A personal agenda for the 21st century

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Abstract

The 21st century looks as though it will be a 'make' or 'break' time for humanity. Present trends do not encourage optimism. But there are many ways in which humans can act to develop foresight and to 'steer' toward more consciously-chosen futures. This paper considers 'inner' and 'outer' threats to humanity and to an emerging 'congruence of insight' about how we might respond. There is a need for many more voices to enter this 'futures conversation'. © 2000 Richard A. Slaughter. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Everything is at stake

The year 2000 is, as is well known, an artefact of the Gregorian calendar. The latter is the result of 1700-year long process during which the present dominant time sense was slowly brought into being by the collective efforts of people in many cultures. But, at the same time, early inaccuracies mean that the placing of the sequence of years is 'out' by several years. In other words, the 'real' year 2000 has already come and gone. It was mis-labelled as, maybe 1995, 1996 or 1997. We will never know [1]. This reminds us that under the reassuring surface of everyday life, the normalcy of 'the way things are', there lie many unasked questions, profound uncertainties and, perhaps, a deeper gulf of chaos than we are prepared to contemplate or admit. This is a metaphor for the condition of humanity at this time.

The year 2000 and the shift to a new century and millennium have attracted many hopes for improvement in the human condition. But most of these hopes will not be sustained, at least not yet. The diet of 'bad news' that characterised the late 20th century will continue for a long time to come because humanity is only part-way

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through a transition that will take many, many years to complete. So the killings will go on. The bombs, the massacre of innocents, the turning of people against their own kind and their world, will continue. The environmental news will worsen. Coral reefs may soon disappear, forests shrink to remnants; we will lose many more species; whole areas will become deserts. Overall, the erosion of the ecological foundations of life will continue unabated. Equally, the fear of annihilation—whether by a resurgence of nuclear conflict or by some unstoppably mutating lethal virus—will loom large over rich and poor alike, particularly in over-crowded cities. It is a terrifying prospect—so terrifying, in fact, that those with the relevant money, resources, choices will, en masse, generally opt for the comfort of images, unreality industries, 3DTV, instead of the work of facing up to it. But face annihilation we must. It is the only way forward for a culture in extremis.

Why such a bleak view? There are many reasons. Humanity cannot re-invent the inner worlds of those in power in a few years. It is the work of generations. We cannot overturn inequitable economic relationships with their ingrained 'pyramids of sacrifice' over night. There will be no sudden enlightenment amongst the world's governments, no sudden upsurge of positive, visionary leadership among statespersons. They will continue to disappoint. The abstract goals of competing trans-national enterprises will continue to drive a technological dynamic that has already forsaken notions of limits and gone far, far beyond any conception of human need or positive social value. This dynamic is now poised to overwhelm the world's cultures with yet another series of revolutions for which they are utterly unprepared [2].

It is necessary to stress these facts at the outset because in this paper I want to try to show that, regardless of the above, there are ways forward that are most certainly worth attempting. But we should be clear at the outset that what is at stake in the forward view is, precisely, everything: the viability of our world and our own humanity.

2. Gaining clarity

It is no simple matter to understand the present condition of our world. Indeed, the revelation of the very processes of meaning-making, social construction and deep, unavoidable, interpretation has led some to lose their confidence and fall into the 'problem of knowledge', never to emerge. Others contemplate the same dilemma and yet maintain their dignity and poise, discern small consolations among the wreckage, the incapacity and the unknowing [3]. I do not want to mock these positions or responses. They belong to people who care deeply and have sought to find ways forward, but failed. They are, perhaps, like some of the early explorers who perished because of inadequate maps in unfamiliar territory. They should be respected, but we should look further afield, find other maps, and, as I hope to show, maybe even other territories to explore.

In order to gain clarity on the condition of our world it seems to me that we must begin with a historical and cultural analysis. In other words, we must understand why we live in *this* world, and not in the innumerable others that were once possible.

If there are alternate pasts and futures there are certainly alternate presents. Some works of imaginative fiction demonstrate this very clearly [4].

But if there is one thing that modern scholarship has proved beyond doubt it is that we are all situated, grounded, if you will, in particular webs of language, ideology, assumptions and so on, many of which are partial, committed, provisional—in a word, fallible, ever open to challenge and to re-interpretation. That, after all, is what happens in every site of conflict: my version differs from yours. How, then, to give an objective account of reality? Well, best to admit right away that we can't. But to acknowledge that does not, it seems to me, plunge us into a sea of indecision and uncertainty where motivation and action die unborn. Quite the opposite, in fact. The fact that we cannot be objective, that we are all committed, encultured, simply means that we should adopt a kind of modesty, an understated approach and style, as we try to engage some of the 'big questions' of our time. And engage them we must. Although there is no rule book for reconstructing cultures that is what we must attempt.

