

Journal Pre-proof

Richard Slaughter: Critical Futures and the Knowledge Base of Futures Studies

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**Richard Slaughter: Critical Futures and the Knowledge Base of Futures Studies;
Evaluation of a selection of Slaughter's published work.**

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Highlights

- Richard Slaughter is a major contributor to the development of the futures field since 1982.
- Major contributions discussed here are “Critical Futures Studies” and the creation of a “Knowledge Base of Futures Studies”
- KBFS was published in 3 volumes in 1996 and as an even more inclusive electronic base in 2020.
- In these valuable contributions he relied on a relatively narrow core of Western futures activities.
- These reflect North America, Western Europe, and Australia and do not discuss important early futures work done elsewhere.

Richard Slaughter is one of a handful of people to whom we all owe undying gratitude for his role in sustaining and nurturing futures studies. He did so in many ways—by teaching and research, and as serving as President of the World Futures Studies Federation from 2001-2005. But I here wish to acknowledge his role in helping many of us understand what critical futures studies is, and in formulating first the idea and then the reality of a “knowledge base for futures studies.”

I had been active in futures studies for over fifteen years when I first encountered an article by Slaughter in the *World Future Society Bulletin* in 1984 (Slaughter, 1984a, 1984b). The idea of “critical” futures studies appealed to me. Slaughter stated that futures studies “has become associated with the needs of relatively powerful groups, primarily North American,” with “an artificial narrowing of vision” “rather than an expansion, of options.” But at the same time, he asserts that “the open-ended nature of the field” prevents it from contributing to education and other “professional services”. And so, with the rest of the article, Slaughter continued his quest for the creation of a critical futures studies that had begun with his doctoral dissertation at the University of Lancaster, UK, in 1982, and continues in his writing to this very day.

What most impressed me in Slaughter's article was a figure, titled “The Futures Field: Tools for Managing Change”, Figure on Part 1, p. 21, that arranged the varieties of people and positions in the futures field along a vertical line, from a “hard pole” of “Futures Research” at the top, to a “soft pole” of “Futures Movements” at the bottom, with “Future Studies” in the middle. This figure came from his doctoral thesis where the

figure had been titled “The Futures Field: A Spectrum of Activities and Influences” which I think is more accurate.

Insert Figure One here

I found this tripartite way of distinguishing the various parts of the field very useful and accurate. There is no doubt that there are differences in the field between those who insist on (or prefer) quantitative methods, and those who insist on (or prefer) qualitative ones. Like many of the people who entered the field when I did in the 1960s-70s, I had a bias towards quantitative methods. I thought I could “predict” the future, if I just had the right theory, sufficient data, and plenty of research money. Like many others, I quickly learned that humans were (and still are) light years away from possessing any of those three abilities with enough certainty to enable them to “predict” anything of importance and uncertainty about “the future”. Right from the start, Slaughter had no truck with quantitative methods and made his position very clear. But, in this figure, I thought he fairly acknowledged that both quantitative and qualitative, positivistic and visionary approaches should all be understood as fairly part of the futures field, with Futures Studies designating the academic center connecting the two extremes.

Another thing I specifically appreciated about the figure was identifying the Futures Movement as different from the other two dimensions. Many of us in the field strongly resist the term “futurism” to designate the field. Futurism, we feel, is appropriate only when it is used to refer to some specific “futures movement”—some specific preferred future to which a group is committed to promoting (or preventing). That is what an “ism” is, and the field, *per se*, is not about one specific future, or way of thinking about the future, but rather research and teaching about alternative futures in all dimensions, including futures movements.

I used Slaughter’s chart in my introductory graduate classes in futures studies that I taught at the University of Hawaii as soon as it was available since I thought it showed that futures studies is a Big Tent into which many views about “the future” are welcome for study, discussion and advocacy, and while (like any discipline) each futurist can warmly argue in support of one theory, or method, or approach, or image of the future as being superior to others, the field, *per se*, encompasses them all. This was especially important to me because the World Futures Studies Federation was originally established, in part, to be a place where futurists from communist and capitalist, as well as “uncommitted”, countries could meet and safely discuss preferred and alternative futures.

