

Reflections on RS Books

Recovering the Future (1988)

In 1986 I was invited to Australia to address a conference entitled *Futures in Education*. While there I noted some huge differences between it and the UK environment. I'd finished my PhD in 1982, been out of work for a year and, by chance, received a post- Doctoral fellowship from the then Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). But that was it. Once the fellowship was over, I was stranded. No one wanted a freshly minted futurist. Foresight projects had yet to be invented.

Then came the call from Australia.

To cut a long story short I took part in another conference in Melbourne. This time it was the centenary conference of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). I was a visiting fellow there for a while and, as such, took part in the meeting. It was here that I met Frank Fisher who headed up the Graduate School of Environmental Science (GSES) at Monash University. As a result of that meeting I was booked to deliver a series of lectures there in 1988. This book is a result of that invitation.

By then I had moved to Australia and had written a handful of published articles. These minor successes, and other related work, had left me feeling that there was a chance I could 'make it' in this new environment. But things were not that simple – they seldom are. It took a good deal longer to land a lectureship in the Institute of Education at the University of Melbourne. These were hard times both for myself and my family.

Frank very kindly invited me to put together a selection of readings for the course I was to teach. The latter was to be called *Alternative Australian Futures*. It built upon what had been previously accomplished by colleagues such as Frank, Peter Cocks and Noel Gough. It presented, perhaps for the first time, a truly 'critical' approach to futures enquiry and action. Then, as now, the term 'critical' did not mean 'to criticise'. Rather it means 'looking in depth'. Some twenty students took the course and I felt that we had accomplished something new and worthwhile.

The cover design for the book had been produced for me by a designer at the University of Lancaster, where I'd been based for some years. It included a logo that I'd also had designed that had been based on a past, present, futures diagram. But the book was fairly basic in production terms. The font was an ugly sans serif, the figures unsophisticated and the layout unexceptional. Nevertheless, I was proud of my first Australian book. It was divided into four sections:

1. Futures now – exploring the extended present
2. Taking issue with 'the way things are'
3. Futures in education – a quiet revolution? and
4. The answer is a journey.

The central proposition of the book was that 'by recovering our individual sense of the future we may steadily recreate what has been for too long missing from our public life: a quality of participating consciousness in space and time'. This and other themes have since been worked out in much greater depth and (one would hope greater sophistication) in many other papers and books. Those who are interested in such things will find an expression of 'early critical futures work' here in *Recovering the Future*.

Delicate Immortal Meanings was selected for publication in the *Gollancz Sunday Times SF Competition Stories*, 1987. Since returning to the UK in 1975 I had met and come to know a

number of British and American SF authors. At the time I wondered if I would join them. This SF story was my first attempt at the genre and it clearly drew on my responses to the Bermuda experience. The fact that I'd achieved publication on my first attempt suggested that I could perhaps begin a career in SF if I so chose. But as my understanding of SF and FS deepened, so I was drawn decisively toward the latter. I began to see SF as an early inspiration, but not the field I wanted to work in full time. In later years, however, I drafted a number of other stories inspired by my responses to the very same context. Only time will tell if they will ever emerge - or remain as virtual presences in an alternative future that never took place...

<https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/RS-RTF-Author-Reflections-2005.pdf>

Education for the 21st Century (1993)

The book began as a series of informal discussions between Hedley Beare and myself during 1990-91. I'd been appointed in 1989 as a Lecturer in Futures and Social Education in the then Institute of Education at the University of Melbourne. It soon became apparent that, while our background and experience were markedly different, our worldviews were closely aligned. While many – if not most – of our colleagues had reservations about Futures Studies (FS) as an area of disciplined enquiry, Hedley had long appreciated its significance, read some of the classic works and clearly understood how vital it was to bring 'futures' and 'education' together. He'd already written about this subject on a number of occasions. So as our discussions continued he suggested that we put the idea of a book on educating for the 21st century to the editor of an 'education and management' series. Approval duly arrived; we were invited to write a formal proposal and duly sent it off.

Once we'd signed a contract our work on the book began. During one of our first meetings we brought printouts of some of our most recent work, sat at a table and assigned specific pieces to several themed 'boxes.' We soon had a reasonable picture of where material in hand might be used. Next we divided up the task of putting chapters together. We each took one, wrote it as a draft and then passed it on to the other with a free hand to edit as each saw fit. I have to say that this was a wonderfully collaborative process. The only issues that ever arose were minor ones that had to do with timing. Hedley, as a full Professor, simply could not work as quickly as I could. That said, the process of collaboration was certainly one of the high points of my professional life. As I've noted in the 2011 Introduction, the book was well received within the teaching profession and we were sometimes hard-pressed to respond to the many subsequent invitations that we each received. Hedley and I went on to write other books. But this is the one that helped me to get established and, in time, to edit a further series on *Futures in Education*.

Re-reading the book in early 2011, it seemed to me that nothing that we wrote back in 1992 had been completely contradicted by subsequent events. Inevitably, perhaps, there were some topics that we could have handled differently. For example, some of our comments on the industrial worldview were a bit too repetitive. We over-estimated what schools could actually do and under-estimated the continuing power of an economic context increasingly dominated by 'economic rationalist' imperatives. We were therefore over optimistic about the potential for constructive change. One might say that schools are severely 'constrained' in what they can attempt to do, but we did not address those constraints very clearly at all. So if there was an omission in the book it may well have resulted from our implicit belief in the power of ideas to affect more instrumental kinds of power. In other words, we needed a broader and deeper analysis backed by more sturdy and penetrating forms of critique. Still, we did what we could with the tools then at our disposal. So it's fair to say, I think, that we made a start on what is, in

fact, a longer-term process than we realised at the time. That, in turn, justifies making the work available in this revised and up- dated form.

If we turn to what one might call the ‘underlying message’ I feel that it has become clearer and more urgent over the intervening years. The themes that we addressed included the following.

- The nature of the Western worldview, especially its defects or ‘faulty programming.’
- The growing interconnectedness of the world in relation to a rapidly globalising world order.
- Re-establishing a sense of ‘depth’ in the world, in part through careful use of a hierarchical metaphor allowing for distinct levels of existence and appropriate ways of knowing within each.
- A pivotal shift of focus and perception away from the past (but obviously not involving any simple-minded ejection of history) toward the emerging future.
- The need to be aware of the nature of schools as organisations.
- The related need to not ‘get lost in theory’ but to ensure that the ideas and suggestions we were putting forward were practicable, i.e. that they’d been tested out in practice, did not make unreasonable demands and were do-able.
- The proposition that what teachers and schools did would help to decide whether the 21st century would tend toward renewal or disaster.
- In that connection we stressed the need to shift our values and concerns from those attending the quest to possess material things, i.e. ‘to have,’ toward a focus on what it means ‘to be.’