Where can we obtain the clarity we need in order to act? Well, as suggested above, the first step is to attempt a diagnosis of our world. What is working well, what badly? What do we need to maintain and protect, what do we need to change? We could do worse than begin by valuing some of the things we have inherited from the efforts of people in the past: language, writing, electricity, notions of social justice and so on. From here we can deepen our cultural diagnosis by considering the body of work that has been created on this subject. In my own case, I found Lewis Mumford's 'long view' on the past and present gave me my first hints of a viable view forward. Mumford was concerned to critique the modern uses of science and technology. He also identified that period in time when notions of 'limits' were removed, thus permitting an historically new dynamic of exponential growth to be initiated [5]. Understanding that that phenomenon was, and remains, a social construction also means that it can be deconstructed and replaced by a view that more clearly reflects our the needs of a planet that is suffering from too much material growth and associated impacts of many kinds.

But, as noted, there are many other views. That is precisely the point. The cultural diagnosis we need will necessarily be a synthesis of what appears to any observer to be the best, the most penetrating and insightful sources around. Thus, most recently, I have turned to the work of Castells, Saul and Scruton [6–8]. The former informs us about how deeply the 'network economy' is interpenetrating, and being shaped by, the many different cultural milieus in which it is now operating. Saul warns us about an over-arching corporatist ideology at work in the world which seeks opportunity and profit but which has become detached from the ecological foundations of the world and, indeed, has no real interest (or capacity to be interested in) the future. More recently, Scruton provided a masterly account of what might be termed 'the fall' of the modern, media-saturated, marketing-oriented, atemporal remains of more vibrant cultural frameworks that manifestly 'worked' (i.e. provided answers to the perennial problems of human life) for other people in earlier times.

3. Propositions about 'where we are'

From these and many other sources I have, like many others, assembled a view of the world, its travails and possibilities. This view contains propositions such as the following.

- The Western worldview is defective because provides us with a thin, instrumental, view of the world which, though successful in the short term, cannot be maintained in the long term.
- Dominant political and economic powers in the world are generally not interested in the real future. Their short-term agendas and habit of 'bounded rationality' are perpetuating destructive and unsustainable views, practices and systems everywhere.
- There are significant arenas of human experience that have been marginalised or overlooked by Western institutions, some of which can be recovered. These include: conscious participation in wider social and natural entities; identification with the latter; celebration of being (as opposed to having); spiritual growth; the direct experience of transcendence; the capacity to heal as a socially sanctioned vocation.
- Modern technologies do little or nothing to assist people in solving the perennial problems of human existence—meaning, purpose, soulful work, rites of passage, death. But they are represented as if they were of central and vital importance.
- The ideology of material growth was only viable for a short time and cannot be sustained. It could replaced by an ethic of 'enoughness' or 'voluntary simplicity'. But there are powerful forces ranged against this option, making it opaque and difficult to grasp.
- Overall, it is possible to re-design the Western worldview by retiring defective components and replacing them with consciously-chosen equivalents. The tools for engaging in this work are widely available, but the places where they can be learned and practiced are few and far between.

Now, if I am asked to prove the veracity of the above, I cannot. I can show evidence, reveal my sources, trace back the chain of reasoning, reflection, the formation and testing of hypotheses, the modifications that flow from well-founded critiques. But I cannot prove them because they are interpretations, not scientific laws. They cannot be tested on the same kind of rig that tests the strength of concrete because they are not empirically verifiable. They rest on values, on judgements and on assumptions that support each. Within the domain of futures enquiry we find rich clusters of propositions that can, in the end, only be 'tested' through the collective judgements of many other minds, each of which are also embedded in their own worlds of reference that, in turn, are constitutive of the 'real world'!

As noted, it's easy to get bogged down in 'problem of knowledge'-type concerns here. The complexities are infinite. But that is a mistake. What counts is whether or not we can extract meaning from such propositions and, in time, whether they make sense in the real world. Let me give an example.