Even though Figure One does not specifically state so, I felt it suggested, and that most people active then understood, the futures field as being cross-disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and perhaps transdisciplinary—that no single academic discipline or disciplinary area could fully incorporate what is needed in order to understand what is understandable about “the futures”: engineers were as welcome as poets, and mystics as well as economists. I was struck by this when I attended a huge precursor conference of what would become the World Futures Studies Federation in Kyoto in 1970 (Kodansha, a prestigious publishing firm in Japan, published, in English, five volumes of papers and

discussions from the conference) and when I attended a meeting in Rome in 1971, convened by Eleonora Masini on behalf of IRADES and Mankind 2000. Masini had produced mammoth bibliographies and newsletters for IRADES documenting the growing literature. I also had produced a bibliography for my futures classes at Virginia Tech in 1968 that also appeared in a very early issue of the *World Future Society Bulletin*. My bibliography caught the eye of Masini (who I had met in Kyoto) and she invited me to the Rome meeting. There perhaps a dozen or so early futurists discussed how to catalog the futures literature in libraries—literally, where in the library such books should sit and with what catalog numbers. There was so much disciplinary variation in what the group agreed were valuable contributions to the field that we could not decide on a single area where they should all be stacked together in each library of the world. This meeting in 1971 was, in effect, an early attempt to define the “knowledge base of futures studies”, though no one described it as such then. It seemed clear that the knowledge base rested in all forms of human endeavor and understanding and not just a narrow few.

Slaughter’s next contribution to the futures field *per se* was “Probing beneath the surface: Review of a decade’s futures work” (Slaughter, 1989). After citing the work of Walt Anderson, Elise Boulding, Bertrand de Jouvenel, Howard Didsbury, Wentworth Eldredge, Michel Godet, Willis Harman, Robert Jungk, Harold Linstone, Don Michael, John Naisbitt, and Alvin Toffler, Slaughter wrote,

Careful study of the field suggested two major conclusions. First, that the impulse underlying much futures work reflected substantial and widely shared concerns about such things as the nature of change, uncertainty and the need to avoid undesirable futures. These are problems which concern everyone, or should do so. The second conclusion was that at that time dominant US approaches tended to be deficient in certain key respects. While outstanding individuals had succeeded in establishing enviable ‘track records’ and an accomplished tradition of instrumental futures work (often for large organizations, including commercial corporations) the literature was permeated by pop psychology, millenarianism and an ideological naivety which was truly breathtaking at times.

The rest of the article was a discussion and elaboration of what he had written in more detail the dissertation and *WFS Bulletin* articles mentioned above.

Slaughter’s next series of publications focused largely on what I consider to be his major contribution. This began with a Special Issue of *Futures* on “The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies” (Slaughter, 1993), with an editorial by Slaughter. As usual, Slaughter starts his essay by stating that “[f]utures work has...been over-identified with prediction, forecasting, ‘think-tanks’ and Western, corporatist, positivistically inclined ‘futurology’” and “the highly visible work of pop futurists....” Yet “there are not yet enough scholars working in the field to achieve a ‘critical mass’ of practitioners.” Kjell Dahle, from Norway, had recently published a book about the futures field, (Kjell, 1991) and pointed out to Slaughter at the World Futures Studies Federation conference in Barcelona in September 1991 “how the lack of a common knowledge base greatly complicated the

tasks of those preparing courses, teaching and developing FS projects.” Slaughter resolved to address this issue by developing such a base.