In critiquing the Western industrial worldview we were of course taking on an immense and challenging task. We were neither the first nor the last to do so and neither of us was delusional to the extent that we’d imagine a small book by a couple of academics would necessarily change the world. But what we *did* believe was that we could influence some of the ways that people thought about schools, understood their role and, indeed, operated school systems. So we were encouraged by the many affirmations we received from the profession. Over time, however, what we did not get was any real ‘buy-in’ from those remote persons of ‘high office’ who ultimately control and operate educational systems. By which I mean the top echelons of decision-makers, administrators, ministers, economists and their equivalents within university hierarchies. While it’s unlikely that such roles or professions entirely lack any progressive thinkers, it seems to me that they are remarkably thin on the ground at these elevated levels. One result is that well-meaning books (projects, proposals, curriculum innovations and the like) such as ours may, for a while, attract some measure of superficial assent but are then set aside and ignored.

Why should this be?

It seems to me that the answer lies within the very worldview we were critiquing, and in the associated values and assumptions that, even now, continue to drive human civilisation toward ‘overshoot and collapse’ futures no sane individual would choose. It’s now painfully clear that those who are most committed to that earlier worldview, with its heroic assumptions about growth, resources, the conquest of nature and so on, will not relinquish it until they are absolutely forced by circumstances to do so. Among the many consequences are that schools may not be resourced to engage in ‘the shift from past to future,’ universities may not commit to placing the global emergency at the very top of their agendas and governments may not turn aside from their disastrous growth-at-all-costs policies until it is too late.

How can one be so sure? This whole dilemma sprang into sharper focus when I read an interview with Gus Speth, Jimmy Carter’s one-time environment advisor. When asked about

why the profoundly serious issues raised in his book *The Bridge at the End of the World* had not been dealt with sooner, when various policies and actions would have been that much more effective, he said words to the effect that ‘we were up against a much more powerful system.’ That was the nub of the issue then and it remains so today. Despite financial scandals and economic ‘downturns’ of worldwide significance, the interconnected system of power, profit and systematic degradation of the world’s resources continues on its destructive path. The rich – and especially the ‘super rich’ – continue to dominate social and economic agendas, dictate consumer ‘wants’, and they will not be easily convinced to desist. That, fundamentally, is why ‘futures in education’ remains an idea, a distant dream, rather than an accomplished reality. That is why books like ours – and there are many of them – are tolerated, read by some, but are ultimately ineffectual.

The recognition of these uncomfortable and disconcerting facts could be viewed as a reason to despair and to perhaps give up, accept the inevitable. Yet if that were the case there would have been little point in making this book available to a new generation of educators. Two very different developments have occurred in the interim period and, in my view at least, hold out real prospects for the kinds of changes we put forward. The first of these is highlighted in the final paragraph of the book and it’s worth reproducing here for two reasons. First, it reveals our overall intentions rather clearly; second, it suggests a way forward that has proved more productive than we could ever have imagined. We wrote that:

This book has been informed by the view that the outer world is an expression of the inner one. The biggest step forward would be re-establishing a map of culture that includes more than the material and the instrumental. We can then use the new map, the new worldview, both to frame and to define futures that breach the bounds of instrumental rationality and see human life as a self-aware part of the whole. (P. 166)

Among the publications that we referenced and occasionally quoted from were three early works by Ken Wilber so, clearly, we must have sensed that his efforts had relevance to our own. What we could not have known then was that within these works lay the beginnings of the Integral perspective that indeed gives us exactly the kind of ‘map of culture’ that we knew was needed and, indeed, were aiming towards. And that, as they say, is a whole other story.

In my own case I’ve followed Wilber’s career and work, read many of his books and even met with him on a couple of occasions. I’ve never been a ‘Wilber groupie,’ never subscribed to the podcasts and other spin-offs of his emergence as a globally significant thinker and philosopher. I’ve neither become an uncritical admirer or an Integral theorist *per se*. While I’ve no objection to any of the above, my interest is in carefully and selectively *using* aspects of the Integral perspective. The reason is simple: used well, it brings clarity where there was confusion, light where there was darkness and ways forward when these seemed few and far between. So any serious consideration of my work since co-writing *Education for the 21st century* with Hedley will acknowledge the influence that this perspective has had. Readers can draw their own conclusions from the companion volume to this one as well as from other recent works.

The other significant development since is the enhanced clarity and renewed sense of motivation and purpose that attends the dawning realisation that humanity as a whole is indeed facing a true global emergency with no easy exits or ‘cost-free’ solutions. While the rich and otherwise privileged may continue to inhabit their zones of affluence for a while longer there are, in fact, no escape routes from this emergency other than those that arise from directly confronting it and comprehensively dealing with it. I would now go as far as to say that no approach to ‘educating for the twenty first century’ can afford to ignore the great global challenges that increasingly confront us. In other words the ‘shift from past to future’ that we

wrote about looks less and less like a 'take-it-or-leave-it' option that can be safely ignored and more like an imperative to which all involved in education must respond if they are to retain any vestige of credibility.

This returns us to a dynamic that I first described in *The Foresight Principle*, back in 1995. I called it the 'dialectic of foresight and experience.' If we continue to deny the increasingly obvious then our modes of social learning will have little to do with schools. They'll be imposed by devastation and disaster as the feedback from breaching global limits turns back upon human (and non-human) communities in ways that can neither be prevent nor controlled. To the extent that we take up and use our capacities for intelligent foresight there's still time to moderate this process and find less costly ways forward. By the same token, education still has a key role to play in equipping new generations for an increasingly challenging world. But the game is changing and time is no longer on our side.

As ever, the choice remains with us, here, now.

Richard Slaughter Foresight International Brisbane

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The Foresight Principle (1995)

The Foresight Principle began as a short paper of the same name published in *Futures* in October 1990, one year after I had started work at the Institute of Education, the University of Melbourne. It was only my fourth paper for *Futures*. Here is the abstract.

Foresight has ubiquitous uses in everyday life. But its implementation at the social level presents difficulties that have not yet been fully resolved. This article considers the nature of foresight as a human capacity, some barriers to its use and contexts where implementation is being attempted. It is concluded that foresight activities are basically driven by structural imperatives. They imply a growth of foresight work despite the considerable difficulties involved. ¹

At the time the term 'foresight' had not been widely used in a futures context if, indeed, it had been used at all. It seemed to me, however, that there was real value in the term. People might be confused by terms like 'futures studies'. But foresight was something that anyone could grasp and, moreover, see operating in daily life. While futures studies were remote and abstract, foresight was clearly grounded in everyday life. It therefore seemed an appropriate term. Then, on one of many trips from Australia to the UK, something quite remarkable happened. It felt as though two sources of inspiration - 'foresight' and 'wisdom' - were resonating together. I'm not implying that I understood in any depth what these terms meant. But whenever they came into proximity within my mind sparks would begin to fly. Something was obviously happening. A huge amount of energy was somehow being generated as these two entities interacted.