4. Ideas into action: the example of 'foresight'

Some years ago I became preoccupied with two clusters of ideas. One was 'foresight', the other was 'wisdom'. There was a strong sense of contained energy in each cluster and, moreover, the energy level went up rapidly when the two were brought into close proximity. The result was that I wrote a paper in 1990 called 'The Foresight Principle' [9]. But, to my surprise, that was by no means the end of the story. These ideas were not exhausted: they spun on and became elaborated in a whole range of ways. The result was a book of the same title [10]. From here the argument continued to evolve. I began to link the *idea* of foresight with those relatively few places in the world (at that time) that attempted to *practice* it. Hence I became interested in 'Institutions of Foresight', or IOFs. In particular, I studied the one I was closest to and knew best—Australia's Commission for the Future (CFF).[11] As my understanding of this particular IOF deepened, so my attention also turned to others in other places and I began to formulate a set of provisional guidelines about 'what works' and 'what doesn't work' in these contexts. I also began to promote the view that Australia should have its own 'post-CFF IOF'. Indeed, I have just taken a new role as the Foundation Professor of Foresight and Director of the Australian Foresight Institute at Swinburne University in Melbourne, Australia. The point is this: powerful ideas can be precursors to social action if they can gain sufficient support.

Here, then, is a personal reflection of the wider dynamic that I believe holds out substantial hope for a world in stress and in peril. It begins with historical and cultural understanding. It proceeds to create forward views based on this understanding. My forward view says, in effect, "the extensions of these trends, these accounts of progress, these futures now in prospect are not good enough; they are not viable pathways into the future." It's not within my power, nor is it my intention or role, to 'take on' powerful entities, or to attempt to frontally assault established institutions that are very much bound up with 'the way things are'. Instead, I have sought to use the tools of critical analysis (critical futures studies) to, conceptually at first, undermine, deconstruct if you will, some of the ways that such entities operate, and then to follow through with positive action. I conclude that, in combination, the deconstructive and reconstructive aspects of futures work can be very powerful forces for social change. In other words, the outputs of applied futures work emerge as social innovations. What is encouraging about the latter is that they can be undertaken by people of good will anywhere and at any time; they can succeed in changing social perceptions and practice; and they can make a difference. Are they enough? Who can say? But it is a source of (rational) hope that both questions can be answered in the affirmative [12].

5. 'Inner' and 'outer' threats to humanity

The above provides a brief sketch as to why it is that, despite a very bleak outlook, I do believe that human beings can act to deepen their perceptions of their historical

predicament (what Dror aptly calls 'thinking in history') and then act effectively in order to change it. The aim here is not to effect a minor course adjustment, or even a series of them. Rather, the main goal is to help re-direct the future path of human civilisation toward a new course. One must necessarily admit that this is an unprecedented task, and this is partly why I think it will take much longer to achieve than we might desire. There may be, and probably will be, immense suffering between where we stand at the dawn of the 21st century and the kind of ethically-, and technologically-advanced civilisation that could lead us into new territory. Hence the existential burdens will continue to grow for some time, as will the many evidences of disaster and dysfunction around us [13].

   The 'outer' threats to humanity are at least visible, and therefore can be approached directly. But the 'inner' threats are quite different and require a different method and approach. Laszlo made reference to this domain some years ago in his book 'The Inner Limits of Mankind' [14] E.F. Schumacher addressed similar territory in his final book 'A Guide for the Perplexed' [15]. But the most comprehensive Western work that I know of that takes up and integrates much that is known about the 'inner path' is that of Wilber, whose work on an integral paradigm, integral psychology, the integration of science and religion, and many other themes, provides detailed guidance about the grounding of cultural change without descending to popular 'how to' formats [16]. The Eastern equivalent is P.R. Sarkar, ably summarised by Inayatullah [17]. From the point of view of this essay, what emerges from both accounts is a powerful sense that humanity is part-way through a very long sequence of evolutionary development (both inner and outer). The drawback is that the time scales are large. But the overall perspective gives us some clear indications of the underpinnings of civilisations that potentially lie ahead. The key to these lie in the development of human consciousness to levels that have already been pioneered by advanced practitioners around the world. In this view, the future is not merely a result of present (and projected) levels of technical capability. More profoundly, it emerges from the level (and hence capability) of the consciousness that is creating and directing it.

