence the primacy of socio/political questions over technical/instrumental ones. Thus, the active pursuit of human autonomy becomes a major concern. It involves a critique of forms of domination and repression and a preoccupation with the growth of human potential and the evolution of consciousness. A critical perspective also encourages reflexivity. It suggests that the researcher be alert to the ideological content of futures problems and the influence of dominant social interests. Furthermore, our grounding in, and debt to, the traditions and speech communities of a particular cultural milieu can be recognized and acknowledged. It is from such sources that the futurist derives the very understandings which allow us to "confront the future." Recognition and acceptance of historicity renders claims to objectivity and value-free knowledge insupportable. Hence, strategies of intervention and communication can be in-

formed by a recognition of the need for dialogue, negotiation, and mutual understanding. Progress is seen to reside in the process of joining with others to reconceptualize human dilemmas, to assist others in articulating their needs, goals, and understandings, and in the development of critical, self-aware communities of inquirers.

Outside narrow approaches to such things as forecasting and systems analysis, the methods, language, and intentions of empirical/analytic science have limited applicability in the futures field. Critical and hermeneutic approaches appear to be much more congruent with its expressed concerns yet tend to be under-utilized. For example, expressions of concern for "stakeholders" (i.e., those affected by prospective developments) may actually amount to little without hermeneutic competencies and a truly critical purchase on the otherwise occluded questions of vested interest, ideology and unequal power relationships. Similarly, notions of "choice" and "control" become problematic when technologies, the products of "intensive rationality," impact upon pre-existing traditions and cultures.

In much of the futures literature, technologies appear to be seen as essentially *neutral tools* that require enlightened decision-making. But, as we suggested in part two, science cannot be considered neutral: it embodies numerous value commitments and cannot be separated from wider frameworks of understanding and evaluation. So, contrary to the prevailing view, it is entirely consistent to suppose that the products of science are not neutral either. Indeed, there is reason to believe that the more advanced a technology is, in general terms, the more it comes to resemble a "tool without a handle." Lang-

don Winner has developed this argument and suggests that "far from being neutral [technologies] . . . provide a positive content to the area of life in which they are applied, enhancing some ends, denying or even destroying others. . . ." Thus, "mega-technical systems" can appear to override human intentions. We cannot do justice to Winner's full argument here. But his conclusion is basically that our technological "means" have become semi-autonomous "ends" in their own rights—ends that require a "reverse adaptation" (Galbraith's term) of society to their particular needs, and the suppression of human purposes.

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**"The best speculative fiction achieves a controlled balance between reason and intuition, thereby permitting us to explore futures, and aspects of futures, that would otherwise remain hidden."**

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The pre-eminence accorded to technical imperatives has become so "normal" in industrialized societies that it has become difficult to reflect critically upon the fact. However, from the perspective provided by Habermas and others, advanced technologies can be regarded as products of an instrumental mode of rationality concerned with efficiency, economy and the matching of means to pre-determined ends. Their dominance is related to the overextension of the technical interest into human life and culture. Hence, the solution to the problem of technological domination is *not* technical in nature. It is political and, in its deepest sense, human. It implies a need for participatory forms of decision-making and the reclamation of those aspects of the human personality that have been suppressed. It suggests a kind of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* (autonomy in community), an attempt to reassert and reclaim human identity. As Lewis Mumford puts it, in his own characteristic style,

if technics is to be brought back again into the service of human development, the path of advance will lead, not to the further expansion of the Megamachine, but to the deliberate cultivation of all those parts of the organic environment and the human personality that have been suppressed. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Clearly these are difficult and contentious issues. But they are generative for the present inquiry because futurists have tended not to deal effectively with them at this level. The debates about technologies in the futures field have been too shallowly based on hardware and somewhat naive extrapolations. From the perspective provided by critical futurism, the understanding and control of technology is not simply a matter of external regulation and hardware, but one of developing critiques and practical responses at the political, ideological, and epistemological levels. Speculative literature has a part to play in this process.

The notion of "alternative futures" is widely considered to be a master concept within the futures field. However, analytic approaches to the future are inherently limited by future uncertainty and by the fact that they omit much that is significant in the present. In the absence of story telling, futurism courts a kind of over-abstract intellectualism, a one-sided and decontextualized preoccupation with plans, projections, paradigms and scenarios which are all grist to the futurist mill but often meaningless to the uninitiated. Most of these approaches fail to reflect the "embeddedness" of social life, the sense of continuity-in-change, the symbols, metaphors, practices, and traditions that constitute social reality. Yet these phenomena can be represented or modelled in stories. The latter are "situated" but not time-bound. The best speculative fiction achieves a controlled balance between reason and intuition, thereby permitting us to explore futures, and aspects of futures, which would otherwise remain hidden.