I reflected on and played around with these ideas for some time before writing a proposal to a UK publisher. Then, following some brief discussions, I returned to my office at the university during a vacation and wrote the basic text for the book in about two weeks. This would have been late 1993 or early 1994. It then took a while to edit the raw manuscript into shape. By the time I'd finished I felt as though I'd finally been able to assemble a reasonably concise statement about why foresight seemed to be such a powerful, yet underutilised, capacity. The book was published in 1995 after I had left the university and was again learning how to earn an independent living. I found it hard at first but soon adapted, adjusted, and even came to prefer this very different *modus operandi*.

It was another couple of years before I could begin to describe the links between individual -, and what I began to think of as social foresight.² But the reviews were generally positive and I was encouraged to think that I might be on the right track. I was pleased, as any author would be, to see that the book appeared on the World Future Society's list of 'best sellers' for some time. Yet, as the book was taking off, so my relations with the publisher were deteriorating. This 'publisher of choice' for the futures arena, had risen fast and achieved much but then seemed to decline and fall almost as quickly. Royalties tailed off and stopped entirely. Interesting, then, to see the book still advertised on the Internet under a different imprint a decade later. Clearly someone was benefitting, but not the author.

During these post-Melbourne University years I worked out of a home office with a schedule determined largely by my own preferences. Still the energy contained in these ideas and propositions only continued to grow. *The Foresight Principle* had allowed me to express them coherently for the first time, but it was time for another approach. So with the help of other colleagues, members of the World Futures Studies Federation and the World Future Society, I began working on the *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*.

And that, as they say, was a whole new ball game.

References

1. Slaughter, R. The Foresight Principle, *Futures* 22, 5, October 1990, 801-819.
2. Slaughter, R. Futures Studies: From Individual to Social Capacity, *Futures* 28, 1996, 751-762.

Richard Slaughter, February 2005, Brisbane.

https://richardslaughter.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FP_Author_Reflections_Final.pdf

Futures for the Third Millennium: Enabling the Forward View (1999)

This book contains 22 papers most of which were published in futures journals over a ten-year period. I took the idea to Oliver Freeman, then publisher and CEO at Prospect Media in Sydney. I'd worked with Oliver as editor of *The ABN Report* for a couple of years and had greatly enjoyed working with him and his team. When we first discussed the matter in 1998 I mentioned that all the papers would need to be re-edited for the book since the earlier versions were indeed intended for professional journals. Oliver subsequently introduced me to an editor, James -, and we worked on the various chapters for an extended period. I am grateful to both of them for turning this material into a publishable item.

As it happened, much of this time was also another period of domestic upheaval. I clearly remember working on the paper about 'professional standards in FS' in short bursts on those days when I could muster sufficient clarity. (Indeed, it took me back to the time when I was working on my PhD thesis as the father of two small, and very lively, boys. That, however, was a pleasure by comparison.) Yet the period proved, once again, that one can indeed work, and be productive, even though the sky is falling...

As the book neared completion other members of Oliver's team began work on the layout and cover. We chose one that showed a partly dissected human head and also a rugged landscape of hills and valleys metaphorically stretching out into the distant future. It is a striking combination of images that speak to our humanity and also to the vast landscapes of imagination and deep time.

I could not know at the time that the book was destined to be used as a course reader at the Australian Foresight Institute, yet to be created. Yet within a couple of years it became a 'standard text' for those beginning their careers in a new tradition within FS. It is one that welcomed and included critical futures work and also opened to what would later be known as integral futures.

<https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/RS-FTM-Author-Reflections-2005.pdf>

Futures Beyond Dystopia (2004)

Like *the Foresight Principle* before it, this work began as a paper for *Futures*.¹ It was published in 1998 and set out some of the key ideas that were later to take on greater resonance and meaning. The paper fell into three main sections. First, a critique of some futures methods and a couple of works of science fiction. Second, a brief overview of Siddhartha's insight (that 'meaning and reality are not somewhere behind things, they are in them, in all of them') and Wilber's four quadrant framework. Finally, a section linking Berman's notion of 're-enchantment' with that of 'worldview design.' It was a fairly straightforward piece that came in under 5 500 words.

I thought no more of it until a couple of people mentioned in passing how much they'd enjoyed the piece. It was this, I think, which sowed a seed that the topic might be worth returning to later. The chance came when, over a period of several years, I'd continued to write on a number of associated themes and found myself with several essays that were relevant to this territory. As I assembled the papers the outlines of a book began to appear. The problem was, however, that there were very many significant gaps. Clearly this was not going to be merely a collection of essays; it had to be something more.

A large part of the underlying drive to write FBD derives most centrally from what I call 'the great refusal.' What I mean by this is a deep sense, shared no doubt by many futurists and others, that current trends in the world do seem to lead to a terrible and diminished future for the human race. Instead of finding this merely depressing, my response is to do everything I possibly can in the here-and-now, with others, to moderate the slide toward disaster. The other motivation is my belief that FS is one of the few fields of enquiry and action that specifically concerns itself with understanding what might be called the 'foundations of the next civilisation.' This is heady stuff, indeed, and it balances what could otherwise be an unhealthy preoccupation with death and disaster on an unimaginable scale.

That said, there are three unifying themes in FBD. The first emerged from a growing conviction that what I call the 'American empirical tradition' had been in decline for some years. The second was a sense that what might be called 'the integral paradigm' could provide a way forward and even re-establish the discipline on a more secure basis. These two themes took on greater reality when, at the Australian Foresight Institute, I had the chance to design and teach a number of post-graduate course units leading to a Master's in Strategic Foresight. The utility of the approach emerged steadily. What stood out – so plainly it could not be ignored – was that

critical futures work and integral enquiry were indeed further steps in the evolution of futures studies (FS). Moreover, they were not merely theoretical but practical steps that led directly to a greatly enhanced capacity for advanced futures/foresight practice. This first became clear through essays and assignments, and then later in the nature of actual projects that people were carrying out in the field.

The third unifying theme is that of 'creating social foresight.' Clearly this is a development out of the suggestions put forward in *the Foresight Principle* some years earlier. Now, however, much had been clarified, the old conflicts between inner and outer, and between (for example) empiricism and hermeneutics, had been resolved. Suddenly (or so it seemed) we were looking at, indeed successfully using, a much expanded, broader and deeper framework. This meant that we could understand complex situations (in organisations, cultures, etc) and have more than an inkling about what was going on. It also meant that we could address the wider process of methodological and disciplinary renewal. The focus on social foresight grew out of these elements and took on a powerfully integrating role.

We were fortunate to win a grant from the Pratt Foundation in Melbourne that, over an extended period, allowed us to take a long and careful look at this subject. It meant that we could assign researchers to various topics, engage a professional editor and issue a series of monographs.² Through this process we were able to go back and look both at the grounding of foresight in everyday life as well as its extensions through various 'stages of capability' through which it can be built up to an 'installed social capacity.' Somewhere during this process one of the students 'Googled' the term 'social foresight' and suggested that I may, in fact, have been responsible for coining it! That could be correct but I have to say that I was unaware of it at the time. The term, and what it stands for, emerged steadily over a period of years and it was not until later that its inherent power became clear.