Slaughter characterized futures studies “as a substantive interdisciplinary field of enquiry” that nonetheless had a core basis in **Language, concepts and metaphors** (such as 'future' and 'futures', 'alternatives', 'options', 'agenda for the 21st Century' and 'sustainability', as well as various metaphors. “Images of futures are both ubiquitous and yet under-studied” Slaughter asserted; **Theories, ideas and images** (such as “evolution, progress, chaos, stability, sustainability, permanence and new forms of society”); a rich **Literature** of “some 200 key books by authors from around the world (but predominantly from Europe and North America)”, that Slaughter does not name, as well as “speculative writing, or SF”, and at least three journals, *Futures*, *Futures Research Quarterly*, and *21C*; **Organisations, networks and practitioners** such as the World Future Society and the World Futures Studies Federation as well as “specialised organisations which fall under the heading of 'institutions of foresight’”; **Methodologies and tools**, including “environmental scanning, scenario analysis, cross-impact matrices, the Delphic survey method, forecasting and strategic management, national and global modelling and, last but not least, positive critique and analysis of discourse”; and **Social movements and innovations**, though Slaughter comments that the “extent to which the peace, women's, environmental and other movements are part of the futures field is difficult to determine.”

The remainder of the issue is devoted to essays illustrating each of the highlighted core areas by Sohail Inayatullah, Martha Garrett, Tony Judge, Slaughter, Ian Miles, Rolf Homman and Peter Moll, and Hazel Henderson. Slaughter’s essay focused on what he sees as the central concepts in the futures field, concentrating on features of critical futures studies relating to the necessity of creating sustainability in the face of the dominant forces of environmental and social destruction.

True to his word, in 1996 Slaughter produced a massive three-volume set of essays on *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* (Slaughter, 1996a). In 2005, these were brought out on CD. I displayed the material prominently in my office in case anyone wondered what futures studies was all about. Slaughter also wrote another article for *Futures* about this impressive project, “The knowledge base of futures studies as an evolving process” (Slaughter, 1996b). In this essay, Slaughter outlines the essence of the KBFS, showing that he elaborated the basic model he discussed in 1993, with several important additions and omissions.

Summary of main sections of Volumes 1-3 of *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*, 1996 are:

Volume 1: Foundations

Part 1: Origins

Part 2: Futures Concepts and Metaphors

Part 3: The Futures Literature

Part 4: The Foundations of Futures Studies

Volume 2: Organizations, Practices, Products

Part 1: Futures Organizations

Part 2: Futures Methods and Tools

Part 3: Images and Imaging Processes

Part 4: Social Innovations and Futures

Volume 3: Directions and Outlooks

Part 1: New Directions in Futures Thinking

Part 2: The Outlook for the New Millennium

Part 3: The Long View

Slaughter points out that “there is no section on practitioners at this point”. Kjell Dahle and Michael Marien provided two discussions of the futures literature, while I. F. Clarke, Peter Moll, and Wendell Bell wrote sections on the origins of the futures field. All of the subsequent chapters also were written by people fully qualified to explain the area assigned them. The three volumes could well serve as an introduction to the knowledge base of futures studies. The process of identifying authors and editing their contributions may have led Slaughter to say “that far from being a monolithic entity driven by 'Western' interests, the knowledge base is a dynamic process that will evolve over time. In so doing it will become less 'Western' and more truly global.”

The journal, *American Behavioral Scientist*, asked Wendell Bell to compile a special issue on futures studies. Bell in turn asked me, and I asked Slaughter, along with 25 other futurists, to contribute to a collection that focused on the theoretical and methodological bases of futures studies courses then being taught at institutions of higher education around the world “Futures studies in higher education” in the *American Behavioral Scientist*, (Volume 42 (3) 1998). These articles were all subsequently published in book form as *Advancing Futures: Futures Studies in Higher Education* by Praeger in 2002 (Dator, 2002) (and in Korean in 2008.) Slaughter’s contribution was titled, “Futures studies as an intellectual and applied discipline” (Slaughter, 1998).

Slaughter observed that science fiction, on the one hand, and concerns about environmental and social destruction caused by the western, and especially American, mania for continued economic production, on the other, provoked in him his first deep interest and concern about the future of the Earth and its inhabitants, while attending a meeting of the World Future Society in Toronto, Canada, in 1980 motivated him to return to the University of Lancaster to finish his dissertation on futures studies and develop his ideas about critical futures studies.