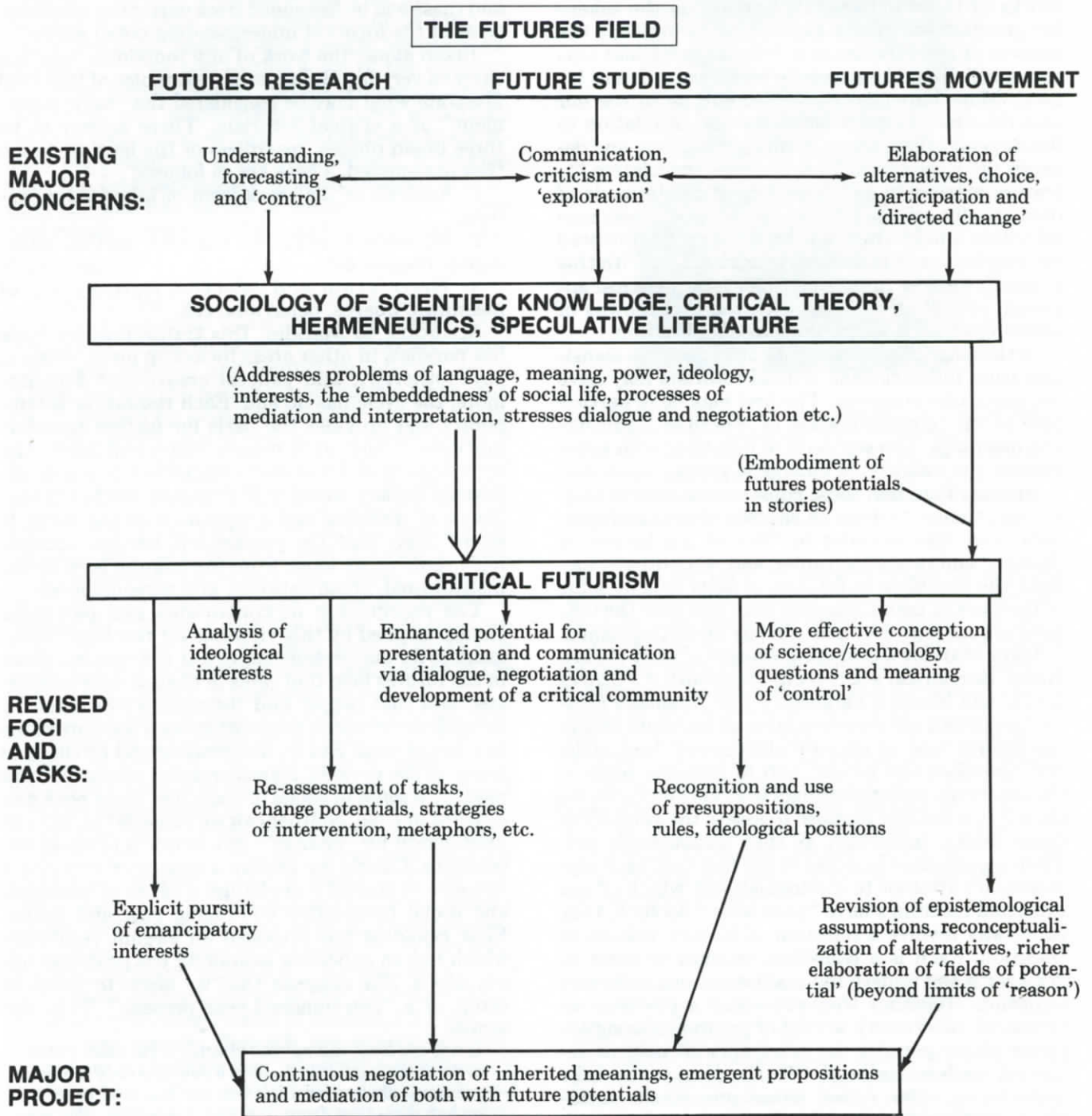
It should not be overlooked that the very existence of numerous stories dealing with a wide range of futures greatly reduces the imaginative investment required to gain a sense of future possibilities. Hence, speculative fiction makes the future accessible to a wide audience. Perhaps its major use is to embody futures potentials; that is, to flesh out by imaginative efforts, by intuitive and metaphorical transpositions, aspects of futures that are inaccessible to reason alone. While one may identify defects in the genre as a whole, many of the themes within it are not merely escapist. They set up a variety of tensions and resonances with existing ways of life which generate valuable insights and questions. For example, stories dealing with the future of megalopolis may prompt the reader to consider the implications of existing urban trends. Again, tales of human cloning, genetic manipulation, and prolongevity lead to questions about the nature and direction of present-day medical research.