Upon receiving a contract for this book I set to work to fashion it into one. As the hard-pressed director of the AFI I had no time or energy during the week to devote to such a task. Thus I ended up returning to the office most Saturdays and putting in several hours of concentrated work there undisturbed. To bring the material from a scattered series of essays into shape as a coherent book took nearly a year. Then there was the usual business of chasing up references, reading through galley proofs, organising publicity and so on. Imagine my surprise, therefore, when on receiving a copy of the finished book I found that the words 'problematic' and 'problematique' had been confused such that in cases where I'd intended the former, the latter had been substituted! Such is the joy of authorship. No matter how hard one tries to cover all bases, it is not uncommon for such mistakes to occur.

The book was launched by Prof Ian Lowe, a close friend and valued colleague, at a local branch of Readings (a Melbourne bookstore) on March 3rd, 2004. The price, however, was a real setback. Unbeknownst to me the local distributor had decided on a cover price of over AUD\$70, or close to twice what it was later available for on Amazon. It was then that I began to look at alternative methods of publication. After a while the reviews began drifting in and, like any author, I was glad to see that most of them were positive. The standout contrast came in one from *Future Survey*, the World Future Society's broad-spectrum scanning newsletter. Back in 2001 I'd published a fairly sturdy critique of the latter, building on comments by Wendell Bell and others.³ The review summarised the content, highlighted comments from chapter five (of eighteen) that critiqued US theory and practice and ended with comments about how this 'righteous free-swinging critique from the ivory tower down under' was 'driven by high minded utopianism'. It added 'too bad that everyone, especially in the US, cannot be as bright and critical, with a superior toolbox of methods.'

All of which only goes to show that our 'ways of knowing' are indeed inextricably bound up not only with who we are but where and when we are as well. In an odd sort of way, the review only served to underscore one of the underlying themes of the whole integral perspective. That is, our immersion in particular 'shaping traditions' and the way that our own filters and developmental capacities condition what we perceive and think and do. Possibly the central insight behind the book is that 'it is depth within the practitioner that determines how well any particular approach or methodology will be used.' The converse is obviously true as well.

In the end, therefore, the book tells the story that I intended. It gives due credit to the early American pioneers who made a certain amount of progress for a couple of decades and without whom the field may never have taken off. Critical futures approaches then developed, raised questions and brought into play social phenomena that had earlier been overlooked. Yet, as is the way with such things, this approach also overlooked something else (or, more precisely, intuited it but did not develop it): interior human development. With the rise of integral methods and, in particular the 'integral operating system' this oversight was corrected. By 2004 the beginnings of a new tradition, or era, of futures work had been established. It is one characterised by breadth, depth, balance, and, indeed, respect for what others have done or attempted to do. The mantra that 'everyone is right' is what helps to distinguish this approach from earlier ones. We can now see very clearly the mutual necessity of different modes of enquiry operating in their different, relevant, domains.

The fact that 'not all truths are equal' also remains to haunt us. Hence Wilber's admonitions regarding what he calls the 'calculus of discomfort.' So long as some forge ahead while others cling tenaciously to the currently known, there will always be stresses and strains to confront and resolve. I am certainly committed to both.

Futures Beyond Dystopia is therefore an invitation to all practicing futurists, and intending practitioners, to participate in the further development of this fascinating discipline or domain of enquiry. There is still a long way to go – partly because we have only begun to explore the possibilities of integrally informed approaches, and also because the field itself has yet to gain wider, mainstream acceptance and application.

Meanwhile the world we live in slides steadily toward the very futures we are working to avoid.

Richard Slaughter,
Foresight International, Brisbane April 2005.

Notes and references

1. R. Slaughter, *Futures Beyond Dystopia*, *Futures* 30, 10, 1998 993-1002.
2. AFI Monograph series. Accessible via:

<https://foresightinternational.com.au/archive/afi-foresight-monographs/>

3. R. Slaughter, The flight of American superego, *Futures* 33, 2001, 891-896. One of the very few disagreements I had with the editor of *Futures* took place as a result of this title. I'd submitted a review with a conventional title. The editor, in his wisdom, decided to 'up the ante' and replace it with a much more provocative one – which he then refused to change. I subsequently wore the fall-out, which continued for some time.

<https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/RS-FBD-Author-Reflections-2005.pdf>

The Biggest Wake-Up Call in History (2010)

Defending the Future (Introductory Overview of a Special Issue of *On the Horizon* on Responses to *The Biggest Wake-Up Call in History*)

A primary objective in writing *The Biggest Wake-Up Call in History* (BWCH) (Slaughter, 2010) was to bring as much clarity as possible to some of the complex, multi-layered and profoundly challenging issues that face our world today. A second objective was to establish if there were, in fact, viable ways forward beyond what I saw as an increasingly compromised present, pathways that lead towards more humanly compelling futures. These twin purposes largely dictated how the book was framed and how it evolved. Part one focused on the nature of 'the problem.' Part two considered a range of possible solutions, some of which were at the conceptual stage while others were already being trialled in one form or another. I wanted to leave the reader with a sense that, while the outlook might initially appear very bleak, there were real and substantive grounds for informed hope and effective action.

My own journey had started more than 40 years ago when, as a young student teacher, I discovered Edmund Leach's 1967 Reith Lectures called *A Runaway World* (Leach, 1967). Now I was attempting my own summation. After all the reading, the conferences, working in or with various organisations; all the long-standing contacts, working relationships and friendships with outstanding Futurists and Foresight Practitioners from around the world; could I produce a coherent overview?

I was not entirely sure. I was, however, clear about my starting point – the need to review some of the most cogent sources of information and knowledge available about the state of the world and, beyond that, provide a view of the evolving pattern of 'signals' that are constantly emitted by the global system (Steffen, W. et al, 2004). What did all this amount to? I felt from the outset that the story I would tell would, to some extent, not necessarily be the kind of news that people would be ready to hear. So early on it was unclear how the project would work out. As the first chapters took shape, however, a narrative began to develop reflecting what is, perhaps, an underlying reality of our times. That is, the many ways that the human species is driving some parts of the global system beyond any reasonable limits. It was inevitable, therefore, that the *Limits to Growth* (LtG) project that began in the early 1970s would become a central theme (Meadows, et al, 1972). As Part one evolved I felt it sufficiently 'on track' to circulate the current draft to some of my colleagues for their feedback and comment. This is a good place to record how valuable their comments and suggestions were. They raised issues I'd overlooked, pointed out errors and significantly improved the quality of this work-in-progress.

