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Precarity and Beyond: A Reflection on the work of Richard Slaughter

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Highlights

- Slaughter's thought is relational
- Key theme for the author is Slaughter's critique of modernity and quest for 'What Next?'
- Author discusses the influences of Slaughter on his work
- Slaughter's scholarship has been a search for a meta-rationality that offers coherence whilst allowing for the heterogenous

Abstract: This paper offers a personal reflection on the work of eminent futurist Richard Slaughter. Key aspects of Slaughter's work, his method and approach, his aspirations and his central theme of precarity and 'What Next?' are detailed. The author also provides two examples of the direct influence of Slaughter's work on his own.

Keywords: Precarity; foresight; Blue Marble; extended present; integral; relationship

Thought leaders have a special place in knowledge ecosystems. This is true for the futurist Richard Slaughter who has dedicated his career to the development, championing and testing of futures thinking and Futures Studies. His extensive body of work has arisen from his own life journey in which the personal has always been in dialogue with the world around him. Slaughter is well aware of the relationship between life, scholarship and activism in general. As I will note below, this sequence in various forms is not accidental, but embedded in how he formulates his approach to the *global problematique* that was framed so eloquently by the Club of Rome back in the 1970s (R. Slaughter & Riedy, 2009).

Slaughter took on board the message of the important *Limits to Growth* produced by the Club of Rome (1972) and has been championing a form of futures thinking that enables us –

if we listen – to proactively respond to the immanent and dire threats our planet and fragile civilisation faces. Such work is transpersonal and transdisciplinary and embraces both the internal processes that encode culture into reason/action and the external systemic complexities that we all ‘witness’ as the *global problematique* continues to unfold (Slaughter, 2009,2008).

For me, Slaughter is a deeply contextual and historical thinker who has consciously engaged with important intellectual and cultural traditions in shaping his own unique oeuvre. He is one of those scholars who recognises and celebrates **the relational nature of knowledge co-production**. So, we find him happily acknowledging his influences in his very recent paper ‘Futures Studies as a Quest for Meaning’ (2020). In fact, he has been speaking to the ‘relational’ for decades. Back in 1994 he wrote: “Human beings from any culture are not separate, isolated beings. They are intensely social. Hence relationships are of central concern to them” (1994, p. 1077). This proposition is restated in his recent 2020 reflection:

I do not believe in the “lone Futurist” any more than I do in the “lone genius.” We are all and always part of a collective, whether we acknowledge this or not. None of us is self-sufficient (2020b, p. 6).

This 2020 article is a great piece in which Slaughter discusses his path in terms of a quest that involves a constant dialogue within the layers of meaning that life presents us all with. In short, we cannot separate the personal from the academic, the spiritual from the pragmatic, the aesthetic from the mundane and so on. Our anticipatory sense making therefore is, as Slaughter back in 1999 noted, immersed “in a web of relationships past, present and future” (1999, p. 5). Just as a life must be understood in context, so too must these temporal coordinates. Yet this has not always been accepted and, as any survey of current politics, business and academia makes apparent, it is an insight that many still struggle with. For most, as Slaughter wryly noted years ago, “the past is real, the present is challenging and complex, but the future does not exist. Ergo: the way forward is via the past” (1997, p. 723).

Futures Pedagogy

To engage with this deficit in temporal comprehension, Slaughter has worked tirelessly to establish a set of tools, methods, and concepts to provide a ‘way forward’, informed by a futures consciousness that was open, resilient and aware. Certainly, he drew on the work of many in futures and beyond, but it was his ability to **synthesise and organise** that laid the foundation for a coherent and user-friendly pedagogy of the future. This work’s early iterations, based on his PhD research (1982), first became publicly accessible in his 1991 publications *Futures: Concepts and Powerful Ideas* and *Futures: Tools and Techniques* (Slaughter, 1991a, 1991b). I was later invited by Slaughter to work on this material in order to produce *Futures Thinking for Social Foresight* (2005). For me, as a young futurist, this was a wonderful opportunity to work with Slaughter and this text also brought to a close a deep engagement with his work as I had reviewed all of his major publications (Slaughter, 1995, 1999, 2004, 1996) at that time for various journals.