A second use of speculative writing is to provide part of the substance or background for work in specific areas. Just as the whole span of this literature belies the popular view of the future as an "empty space," so stories based on particular themes can complement scenarios, provide specimen resolutions, and generate new lines of inquiry. A third, often cruder, function is performed by stories which serve to warn of what may lie ahead. However, the relatively unsophisticated nature of some of these fictions in no way detracts from their cultural importance. Images of the havoc created by wayward robots/computers/aliens reflect real and well-founded fears of depersonalization and threat.

Perhaps the most far-reaching use of speculative literature is its ability to function as an epistemological tool which questions widely-held presuppositions and reveals the contingency of the present. In metaphorically re-arranging the world it widens the bounds of possibility, preparing the ground, as it were, for reconceptualizations of the human condition consequent upon the impacts of science and technology. One example is the parallel- or alter-

Table 1

**A Path To Critical Futurism**



**IMPLICATIONS:** Clarification, revision, re-assessment of futures field, improved articulation with real life situations, problems and perceptions. More realistic goals and task-setting. More effective embodiment, communication and deployment of resources and ideas.

Source: Slaughter, R. A. *Critical Futurism and Curriculum Renewal*, University of Lancaster Ph.D. 1982.

nate-world story, which presents us with a plausible history leading to an alien present that might have been ours if events had worked out differently. Works of this kind usefully undermine the taken-for-grantedness of the present, showing that the context of our experience is but one particular outcome, which could have easily been very different indeed. More importantly, they invite us to see our own lives in a longer time frame and in relation to future generations whose reality grows from, and depends upon, our own. Thus, serious speculative literature represents an entirely appropriate mode of discourse for critical futurism and is immensely useful within a field which has been strongly influenced by pragmatic and rationalistic tendencies. With this in mind, we now turn to consider how a critical approach permits us to deal with the breakdowns of meaning which underlie our present situation.

In the climate of uncertainty attending the transition from industrialism, critical futurists may have two particular concerns. The first may be to participate in the reinterpretation of inherited traditions and meanings. The second is to negotiate with wider publics the validity of emergent propositions and meanings. Together, these constitute a central project: an attempt to draw on shared cultural and symbolic resources in order to "live at the breach of change," embrace uncertainty, and, with others, mediate the unfolding of futurity. A brief look at some of the work of major futurists indicates how the outlines of such a project may already be distinguished.

Mark Markley's *Changing Images of Man* (1974), Hazel Henderson's *Creating Alternative Futures* (1978) and Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980) are representative of attempts within the futures field to identify obsolescent "industrial era" premises and beliefs, and to examine some of the emergent understandings that may be replacing them.<sup>3</sup> It is not our purpose to assess the veracity of these works, important as they undoubtedly are. Their significance here lies in the fact that each represents an attempt to distinguish just which of our inherited meanings have "gone sour." As such, they in no way involve a rejection of history, culture or tradition. Each is a conscious attempt to come to grips with the underlying realities of our collective situation. Together they represent a positive response to uncertainty, a kind of ground-clearing exercise which permits the emergence of new, or renewed, understandings. Clearly, these may take many forms: rules, values, paradigms, myths, metaphors, and guiding images of various kinds, which permit reconceptualizations to emerge at every level.

There exist strong cultural and academic barriers to the reconceptualization of meanings. However, Elise Boulding is emphatic that "new images generate new behavior possibilities." Although she admits that the processes involved remain obscure, her view is that certain images become "selectively empowered" and "explode later . . . into the realized future." She continues, "in any cultural epoch, only certain images of the future out of a much wider pool . . . develop enough cultural resonance to affect pro-

cess, and to move toward actualization."<sup>4</sup> In this view, innovation in culture is closely related to the production and utilization of appropriate images, and these will be fashioned from particular combinations of the forms of understanding noted above.

Taken alone, the work of any individual may not carry us very far. But together, examples of this kind illustrate what may be considered the "basic movement" of a critical futurism. There appear to be three broad phases, regardless of the level at which they are applied. These are as follows:

1. Analysis of the breakdown of inherited meanings.
2. Reconceptualization via new myths, paradigms, images, etc.
3. Negotiation and selective legitimation of meanings, images, behaviors, etc.

According to Markley, this transformative cycle has parallels in other areas including myth, science, psychotherapy, and general creativity.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the cycle has no end. Each resolution is temporary and provides the basis for further transformations. Thus, at a macro-historical level, the achievement of a successful transition to a post-industrial society would still prefigure further breakdowns of meaning and a repetition of the cycle. It seems likely that the process will become increasingly rapid as we move from the cultural level to the institutional, organizational, and personal levels.