An example of this is a comment by Ken Wilber about an article I wrote for *The Journal of Integral Theory and Practice* on a review of climate change literature (Slaughter, 2009). In that piece I'd made reference to organised crime as a reflection of humanity's 'shadow', or repressed contents of awareness. The point was that, unless we took some of these subterranean impulses and their effects into account, our attempts at rational restorative actions in the wider world would be vitiated or undermined. This resulted in an entire chapter devoted to the topic. While few have commented on this I'm not aware of any other substantial work on the global emergency paying explicit attention to this under-regarded area. It is therefore gratifying to know, for example, that Dennis Morgan has taken it up for this issue of *On the Horizon* (OTH) and provided us with a more recent overview of the subject. Much more work needs to be carried out on the question of 'structural criminality' and its malign effects upon a world already experiencing unprecedented stresses from many other sources. In brief, the 'values' adopted by the international Mafia can only have one outcome, the pervasive signs of which are perhaps seen most clearly in and around Naples, Italy. This is a future that should rightly be feared and refused in its entirety (Saviano, 2007).

With part one completed my attention turned to consider what I regarded as more inspiring and hopeful themes. I soon realised that there was value in taking a closer look at, and critiquing, the notion of ‘collapse.’ The concept had been explored by various writers and figured prominently in the LtG. Over subsequent years a variety of attempts to model the global system were undertaken in order to discover how the latter might behave under ‘anthropogenic forcing’ – the growing stresses created by human growth and development. The news that emerged from these studies was far from encouraging. ‘Overshoot and collapse’ became a kind of mantra that, in a way, set us up for a view of the future that was little short of a continuing disaster. I felt that shifting from a predominantly fatalistic ‘collapse’ narrative to one that could be summarised under the heading of ‘descent’ would not only be more accurate but also more likely to stimulate constructive responses. Peter Hayward drew my attention to the work of J. M. Greer who for some years has been one of the leading figures in what might be called ‘descent theory’ (Greer, 2008). But there were also many others whose lives and work focused on these questions and who had, over time, produced no shortage of suggestions and real-world innovations. So I set about exploring some of these.

What also perhaps distinguished my efforts from more mainstream accounts was the fact that I drew, to some extent, on an Integral perspective (Slaughter, 2012). I felt then, and I continue to believe now, that this was, and is, a highly appropriate strategy. While it is by no means the only option, it provides a panoramic and inclusive perspective that helped fulfil my first objective of bringing clarity to these questions. That not everyone favours this approach is unexceptional and to be expected. Personally I’ve never doubted that it provides a useful and balanced starting point to approach a wide variety of phenomena many of which, in other approaches, tend to be omitted. Nevertheless, the Integral component of my thinking and work has sometimes been exaggerated. Readers of BWCH may or may not have noticed that none of the three exemplars of ‘ways forward’ (or ‘walking the walk’) that I drew upon late in the book are Integral theorists *per se* (James Hansen, Muhammad Yunus and Joanna Macy). So I’m delighted that Chris Riedy acknowledges their very specific significance in his paper. They provide a number of productive answers to questions about transcending negativity and becoming both constructive and empowered. These issues are addressed in several of the contributions to this special issue so I’ll add a brief biographical note that is relevant here.

During my early years at Lancaster University I was invited to a teacher’s centre in Wolverhampton, situated in the UK’s industrial Midlands. A group of teachers had started a project on futures but had ended up feeling somewhat deflated or depressed. So far as I can recall, I’d not yet encountered Fred Polak’s seminal work on the social implications of futures images (Polak, 1961). But after reflecting on the issues presented to me I developed a couple of exercises dealing with optimism and pessimism. What I realised at that time has remained with me ever since. That is, that *optimism and pessimism are both inherently ambiguous*. It is simply not the case that people are *necessarily* depressed by negative images of futures or stimulated by positive ones. Everything depends on what happens next, on what resources are brought to bear and, specifically, what level and kinds of futures literacy are available to assist and support them (Slaughter, 1991). I suppose I may not be typical (since I’ve had more time and resources than most to think / feel this through) but I actually find negative images of futures powerfully motivating. Perhaps I subconsciously attempted to demonstrate that in this in the book.

That said, my view of the human prospect has certainly moved further towards the pessimistic pole as compared with only a few years ago. The reasons for this are various but include the following.

- It has become ever more obvious how large corporations have, in the main, become increasingly powerful and remain committed to unsustainable growth for short term gains on behalf of a tiny minority.

- Many conflicts are arising or being exacerbated by the collision of these special interests with the realities of resource scarcity and climate change dilemmas. This is not a viable way forward.
- The long-term effects of 'wild globalisation' continue to generate suffering and inequality within and between nations. China's vandalised environment demonstrates some of the consequences of rapid and careless over-development.
- There is still no effective international or structure or process in place that can facilitate the emergence of global governance. This is particularly clear in the continuing failure to address (let alone resolve) the fundamental causes of the global financial crisis.
- Educational institutions worldwide continue to ignore or avoid educating for challenging and uncertain futures. Advanced courses on Futures and foresight remain extremely rare. Hence social foresight remains a distant dream far removed from effective implementation.
- Technology is often put forward as a solution to many issues, particularly in the USA. But the fact remains that high tech coupled with inadequate values leads rapidly to dysfunctional and Dystopian outcomes (Lanier, 2013).
- Finally, denial, repression and avoidance remain common responses to global issues. As a result, powerful signals from the global system continue to be widely ignored. Mass media collude in this process of widespread mystification and 'not knowing.'

I will comment here only on the last point. It was driven home when I saw a recent documentary about 'Superstorm Sandy.' The program outlined the way that two weather systems collided off of the North East Coast of the USA. At one point, and one point only, a very brief mention was made of the fact that increased temperatures had ramped up the ferocity of the storm that flooded parts of New York and left some of its suburbs looking like war zones. I realised that a clear and obvious chance to link human responsibility for global warming with increasingly destructive storms had been set aside and lost. Somewhere in an editorial meeting the decision had been made to under-play that key factor so that, when the program was aired, it was very easily missed. Taken in isolation the stifling of this particular 'signal' may not appear significant. What it does do is to help to explain why the human outlook continues to deteriorate. The dominance of the mass media by corporate interests means that they dampen down, dilute or simply ignore this kind of crucial feedback information that is essential for motivation for change to develop and social learning to occur.

I'm not going to comment on all the contributions to this special issue. But I will summarise my view of some of the most valuable suggestions further work that have been put forward. To begin with, a couple of the papers raise questions about what might constitute effective communication about global issues. Breaux, for example, puts forward some useful guidelines for affective communication with broader constituencies that deserve to be taken seriously while Collins briefly outlines her view of the need to 'accentuate the positive.' Heinonen contributes an argument that parallels and supports much of what was written in BWCH, reviews some possible responses and concludes that progressive ideas may be an 'infinite resource.'

Floyd's paper draws our attention to the role of particular forms of energy (especially oil and gas) in helping to shape what is possible in any society. This is something I'd not really considered when, late in the book, I developed an argument around the positive implications of advanced awareness in concert with advanced technology. I still think that visioning work along those lines has great potential to help people see distant futures in more positive terms and, in so doing, help them escape from the 'prison' of an over-determined present. But Floyd's argument is a beautifully nuanced demonstration of the need to check one's assumptions and to relate them back to factors one may have not seen earlier on. It's a fine demonstration of how a

discourse around these issues can develop and grow – how to be properly critical and constructive at the same time.