Slaughter summarized this article by stating,

This paper has argued that Futures Studies in general, and Critical Futures Studies in particular, have come of age. That is, FS can now be regarded as a viable discipline with multiple uses and applications. I also suggested that critical futures work taps deeper sources than the still-dominant empiricist American tradition and, in so doing, provides access to a range of powerful new tools and options. If this is correct then we will witness the further emergence of FS onto

the world stage in both practical and applied ways. This would clearly enhance the prospects for humankind to weather the storms ahead and move on to a truly post-post-industrial civilisation.

In the section on the futures-oriented courses he teaches, he made it clear that he taught and advocated the critical futures studies focus specifically in opposition to futurists who support “the Western industrial worldview” which he deemed “profoundly defective.” “I work with an evolving diagnosis of what has gone wrong in Western culture and an evolving view of what this means for the future”, as well as what we can and should do to counter that future. He specifically emphasized that “[u]nlike some of my futurist colleagues, I don't believe that aliens will visit us or that the human race is merely a transitional species that should make way for so-called ‘intelligent’ machines.”

In 2005, *Futures* (Vol 37 No 5) published an issue devoted to essays about the origin and evolution of the World Futures Studies Federation itself. Slaughter served as editor and opened his editorial (Slaughter, 2005) by observing, “[a] look back at the origins of the WFSF show that, in contrast with its larger US cousin, the WFS, the WFSF was created by people who dissented from the emerging status quo in the world and who wished to ‘open up’ the domain to cultural pluralism.” I essentially confirmed and elaborated on that observation in the piece that I wrote for that issue of *Futures* (Dator, 2005). Slaughter also stated that “from the beginning the WFSF aspired to be a true world federation. As time passed it became rich in people, insight, idealism and effort. It has never yet been rich in financial terms. But it could well be in the near future. It has certainly created a tradition of flexibility and openness; a tolerant environment in which many voices can be heard and a variety of progressive agendas pursued.” He concluded his comments with a “summary of the themes that have created the WFSF and continue to inspire those working within it. They include the need to:

- critique power and stand apart from it;
- explore alternatives to the status quo;
- equip people with the means to define and explore futures of their choice;
- encourage the young to understand and take charge of their world;
- build the futures domain in both theoretical and applied ways;
- encourage a range of social innovations;
- induct newcomers into the field; and
- explore the grounds of futures beyond dystopia.”

In 2008, the journal, *Futures*, celebrated its 40th anniversary by inviting various futurists to comment on the state of the journal and the field over the forty years. Slaughter noted that while some ideas and terms that futurists first began using, such as “scenario”, are now popularly used, the field, especially in its critical perspective, has had little impact on the headlong rush of civilization to its demise. “Yet if we look for evidence of any moderation in the underlying growth dynamic that is driving the current diet of ‘bad news’ one must say that such evidence is very difficult to find.” (Slaughter, 2008)

He notes that most futures work is centered around two different poles:

Focus on pragmatic social interests, systemic and linear methods; structural focus on the collective external world and conceptual/method-and-tool-oriented with respect to capacity building. (On the whole this is conventional work carried out mainly on behalf of existing centres of political and economic power.).

Focus on long-term, civilisational social interests, use of critical and integral methods, integration of focal domains including individual behaviours and meaning-making capacities; and moving beyond methods and tools to consider the social legitimation of futures/foresight work. (Such work tends to be carried out by academics, would-be social innovators and occasionally by leading-edge research institutes.)

The two poles are not of equal impact, Slaughter points out: “we can say that the first of the two following profiles is dominant, while the second characterises only a small minority”.

One of the organizations that played an important role in the futures of futures studies itself for a while was the Foundation for the Future, established by Walter Kistler, a philanthropist who made his fortune in the space industry—one of the most persistently futures-oriented activities of humanity. Kistler was interested in truly long-range futures, arguing that humanity should think as far forward as it could backwards—at least to the evolution of *homo sapiens*, *sapiens* and preferably to the first in the *homo* line—if not to the Big Bang. He sponsored many futures activities on this long-range perspective, as well as a survey of “the state of play in the futures field” which Slaughter reviewed in an issue of *foresight* in 2009 (Slaughter, 2009).