   Such a view rests on a deep appreciation of 'inwardness' that can only come from immersion in traditions that value it. For many this suggests some form of inner practice that leads to greater insight and clarity. A recent example is the story of Diane Perry who, re-named Tenzin Palmo, became a Buddhist nun and subsequently spent 12 years in a cave in the high Himalayas. When asked to explain why she took such a drastic course of action she replied that:

> it's a poverty of our time that so many people can't see beyond the material... In this age of darkness with its greed, violence and ignorance it's important there are some areas of light in the gloom, something to balance all the heaviness and darkness. To my mind the contemplatives and the solitary meditators are like lighthouses beaming out love and compassion on to the world. They become like generators—and they are extremely necessary. [18]

What Palmo is expressing, of course, is a contemporary re-statement of what Hux-

ley termed 'The Perennial Philosophy' [19]. That is, the view that humanity shares a common heritage, both 'inner' and 'outer' and that there are appropriate ways of addressing and reconciling both. What is significant about this in the present context is not the idea that large numbers of people could or should follow Palmo's path in any literal sense. Rather, it is to remind us that there are real and vibrant alternatives to the kind of limited rationality that is currently driving the global system toward a diminished and unsustainable future. Those alternatives may be hard to find in Western societies overwhelmed by materialism and instant gratification. But they can certainly be found elsewhere.

Now for the empirically minded, those in pursuit of share market dividends, for marketeers more generally, and for all those now being drawn into an uncritical involvement with the internet and the wonders of the 'digital economy'—to all these folk who are, perhaps, caught up in their own versions of 'the way things are', such considerations will seem esoteric or irrelevant at best. Who needs an inner life, who needs values or discriminating awareness, when you can have Netscape, Windows 2000 and all the man-made wonders the latest web-browsers can deliver?

It seems to me that the answer is relatively simple, but the consequences are not. I believe that a combination of low-level human motivations and high-powered technology in any realm is likely to be what I have called elsewhere 'a continuing disaster'. I dislike moralising intensely and will not slip into it here. But I do find it fascinating that what were once called the 'seven deadly sins' (pride, envy, avarice, wrath, gluttony, sloth and lust) have finally been domesticated within the hyperculture of consumerism that now rages around as, perhaps, what now might be called the 'seven marketing imperatives' [20]. This kind of inversion of traditional understandings is too significant to be overlooked. Were it a fully conscious process it would, I suspect, only be contemplated with enormous caution. But that is not our situation. In late industrial culture caution has been thrown to the winds, with the results that we all know so well. 'Tradition', I once read somewhere, 'should not be sacrosanct, but it is seldom silly.' We have lost sight of what that means and re-learning it will be costly.

The vast and largely unresolved meta-problem that now confronts us is that a technological dynamic that acknowledges no limits whatever is poised to overrun all human cultures and the world in which they are located. Yet the kinds of values and cultural capabilities that would, under more 'normal' circumstances, be available to mediate such a dynamic are contested, fragmented, largely unavailable as a coherent set of policies or responses. As T.S. Elliott, that supreme diagnostician of the penalties of modernity, put it: "the best lack conviction; the worst are full of passionate intensity". It is, I think, this contradiction between the likely onset of disastrous or heavily technically-modified futures moving inexorably toward us, set against the more down-to-earth needs of real people living lives amidst great contradictions and uncertainty, that stimulated the emergence of Futures Studies in the 20th century. Whatever else it might be as well, the latter is an attempt to re-assert human agency in the face of dehumanisation and the destruction of all that we hold dear. And here, perhaps, is the essential clue to finding our collective way forward.

6. An emerging 'congruence of insight'?

I suggested above that futures work falls within the domain of interpretative knowledge and succeeds or fails according to whether or not particular interpretations find echoes in other human minds and proceed toward action, or not. However, it seems to me that, as I look around the mind-space that is FS, and, indeed, the wider world in which it is located, that a number of insights and ideas are gaining currency. They are, perhaps, evidence of an emerging 'congruence of insight'. If that is the case, if, indeed, they are widely shared, then the knitting together of these ideas may well form part of the basis for many forms of cultural creativity, including a variety of social innovations and a recovery of politics, that may together be brought into being to re-assert the primacy of human agency, human needs, in the face of the emerging high-tech nightmare [21]. A few strands in this complex, many-layered, debate are as follows.