Hines paper on long-term value changes draws on his analysis of some 20 different values systems that, overall, offer both hope and raise concerns. He poses a number of key questions that can be used to frame and carry forward future work. On ‘global issues,’ will post-modern actors in currently affluent nations be capable of effective action? Will consumers in the currently rapidly developing nations be willing or able to moderate consumption and growth? Will those described as ‘integrals’ gain sufficiently in number and influence to be effective? From these questions he sets out a research agenda that I very much hope will be taken up, further developed and applied. Both he and Riedy draw attention to the fact that assumptions about the assumed effectiveness of ‘late stage’ human development need to be much more rigorously examined.

Riedy’s contribution to this special issue of OTH is a highlight of the collection that deserves careful and sustained attention. His theme is centred on exploring the notion of what the ‘waking up’ metaphor might mean and how it can be operationalised in practice. As he notes: ‘simply hoping for an awakening is not enough. We need to actively explore and prospect for realistic pathways towards positive futures.’ Further, he writes of the need to ‘move from an idealised normative view of awakening to a realistic, empirical investigation...’ His paper sets out what he calls ‘seven signals of awakening’ which he employs as a ‘preliminary environmental scanning framework.’ This is exciting and innovative work. It may well constitute a new chapter in the developing story of how humanity can respond to new levels of hazard and risk without losing its aspirations and hopes for a better world.

Near the end of the piece Riedy sounds a note of caution, i.e. that it is ‘surprisingly difficult to identify inspiring visions of positive futures that have gained widespread traction.’ Overall, however, the paper introduces a research agenda for ‘exploring the nature and trajectories of awakening.’ Finally, he has a couple of radically constructive suggestions for practitioners. First, that they can ‘work to strengthen the signals’ that he and others have identified. Second that currently disparate initiatives can be brought together ‘under a common banner,’ perhaps constituting ‘an awakening movement.’ These suggestions are of enormous value and I hope that they will similarly be critiqued, expanded, further developed and applied in a range of ways and in different contexts.

Overall these contributions to the special issue of OTH more than fulfil the goal of commenting on and, in some cases, extending the core concerns of BWCH. Reading and interpreting the signals of global change is, in itself, a huge and challenging task. To communicate an evolving understanding about what they mean and, further, what should be done and by whom, is more challenging still. No one in their right minds could imagine that any one individual would be able to carry out more than a fraction of that task alone. On the other hand, a widening group of self-critical, open and dedicated workers in a range of related fields can and should carry these agendas – and the practical developments that spring from them - forward.

The ‘awakening movement’ referred to by Riedy powerfully resonates with a related notion that has been with me for a while. That is a view of the steady and irreversible emergence of a *mainstream project* to secure the future of humanity. It goes beyond what I regard as a somewhat naïve and over-optimistic view advanced by some that the current plethora of NGOs can act as a unified force for change (e.g. Hawken, 2007). Currently they seem to me to be too diverse and culturally marginalised to have anything like the required transformative effect. The ‘project’ I have in mind is inspired and driven by diverse actors, organisations and means – many of them from mainstream institutions such as universities, banks, the legal system and so on. It begins, perhaps, with the realisation that the deep myths that drove humanity into this

unprecedented ‘mega crisis’ or ‘global emergency’ have run their course and are now exhausted. As the evidence becomes unavoidable, a much wider appreciation emerges of the fact that the ‘wake-up call’ confronting humanity is reality-based. It is not a figment of the imagination, nor will it disappear any time soon. Rather, it reflects a structural reality – or series of them – that are permanently re-aligning the terms of our species’ tenure on this planet.

Central to an understanding of that process may be the rehabilitation and broad acceptance of the conclusions of the *Limits to Growth* project that emerged over its 40-year span. The very same project that was pilloried and abused, portrayed as ‘ideology,’ as unreasonable, threatening and extreme. Perverse valuations of this kind flow from powerfully embedded human and cultural defences that need to be named, exposed and set aside. Similarly, it is increasingly obvious that it is the industrial corporatised view of reality with its denial of limits, its extreme anthropocentrism, its unbridled commitment to consumption, growth and over-development that needs to be retired. Beyond this, greater efforts certainly need to be invested in developing, and investing greater meaning and significance, in positive and compelling images of possible futures. Much of the substance and inspiration required to support such work is not new but was given to us by forward-looking pioneers some years ago (Macy, 1983; Jungk & Mullert, 1987).

If the BWCH and the papers presented here can play even a small part in the process of waking up and taking species responsibility, then we can all breathe a little easier. We can look our kids in the eye and know that *they* know we did what we could as well as we could. It is, after all, their future and that of future generations that we are defending.

Note

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To See with Fresh Eyes: Integral Futures and the Global Emergency (2012)

Looking back to look forward

To See with Fresh Eyes (TSWFE) was and remains the record of a journey. A journey in space from a working class home in Portsmouth, UK, to Bermuda, back to the UK and then finally to Australia. It's also been a life journey of experience and developing insight. Yet I've never travelled alone. I've always been clear that this journey could not have taken place without the inspiration and support of many other people. I pay tribute to some of them in the introduction to this book.

Looking back what stands out to me is the compressed power of the three main subjects of the title: fresh eyes, Integral futures and global emergency. Taking them in reverse, humanity has certainly fallen deeper than ever into what I've often referred to as a 'trap of its own making'. This is not a popular view, so it is almost universally denied or avoided. But the evidence just keeps getting clearer, stronger, all the time. Back in 2010 I'd initially presented the evidence as I saw it in *The Biggest Wake-Up Call in History*.¹ I returned to the subject later in a 2015 article for *Futures* that drew on a wide range of reliable sources.² So the generic 'failed future' remains a dark backdrop to my work. But the effect that it has is not to make me feel depressed but, rather, to provide enduring motivation and purpose. Similarly, with Integral futures, the early days of exploration and excitement steadily gave way to sober application and wiser, more informed use. The rise of Integral thinking and methods is by no means universal but over the last decade it has been widely validated and applied.³ Thanks to those who understand it and apply it with due care, it now appears in the mental maps and work of many futurists and others around the world. Finally, the notion of seeing with 'fresh eyes' is a notion that's not particularly easy to pin down or define but neither does it become dated or less valuable. It sometimes emerges when you least expect it. The key thing, perhaps, is to be ever on the lookout for new sources of inspiration and insight. They are indeed plentiful once you know where, and how to look.⁴

Several years ago I was invited to speak at Womad - a popular bi-annual music festival held in the Adelaide parklands. I was on a small panel with two others and Robyn Williams as chair. The topic of our session was 'reinventing society'. It was during this session that Williams asked me if there'd been any new developments in futures methods over the last 20 years. Which was an ideal opportunity to say that, yes, while good foundational work had been carried out 20 or more years ago much of it had been concerned with tracking and understanding *external* change. Now, with the help of Integral and related perspectives, we were at least as interested in the pervasive influence of *the human and cultural interiors*. So, in a few words it was possible to summarise what I saw then, and still see now, as an 'epochal' shift in the self- understanding of practitioners and their methods. The point is this: when you look back at the field and compare where we are today you can see real progress, more depth, more modesty, less overstatement and greater willingness to confront complexity. It's truly a field that one can be proud of.