Four articles discussed the results written by Slaughter and Chris Riedy on “assessing the balance between progressive and socially conservative foresight”; Riedy on the influence of futures on policy and sustainability; Graham May on futures in Europe; and Dennis May Morgan “on futures schools of thought within the integral futures framework” a perspective to which Slaughter was especially devoted. Acknowledging the limited and incomplete nature of the survey and the reports here, Slaughter concludes “[t]hat as yet the futures/foresight area has simply not progressed far enough, fast enough or been adopted broadly enough.”

In 2020, Slaughter and Andy Hines heroically brought out a completely new electronic version of the KBFS, *KBFS 2020*, (Slaughter & Hines, 2020) in four volumes that was distributed free to all members of the Association of Professional Futurists and made widely available to all others. Thirty-seven futurists contributed articles to the project. The volumes were titled “Foundations”, “Methods and Practices”, “Synergies, Case Studies, and Implementation”, and “Directions and Outlooks” to a total of 508 pages.

KBFS 2020 demonstrates that the futures field has made enormous strides since the first version in 1996. There are many more people writing on a much wider variety of topics under each of the headings, and there are many new headings on topics that were not even mentioned in the early version. There are more contributions by non-westerners

than before. Unfortunately, the corpus of *KBFS 2020* is too great for me to analyze in the detail it deserves. I do hope that someone was assigned the task of making such a review for this issue of *Futures*.

Comment.

I have recently concluded that “the past” is everything that happened before I was born or gained self-consciousness while “the future” begins when I die or when I become senile. Everything in between is “the present”. All my long life I have yearned for the future, and yet, for a variety of reasons I also have been unusually familiar with things that happened well before I was born. Nonetheless, I found that I was forever stuck in the present, looking both “forward” and “backward”.

The same may true of a person’s intellectual life as well. We each know best what we learned and experienced first and have continued to experience, and tend to ignore or forget what we have not experienced by direct or mediated contact during our own life.

Richard Slaughter says he entered futures via science fiction and environmental awareness in the mid 1980s, and seems unaware of the scores of people around the world and their ideas, activities, and institutions oriented towards the future before the 1980s who I consider essential to the founding and trajectory of the field. Some of the people who I consider the most important in the earliest days are not even mentioned, or, if they are cited, their ideas and work are largely unexamined. I am thinking of many people who I could list and explain if there were space here, but I must mention two examples. One is Johan Galtung. His brilliant and numerous writings are absolutely central to the creation and evolution of most ideas about the futures. Galtung’s essays are a joyous pleasure to read because of his many clever turns of phrase. The other is Madhi Elmandjra, from Morocco. His fiery presence and penetrating intellect constantly challenged the WFSF to broaden its membership so that it more truly embraced all humanity’s hopes and fears for the futures. Both Galtung and Elmandjra were early presidents of the WFSF.

Slaughter also emphasized that too much of futures studies as it was popularly known was American-centric and of dubious intellectual rigor. That is true, and was another crucial reason for the creation of the WFSF in contrast to the WFS. I heard many WFSF members say that if western civilization was so great why have we had two world wars, a global depression, the attempt by the most “highly developed” nation on the Earth to exterminate an entire group of people in the most brutal ways, and now an iron curtain dividing Europe and much of the world into bristling armed camps itching to destroy the planet a thousand times over with atomic weapons? Surely we can do better than that, they said, and so they established the WFSF in order to create a better world by amplifying the voices of more cultures than just those of the west, or of the United States. Many people labored in the various futures vineyards around the world, including in the United States, doing balanced, ethically-oriented, and rigorous research, teaching, writing and consulting as well,

But I find inadequate recognition of the role Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Thai, Indonesian, Malaysian, Philippine, Indian, Pakistani, Soviet, African, South American and other futurists and organizations played in the creation and development of futures studies and its knowledge base. Their work was documented in the journal *Futures* and the *World Futures Studies Federation Newsletter*. Anyone who has not read *Mankind 2000*, containing papers of what might be called the first world futures conference in Oslo, Norway, in 1967, which was co-organized by Johan Galtung, and especially the five volumes containing the proceedings of the Kyoto world futures conference in 1970, sponsored by the Japan Society for Futures Research (whose origins lie in the early 1960s) may not understand how global and multidisciplinary (and multigenerational) futures was from the beginning.