One of the characteristics of futurists in general is their ability to identify relationships, elicit patterns, and activate the pattern-making narrative capacity of others. Thus, we see relationship → pattern → action. In much of Slaughter's work we find this kind of sequence playing out. For instance, with Hedley Beare, he identified Futures Research (Relationship), Futures Studies (Pattern) and Futures Movements (Action) (1993, pp. 109-111). A variation of the same formula recently appeared at the end of his tough reflection on a diminished set of alternative futures where he proposes:

Is this future dangerous? Certainly. Is it inevitably disastrous? That depends. The main suggestion put forward here is that what the futures field may have lost in naivety it has gained in interpretive power, visionary potential and practical utility (2020a np)

Not only do we see relationship → pattern → action here framed in terms of vision, interpretation and practical utility, we also see, as a *leitmotif* in Slaughter's work, the theme of precarity. This theme comes from his close reading of the relational degradation at the heart of (late) capitalism, coupled with an equally degraded vision that serves materialist short-term goals.

As an heuristic, precarity incites uncertainty and challenges unfettered optimism. From my reading of culture (2017), it is a key element in the drive of culture towards authoritarianism. Precarity constrains hope, closes the heart down and leads us to sacrifice freedoms for security. At no time has human life been as secure as the illusion of repetitive cultural conditioning leads us to believe. Life, as Judith Butler (2004) reminds us, is precarious. Culture is the collective commitment to 'imagined orders', the similitude of predictability, as Yuval Harari reminds us (2015). Yet the future is the perpetual reminder that change (aka precarity) is a universal constant. In Slaughter's own work we can see this taking the form of *The Biggest Wakeup Call in History* (2010). A biographical detail will illustrate this.

The Blue Marble

A formative moment for Slaughter was his time as a special needs teacher on the island of Bermuda in the 1970s. Bermuda was for him the metaphorical 'blue marble' in space (NASA: AS17-148-22727). The impact of human activity on Bermuda made it apparent how out of balance modernity was with nature (see Slaughter, 2020b). This revelation laid the foundation for Slaughter's engagement with the world of ideas that from the 1970s became known as Futures Studies. The blue marble provides the viewer with a sense of the beauty and vulnerability of our planet. Certainly we have, in recent years, discovered a range of exo-planets with the conditions for life, but that does not detract from the fact that *Earth is our home* and that as a closed system it has limited resources, and that the biosphere is vulnerable to a range of devastating disruptions to which our species is contributing.

For Slaughter this insight remains a key plank in his ongoing engagement with a period of history we have come to know as the Anthropocene. From my reading of Slaughter's work, which as I noted, has been ongoing since the mid-1990s, I see this as his legacy theme: the *unsustainability of Modernity and the question of 'What Next?'*

Thinking about Time

One way to engage this 'What Next?' is to look at how the present is understood and experienced. The present is a folded field that has been reduced in the past century to what Slaughter calls the 'minimal present'. He argues that the minimal present strikes at the relational nature of being, the present is instead socially constructed and spans a sizeable period of time, starting 'in a particular era and [merging] finally into cosmological uncertainty' (1999, p.5). This extended present was argued for by Elise Boulding and has produced a simple but profound image that appears in Slaughter's work on *Futures Concepts and Powerful Ideas* (Figure 1). It is something of a staple in my own presentations on rethinking self, community and our pasts and futures.

Figure 1 Here

Figure 1: From Slaughter, 1991a, p.44

This is a good example of how Slaughter's work has influenced me. Many times, influence can be subtle but on this occasion it is overt. Let me explain. I have been writing about what I call 'creative traditionalism' (Bussey, 2015, 2018). As a trained historian I have a critical relationship with the past. I have now developed an equally critical relationship with both the present and the future. As I see it, we are born into history and some of us spend our lives trying to throw off its baggage whilst retaining that which enables us to be a little less governed (Foucault's term) or a little freer. This activity of 'retaining that which enables' involves a creative engagement with traditions. When we consciously engage in these activities, we are being creative traditionalists.

To capture this sense of engagement I reworked **Figure 1** for a presentation, and then book chapter, on the transformation of a traditional Chinese dragon kiln in Thow Kwang Singapore. Key to my argument was that there are many pasts, presents and futures and that what was occurring with this kiln in Singapore reflected a selective, conscious reshaping or editing of tradition that aligned with creative and generative futures for the communities

now gathering around this wonderful site. As the kiln is called a dragon (kiln) I conceptualised **Figure 2** to demonstrate this.