Structure and content

Given that elements of the first paper in TSWFE were drafted some four decades ago, I'm struck by how certain insights have changed more in detail and depth than they have in substance. Even at that early date, I was increasingly clear about two things. First, that there were indeed many ways beyond the 'civilisational trap'. Second, that however we collectively responded, the road ahead was going to be very challenging. Yet, the core of the book is a belief that what emerges from these chapters makes the journey deeply satisfying and productive. The evolution of understanding and insight presented there leads to a renewed sense of agency and purpose

wherein lies real hope for the future and greatly enhanced capacity, both human and social. In other words, we can now see ways forward with far greater clarity and insight than before.

Part one, *Early Perspectives*, presents three early works. In *Origins of a defective worldview* I tried to account for how it was that we'd arrived at this point in the first place. Parts of the piece were derived from my very first book, *Birds in Bermuda* (1975) later reworked into the first chapter of *The Foresight Principle* (1995).⁵ Reading it some years later, I still find the overall diagnosis persuasive even though I'd express it rather differently now. Two pieces on 'future vision...' and 'cultural reconstruction...' are closely related and deal with related issues in greater depth. In effect, they delineate what might be called my 'thinking environment' of the time. They are early attempts to articulate themes offered to support what I saw—and still see—as useful sources of informed optimism and hope. Part two, *Applications*, presents work from 1996 to 2003. I included *Mapping the future* for a very specific reason—to demonstrate the point I'd reached *prior to* grasping the essence of an Integral perspective. It shows how social construction theory can illuminate much that's otherwise hidden while, at the same time, also providing evidence of significant gaps. A few of those 'gaps' are briefly addressed in *Transcending flatland*, first published in 1998. Here are the beginnings of an exploration into the nature and applications of Integral theory in Futures and Foresight contexts.

The following year I showed how applying such theory to a core Futures/Foresight methodology—environmental scanning—seemed not only to take it to a new phase of operational effectiveness but also to change the very nature of that game. Now, instead of an exclusively outward gaze at signals and events 'out there', I proposed an equally vital focus of attention to the framing of the world 'in here' within the minds and understandings of the scanners themselves.⁶ I saw this as a pivotal shift—and so it has proved to be.

Part three, *Case Studies and Implications*, contains seven items from 2004 to 2011. *Waking up after the war* began as three shorter 'thought pieces' that were published in the *WFSF Bulletin* following the US-led invasion of Iraq. The focus of this work, however, was not the conflict itself but 'post-conventional Futures/Foresight practice.' It was informed by depth knowledge of many of the active personal and social processes that operated around us and, in this view, are in many respects 'prior to' more commonplace concerns about technology, wealth, development, etc. Overall, while post-conventional work could certainly be said to be more demanding, I felt that it was capable of producing more innovative and useful results. I demonstrated this—at least to my own satisfaction—when Zia Sardar, then editor of *Futures*, invited me to review a report from the US National Intelligence Council. Viewed through the framework that had by then evolved, I found it to be a deeply flawed work. Then, more positively, another opportunity arose to evaluate the usefulness of integrally informed methods. It came in the form of an international research project into the *State of play in the futures field* (SoPiFF). A team of researchers based in several countries worked on this project over an extended period and the results were published in a special issue of *Foresight* in 2009.⁷ The lead paper I wrote providing an overview of the project and its key results are reproduced in the book. Two final papers rounded out this section: *Welcome to the anthropocene* and *Making headway during impossible times*. The former identifies the shift of eras from those driven by natural processes to another characterised by the global impacts of human activities, with all the associated impacts and ramifying costs. What I hoped to achieve was to review and recontextualise some of the issues that identified *a true global emergency* and, beyond that, to set out as clearly as I could some of the most promising options available to us. '*Making headway...*' then considered what I called 'proto solutions' for a detailed and integrally informed agenda of action and response. That this work remains of continuing value is demonstrated by its use in my most recent work where it has been applied to Humanising and Democratising the IT Revolution (Figure 1).⁸ In the original context it was followed by a rationale for helping

societies to see the point of moving beyond the 'growth imperative,' since it is the latter that arguably lies at the heart of many of our continuing dilemmas.

Conclusion

Since editing this book I've continued to further explore and develop the themes and perspectives within it. For example, in 2015 I co-edited another special issue of *Foresight* on what might be called a 'macro strategy' of 'descent pathways.' That is, the notion of a moderated descent from the peak of industrial-era growth (leading inexorably to collapse) to a 'staged descent' arguably leading to a more stable and sustainable world. In particular I focused on the theme of 'The denial of limits and interior aspects of descent'.⁹ In the same year I wrote a companion piece on 'Integral futures and the search for clarity' for Jim Dator's *World Future Review*.¹⁰ Yet in contrast to all this, and as noted above, my most recent project has been a fascinating in-depth attempt at 'Re- assessing the IT revolution' for *Futures*. Interestingly, while much of this exacting three-part project necessarily deals with the 'nuts and bolts' of the Internet and related technologies, the conclusion returns to what I have long regarded as 'the source', i.e., values and moral development. This would be no surprise at all to readers of *To See With Fresh Eyes*.

Note: The author would like to thank the following people for their assistance in the production of this book: Fereshteh Sadeghi (cover design); Mel Rumble and Liz Else (copy editing); Susan Leggett (page layout) and Laurie Slaughter (index). The book has been recently re-reviewed by Daniel Pesut for the Easter 2018 issue of *Compass* (the APF quarterly journal) edited by Andrew Curry. PDF and ePub copies of *To See With Fresh Eyes* can be obtained from the Foresight International site.