Futures was not invented by the US military and the RAND Corporation as too many people have said. They played a role, but so did many people at the same time who were concerned about peace, culture, the environment, space, governance, gender, race, class and many other issues. I believe that the first nationwide futures survey in the US may have been *Recent Social Trends in the United States* (Waples, 1933), prepared by the most future-oriented thinkers of that era for President Herbert Hoover's Committee on Social Trends—where a major concern was population decline in the US and the west.

Almost all of the issues that have puzzled the field up to the present were discussed intelligently and well in papers in the proceedings from those two conferences, as well as subsequent ones. World Conferences of the WFSF that have been held, since 1967 to 2010, chronologically, in Oslo, Kyoto, Rome, Dubrovnik, Cairo, Stockholm, San Jose (Costa Rica), Honolulu, Beijing, Budapest, Barcelona, Turku (Finland), Nairobi, Brisbane, Bacolod (the Philippines), Brasov (Romania), Kure City (Japan), Budapest, Trollhättan (Sweden), Bollwiller (France), Bucharest, Jondal (Norway), and Mexico City.

These were not exotic venues for jet-setting futurists to hold meetings. They were co-organized by local futurists and representatives from the WFSF in order to have a fair balance of local and global participation. There also have been numerous local or regional conferences of the WFSF as well as futures courses taught irregularly in Africa and Asia. From 1976 to 1991, the WFSF offered a futures course at the InterUniversity Centre for Post Graduate Studies in Dubrovnik, then Yugoslavia.

I do not see that these activities were discussed sufficiently when Slaughter described the history or content of the field. While his critical futurism is importantly expressed in his unique way, I suspect it could have been even more powerful if he had built it on the existing foundation and so pushed the critique forward and outward.

Finally, Slaughter's work is with few exceptions about *futures studies in English*. While much global futures work is conducted in English (or French or Spanish), the futures work of a vast network of futurists working with others in their own language (and then sometimes also in English) is under-represented in the KBFS. Bae Ilhan and Park Seongwon (Bae, 2014), among others, have expressed concern about basing a discipline

as vital and inclusive as futures studies on any one language, especially on English. That results in a kind of intellectual imperialism that should concern us all.

While Slaughter might wish that I expressed my comments in different terms, I believe he will agree with my basic concerns and, noting that no one person can know everything and do everything, will challenge scholars to create KBFS from their own cosmologies and languages, and so with a deep bow and genuine expression of gratitude to Richard Slaughter for working so diligently and well, we will continue, with him, to push the gnarly futures rock up the hill of time.

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Figure 1: The Futures Field: Tools for Managing Change (Slaughter 1984a, p21)



TABLE1: THE FURTHER FIELD TOOLS FOR MANAGING CHANGE

Futures research (Major knowledge-seeking focus)	<i>Prediction</i> <i>Economic and technical forecasting</i>	Trend extrapolation Social indicators Social forecasting Technology assessment
↑	<i>Systems analysis</i>	Global and societal modelling Long cycle research Simulation of change processes
↓	<i>Management science</i>	Issues management Decision and risk/benefit analysis Policy analysis
↓	<i>Scenario writing</i>	Ethnographic futures research Cross impact analysis Delphi surveys
Future studies (Synthesis, criticism and communication)	<i>Comparative surveys and critique of futures issues</i>	Digests, indexes, overview of problems and dimensions of change
↑	<i>Futures in education</i>	Professional training and development Curriculum innovation and courses development Interdisciplinarity
↓	<i>Speculative writing</i>	Social imaging processes Creation and falsification of images Exploration of trans-rational
↓	<i>Networking</i>	Global communications Social innovations

		Green politics
	<i>Theory and practice of alternative lifestyles</i>	Alternative technology Reconstruction of community New age cultures and values
Futures movements (Stimulating, reconceptualizing, and possibly leading change)	<i>Humanistic and transpersonal psychology</i>	Future imaging workshops Despair and empowerment work Psychodrama Psychosynthesis

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