- We should remember (indeed, re-member) how healthy cultures work, from what features they are constituted, and the kinds of perennial human values they embody. A healthy culture would re-assert limits and understand that there are some technological possibilities that should not be pursued under any circumstances.
- We could do worse than to regard people as 'layered beings' with a range of attributes, capabilities and needs at different levels. Material wealth does not, by any means, exhaust the span of human need or capability—it can be actively limiting. Inner wealth and outer wealth should be in balance. But this does not mean that there is anything honourable about extreme poverty.
- We need to recover a set of social values and embody them in socially-validated forms such that they can be available to moderate other powerful forces including those of technology, finance and commerce. Progressive social values depend on people's ability to enter into, and be nourished by, a rich inner life. But they also must be reinforced by appropriate institutions (such as IOFs and NGOs).
- In late industrial culture, people are searching for meaning, vision and leadership. On the whole, what they are getting is vacuity, illusion and administration. However, there are plentiful grounds for the recovery of meaning and value once these tasks are fully engaged [22].
- Institutions of foresight (IOFs) are social innovations that are, in some sense, 'called forth' by this time. They can be created in many places to serve a range of purposes and networked internationally to provide humankind with an 'early warning system' to help stimulate its creativity and give it time to respond and act. IOFs should not only serve limited interests but universal ones as well. Both are valid; the latter are more needed at this time.
- Human beings possess significant reflexive powers; they can look afresh upon the world (inner and outer), revise assumptions, explore others and, together, re-invent their worldview by consciously incorporating other components.

7. Obstacles and contradictions

It is not to be expected that the kind of 'cultural agenda' I have tried to characterise above will be universally welcomed or implemented. It is, as I've noted, a quintessentially collective process. But there is certain to be opposition from those with interests bound up in the status quo. For example, present political leaders, financial speculators and the CEOs and boards of trans-national companies who see a world of 'opportunity' in the 21st century.

Anyone calling for a moderation of the present unquestioned technological dynamic will face opposition from those who are creating it. It seems to me that Silicon Valley, as the heartland of the emerging 'digital economy' has been termed, shows no interest at all in the well-being or the future of humankind. Rather, its focus is determined by the powerful alliance of capital and compulsive technological innovation. I wonder how long it will take us to wake up to the fact that these clean-looking labs are actually the source of the widespread disruptions that, if given free reign, will annihilate what remains of our inherited culture and heritage and consign them to a 'virtual' realm from which they may never emerge? Those who oppose or question this process are bound to be called 'Luddites' after the 18th century movement against spinning machines that deprived a class of workers of their livelihood [23]. The difference, this time, is that our world is being transformed 'under our feet', but far there are very, very few people who are willing or able to call the entire process to account.

Those who follow conventional 'mainstream' economics will not welcome the suggestions set out here. The former still believe that 'economic growth is good' despite decades of work which demonstrates that it is not [24]. So any perspective that calls for a revision of what have become standard 'growthist' assumptions will attract opprobrium: 'How can you generate wealth, pay for social programs, without economic growth?' In such cases it is the frameworks of assumptions that are in contest, not so much the individuals taking sides on such an issue. But too few have the time, capability or inclination to 'dig out' the insights that show why 'growthist' assumptions need to be abandoned and how a whole other world of options lies beyond them.

Any thorough-going attempt to bring about cultural change should be cautioned by what has happened before. So many initiatives become subverted by their own blindnesses, weak spots and contradictions: the Third Reich, Stalin's terror, the killing fields of Cambodia, Kosovo. So what contradictions may be embedded in the above account? There are perhaps three things to beware of.

1. In all of our utterances, some of our own deepest interests remain hidden. If, as is likely, we are unaware of these, such interests could derail all our well-meaning attempts to bring about change. The solution, perhaps, is to regard critique as an essential component of any such process and, indeed, a prime futures methodology in its own right. Critique must be applied internally within FS every bit as much as to external subjects.
2. The above was written by a Western writer in a comfortable study in one of the

most affluent countries in the world. Out of such comfort there is bound to be missed much that would be the common experience of the poor majority in the world. For whom, then, does this text speak? Is it only for the already-privileged? Or are more universal concerns embedded within it? How can futures practitioners admit their debt to particular cultural sources yet be open to, and supportive of, others that they have never experienced?

3. It is a characteristic of the human mind that themes are often cast in opposites. This is known as enantiodromia. To what extent, therefore, has this text assembled a cast of 'saints' and 'sinners' according to the author's own predispositions? That is for the reader to decide and, more widely, for those who inhabit the futures arena to come to judgement upon in time. In a wider view we all and always inhabit both categories.

8. Conclusion

One thing is certain, 'creating a worthwhile future' is an easy phrase to write or speak, but historically it is an unprecedented and very challenging task. To have any chance of re-directing this overheated global megaculture toward more life-affirming paths is quintessentially a collective process. It follows that the more people who will join in this critically-vital 'futures conversation', the better. To achieve this we need to ensure that futures work is taken up and practiced far more widely than at present [25].

The emergence of 'new voices' may well be more significant than the continued declarations of those that have been around for some time!

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