Figure 2 Here

***Figure 2: Dragon Pasts, Presents and Futures (illustrated by Lynda Windsor)
(Bussey, 2015, p. 129)***

Working with Metaphor

This image obviously builds on the alchemical Worm Ouroboros, overlays the 200-year present of Figure 1 and moves into a post structural space that explicitly allows for multiplicity. This journey of transformation and influence has two starting points: one, my historical interests in alchemy had provided the metaphor and image of the worm eating its tail; and secondly, my encounter with Slaughter's presentation of Boulding's work triggered an association that was physically represented by my time in Singapore, a nation that likes dragons, and the community of ceramicists of Thow Kwang in Kranji.

Hybridity of course is key to understanding influence. Certainly, the impact of Slaughter's work on my own evolution as a futurist is like this. The Ouroboros eating its tail suggests the cultural flows where we all ask, where is the beginning and the end of this? The play with metaphor here is also important to acknowledge. In fact, metaphor has been a central element of my thinking in futures. I first encountered its application in this context with Beare and Slaughter's 1991 (p.91ff) book on educational futures. Certainly, there had been Polak's (1973) seminal book on *Images of the Future*, but I discovered that text after reading Beare and Slaughter. It was in their text that I began the cultural journey that led me to appreciate the definitional power of metaphor and image. The energy that metaphors harness as meaning and purpose (or purposelessness) is extraordinary and not just confined to the epistemological. Metaphor and the mythic have real impacts on people's embodied experience of 'being in time' or, as Beare and Slaughter asserted, on the paradigms that act as lenses for the sense making that defines the real and what is meaningful action (BUSSEY, 2014, 2020).

Precarity and Beyond

As noted above, I see Slaughter's overarching *leitmotif* as a combination of diagnosis of Modernity and a wrestling with the "What Next?" This 'what next?' of course requires both imagination and tools. It is clear he has been working with both across his career. Wrestling also calls for strategies such as those outlined in his numerous books and articles. In addition, it calls for a 'Big Picture' lens to tie the many elements together. So, in trying to get a handle on the daunting scale of wicked problems facing the planet, Slaughter turned to the integral work of Ken Wilber. This approach has enabled him to integrate and present a coherent, multi-layered narrative of the current predicament. In his *Futures Thinking for the Third Millennium* Slaughter (1999) first flags the four-quadrant model, offered by Wilber (2001), and now used by many futurists including myself (2012). This is an excellent sense making tool. It effectively maps the various human and more-than-human systems we inhabit.

This tool offered the synthesis of elements the Slaughter was looking for. As he notes the solution we are looking for, the transcendent space from which new stories can emerge, "cannot be found through the further development and evolution of rationalist thought, nor through a one-sided and over-powerful system of science and technology. Rather, it lies in escaping from – or rather, transcending – the 'flatland' imposed on us by 300 years of reductionism and epistemological ignorance" (1999, p.32).

Through the integral lens Slaughter calls for 'cultural recovery' as it is only via a re-balancing of civilisational priorities that we can move from precarity to more sustainable futures. From my reading, Slaughter is calling for a meta-rationality to extend the rational to a relational epistemology and ontology that includes spiritual, ecological and deep subjectivity (see Bussey, and Sannum, Miriam, 2017). Here ignorance and mystery are equals with science and technology, and economics serves the planetary family. We have outgrown the epistemological parameters of Modernity. Slaughter has tied this fact to an open epistemology of the future, of course he acknowledges he is not alone in this, but his special focus on capacity building and linking foresight to institutions has been important in my journey as a futurist. I think he summed up his position perfectly in his 2020 essay when he concluded with the flowing observation:

Futures work needs to go beyond the humdrum, the conventional, and the search for strategic advantage in the here-and-now. It needs a planetary, civilizational coherent vision. It needs to be transformational in spirit and in deed. We might say that its core purpose is to help us all to live within a deeper, richer, and unbounded present. That is to say, for example, that cultural healing, energy transition, and large-scale ecological restoration can finally move from the contested margins. They are all part of a multihued and mainstream project to take back ownership of the world for future generations (2020b, p. 12).

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Figures

Figure 1

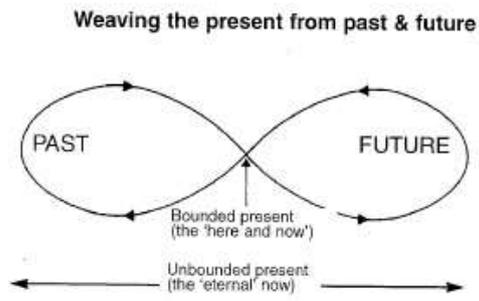


Figure 2