The recognition of continuous and pervasive change implied by this view has far reaching consequences for our present inquiry. It is a commonplace in the futures field that rates of change have accelerated and that people find themselves overtaken by developments which might have been less surprising in a longer view. But an imaginative and intellectual grasp of the cycle of transformation discussed here requires a sense of social process that looks *back and forward in time*. Neither can we concede the futurist predilection for "change": continuity is of equal importance. Clearly we require a strategy conveying a measure of stability-in-change, a sense of historical and social perspective embracing past and future. Elise Boulding has provided an elegant resolution which has an appealing simplicity but profound implications. She suggests that we begin to think in terms of a "two-hundred year present." This, she writes,

is not too long and not too short. . . . Its chief virtue is its organic quality. . . . It is a continuously moving moment, always reaching out one hundred years in either direction from the day we are in. We are linked with both boundaries of this moment by the people among us whose lives began or will end at one of these boundaries. . . . It is our space, one that we can move around in directly in our lives, and indirectly by touching the lives of the linkage people, young and old, around us.<sup>6</sup>

In the present context, this proposal has obvious attractions. It is fully congruent with a view of history and-futures as each comprising part of a broader enterprise. It provides an opportunity to free ourselves from temporal provincialism and permits us to view changes in our own lives in a wider context of

continuity. Some indication of the potential of the idea can be obtained from Frank Snowden Hopkins's evocative account of a 150-year historical perspective. This was achieved by merging his own biography with that of his grandfather to form "a single historical memory and a single historical experience."<sup>7</sup> If we add to this some of the elements discussed above—images, myths, emergent understandings, the elaboration of futures potentials through speculative writing—we can begin to appreciate the potency of a 200-year present. It emphasizes the interdependence of past, present, and future, the web-like nature of causality which unites past events, present choices, and future potentials.

## Conclusion

A critical approach offers futurists the opportunity to re-examine questions which have been largely overlooked. Questions about language, meaning, power, ideology and conflicting interests are, it is true, not readily resolved, particularly when they are de-focused by empirical/analytic social science. But work which skates over such major features of the social landscape risks superficiality and remains unconvincing. A different error is made when profundity is tricked out in jargon or deep, obscure, language. Somewhere between these extremes are the popularizers, the Tofflers and Naisbitts, who, through shrewd observation and marketing know-how, serve up fluffy packages of instant insight so beloved by the media. But this, along with most varieties of inspirational futurism, quickly looks silly in the absence of visionary power and a grasp of the human significance of universal issues.

To write convincingly about the future we must know who we are, where we are from and whose interests we are pursuing. The best futurist writing springs not from a denial of historicity, but from a reflexive appreciation of it. This is a critical/hermeneutic task, and one which benefits from inter-cultural dialogue. From Europe, American futurism looks more powerful than it really is. It has pioneered many innovations and, even now, provides a shelter and forum for new cultural developments which may be of immense international importance. But from an island which has sometimes been called "the largest aircraft carrier in the American fleet," the military/strategic roots of modern futurism are still clearly visible. Beneath the psycho/spiritual precursors of the "new age," atavistic conceptions of the future involving territoriality, domination and conquest remain powerfully present. Such understandings have long passed into the conventional wisdom and appeared "natural." But they never are. Behind every large-scale project of the future lie interests that are served in the present.

Thus the best futurist work is concise, economical and iconoclastic, revealing aspects of our reality that



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we had overlooked. It provides access to meanings and commitments which tend to be hidden precisely because they frame our world. It regards the reader not as a passive observer, but as a co-author, capable of calling forth meaning, purpose and intention. By understanding the present cultural transition less in terms of the external regulation or control of techniques and technologies, but as a transformative process involving breakdowns and renewals of meaning, we penetrate to the core of all our major concerns. Critical futurism stresses the *mediated* quality of all communication and anticipates the time when becoming involved in the self-constitution of one's own reality is no longer the prerogative of the fortunate few.

## NOTES

1. Winner, L. *Autonomous Technology*, MIT Press, 1977, p. 29.
2. Mumford, L. "Technics and the Nature of Man," in Micham & Mackey (eds.). *Philosophy and Technology*, Free Press, New York, 1972, p. 86.
3. Markley, M. *Changing Images of Man*, SRI, 1974. Henderson H. *Creating Alternative Futures*, Berkley, 1978. Ferguson, M. *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, Tarcher, 1980.
4. Boulding, E. "The Dynamics of Imaging Futures," *WFS Bulletin* 12, 5, 1978, pp. 1-8.
5. Markley, M. "Human Consciousness in Transformation," in Jantsch & Waddington (eds). *Evolution and Consciousness*, Addison-Wesley, 1976.
6. Boulding, 1978, p. 7.
7. Hopkins, F. "The Senior Citizen as Futurist," in Feather, F. (ed) *Through the '80s*, WFS, 1980, p. 388.

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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.