Humanising and democratising IT

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|---|---|
| <p>Interior human development</p> <p>Relate human developmental factors to <u>organisational</u> development and innovation. Implications of different worldviews, values and choices. Revalue human agency as source of power and capability. Re-focus attention on human and social priorities for positive futures.</p> | <p>Exterior actions</p> <p>Abandon the century-long fiction that consumerism equals happiness. Re-value human capabilities and redress their takeover by tech substitutes. Restrict 'screen time' in <u>favour</u> of real world interaction and experience. Refine uses of 'digital reality'</p> |
| <p>Interior cultural development</p> <p>Revalue the socio-cultural domain and <u>recognise</u> how IT conditioned by these foundations. Develop understanding of how cognitive and social interests intersect with technical and practical outcomes. Pay particular attention to role of public goods and moral universals in pursuit of healthy social forms. Abandon business models based on theft of private data. Support progressive innovations such as social democracy and platform cooperatives.</p> | <p>Global system, infrastructure</p> <p>Revise and update civil infrastructure to shift core functions from private interests. Invest in powerful new oversight and foresight functions. Subject new technologies such as 'big data', algorithms and <u>cryptocurrencies</u> to strict evaluation and continuing management. Ensure that innovation and technical development contributes to human, social and environmental wellbeing. Ensure that 'sharing cities' are based on democratic principles.</p> |

Source: Slaughter, R. The IT Revolution Re-assessed Part 3: Framing Solutions. In press, *Futures*, 2018

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Deleting Dystopia: Re-asserting Human Priorities in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism

By embedding its values and goals into concrete technologies, capital seeks to assert dominion over the future - constraining what type of social change is viable. This makes techno-politics a natural battleground for staging struggles over what utopias are imagined and whose utopia is materialised.

Jathan Sadowski, Real Life, 2021

General Introduction

This book presents a critical analysis of the IT revolution in the early 21st Century and, in so doing, seeks to account for the way that innovations initially regarded by early pioneers as liberating and helpful have become absorbed into an oppressive global system that appears more dangerous and invasive with each passing year. It's not a particularly easy call since this is a huge subject. Moreover, many of the services that the system provides appear, on the surface, to meet authentic human needs. We tend to forget that in order to make each and every device appear desirable, every item of consumer hardware (smart phones, tablets, screens and related devices) has been subjected to purposeful design and testing. The whole effort is backed by pervasive high-end marketing that has, over several decades, sought to construct entire populations as passive consumers. Not, it should be noted, as autonomous beings, meaning-makers, who deserve to be seen and respected as such.

It follows that, in order to understand what is at stake, we need to confront the rationales and practices that create such radically diminished and reductive views of human life. The point here is not that the products of this revolution are not useful. Clearly, they are and may well

continue to be. But the current 'terms of engagement' are unacceptable both in principle and in practice. What is clearly at stake are the growing costs, dependencies and long-term hazards that have crept up on entire populations almost unawares. These are, however, no 'ordinary' hazards since, even in the present, relatively early stages, the tendency toward unliveable dystopian futures is becoming unavoidable. Thus, to confront and 'delete' dystopia is not merely a question of prudence. It constitutes a vital series of time-critical investments in the futures of our grandchildren and of future generations.

There's something distinctly odd, or ambiguous, about this story. The systems and devices that we've become so dependent upon only reveal very limited aspects of themselves to human senses in the context of our everyday lives. It can be a shock to realise that a vast slice of reality, known only to a few, controlled by fewer still, holds us in an invisible grasp, directs our actions and, in the process, by-passes our conscious senses and undermines our critical judgement. To deal with this 'other world' of hidden codes, distant servers, cloud repositories, hidden power structures, obscure algorithms and the like, we need to become conscious of them and how they operate. That is a primary purpose of this book. In this connection, some readers may recall the Matrix film trilogy. It drew on similar concerns by depicting stark, and at times shocking, contrasts between the awesome power of these hidden entities and the diminished status of humanity. In effect it provided a kind of fictional 'master class' that showed why these hidden structures and processes needed to be revealed. Without that knowledge, that clarity of understanding, we remain beholden to forces we can neither see nor hope to understand. With it we take the first steps toward reclaiming our dignity, re-asserting human needs and replacing redundant values with consciously adopted ones that make greater sense in our fragmented and imperilled world.

A secondary purpose of the book is to foreground the work of others who have also considered these issues in some depth. Chapter One picks up the story from the viewpoint of various qualified observers during the early 2010s. It is a useful place to begin since this is when serious concerns about 'where the IT revolution was going' began to arise and underlying issues were beginning to emerge. Many ideas were generated that served to prime and inform subsequent debates. Chapter Two considers three distinct issues that have attracted significant critical attention: the 'internet of things,' the prospect of 'driverless' cars; and growing concerns about what exactly was going on inside the slick but isolated world of Silicon Valley. It's in the latter connection that we first encounter Shoshana Zuboff who has probably done more than anyone else to reveal what surveillance capitalism is and how it operates. Her early critique of what she called 'the big other' pre-dates her impressive book on this subject by several years. Yet even at that stage, it helped to register a new stream of informed insight and enhanced clarity that fed into her master work (considered in Chapter Four). Since language is part of her gift and one of the keys to depth understanding, a glossary of key terms is included in the Appendices.

With Chapter Three the focus shifts toward several broadly defined areas that serve to frame possible solutions. Since the notion of 'compulsive innovation' is relevant to the whole project the first section takes a critical look at some of the existing and possible future expressions of this impulse. The following sections consider the grounds of various possible solutions under a variety of headings and conclude with a brief review of values and moral development. Far from being obscure esoteric matters, these topics reflect a further theme of the book. Namely that while science and technology are often assumed to be neutral, this is merely a convenient – and problematic – fiction. Both reflect aspects of the society (values, institutions, regulatory regimes, culture etc.) in which they occur. It follows that current usages tend to be misleading and diversionary. The term 'technology' cannot merely be applied to a limited set of physical objects but need to include the networks and wider human / social / cultural / environmental contexts in which they are embedded. For these and many other reasons, new technologies cannot but exhibit a range of unforeseen and unintended side effects. As such they need to be considered ambiguous from the outset and subjected to intense broad-spectrum evaluation. While the

‘tunnel vision’ of powerful actors allow them to ignore such inconvenient facts, the wider consequences of ‘rushing’ such innovations to market can be, and are, severe.

Chapter Four draws on the foregoing to propose a way of understanding our real-world situation. The aim is to clarify some of the ways in which the current system exerts its power and influence over whole societies, to their present and long-term detriment. Four ‘witnesses to the revolution’ are then introduced. These are people who, in one way or another have had relevant experience of some of the core issues. They have, so to speak, ‘done their homework,’ so their accounts are both recent and reliable. It’s all-but certain that they’ve worked independently. Taken together, they provide a coherent overview of the current state of play. They are telling us that while the age of traditional utopias may be over, the outlines of technological dystopia are already taking shape around us. The final section of Chapter Four draws a number of conclusions. It recognises useful work already being carried out and suggests a broadly two-pronged response to the present over-dominance of ‘Big Tech.’ On the one hand, a firm and steady continuation by governments of their efforts to enforce various forms of regulation (privacy, tax reform and anti-trust measures). On the other, significantly increased support for civil society, ‘sharing cities,’ community start-ups and the like. Both multi-initiatives are required to take market share away from the oligarchs by creating equivalent or improved services based not on the familiar capitalist imperatives of profit and exploitation but on defensible, clearly articulated human and community values. This is urgent work in its own right. But even more so in light of other existential threats facing humankind.

It’s time for the power and influence of the oligarchs, if not to be removed entirely from history, then to be significantly diminished and replaced by carefully designed and implemented democratic alternatives.

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Note

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