

Futures Enquiry as a Collective Journey

By Richard Slaughter

What has influenced your journey into the futures world?

I've always viewed my career as a collective journey informed by experience, significant people and, more profoundly, the 'great conversation' of books. When asked about influences on my thinking as a futurist I reflect how each of these have played a role. If the focus is specifically on books, I've been inspired by many, and over the years, have authored a few myself. Here, the focus is even more specific as I've narrowed a huge list of works down to just 15. Each one stands out as having had a profound influence on shaping my identity as a futurist. Clearly this was no easy task since there are so many first-rate books that provide clarity and depth insight into the torrent of change surging around us at this time. All are worthy of consideration and therefore any such exercise cannot be undertaken lightly. Furthermore, in the years ahead, there are certain to be others that will qualify.

In the meantime, here are 15 that have marked my journey as a futurist:

Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future

As a child growing up in post-war Britain the most significant influence on my early sense of the future was a beautifully illustrated comic strip called [*Dan Dare: Pilot of the Future*](#). It appeared

on the front and back pages of a boy's weekly comic called *The Eagle*, which ran from 1950 to 1969. Hampson's work left a lasting impression. He was equally at home creating fully realized characters, both men and women, as he was at depicting near-future environments, alien worlds and highly credible technologies. What Hampson and his colleagues achieved was an early evocation of 'futures in balance' or what one might call 'high-tech with human qualities.' This is when I discovered that, while the future can certainly be challenging, it also can accommodate positive values within diverse and inclusive human cultures. (1)



Dan Dare: Pilot of the Future.

Photo: Amazon

Futures Enquiry, cont'd.

A Runaway World?

In March 1968, I was close to finishing a three-year course of teacher training at Chester College, Cheshire when I discovered Edmund Leach's BBC Reith Lectures on [*A Runaway World?*](#) Leach clearly had a high level of credibility. But his core thesis was that human affairs were spinning out of control. What did that mean? A quote on the cover suggested that "Men have become like gods. Isn't it about time that we understood our divinity? Science offers us total mastery over our destiny, yet instead of rejoicing we feel deeply afraid. Why should this be? How might those fears be resolved?" What puzzled and provoked me was that, during my three-year stint at the college, there'd been no mention of these issues. If Leach was right that there were serious upheavals ahead, what did this mean for beginning teachers?

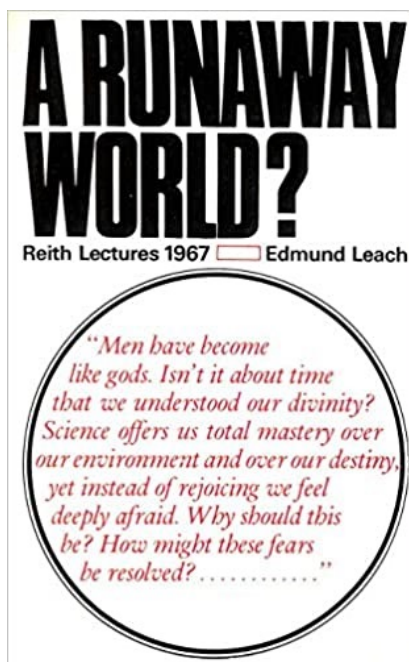


Image: Amazon

A Sand County Almanac

From 1969 to 1975, I lived and worked on the small, sub-tropical island of Bermuda. Compared to the U.K. it presented a world of intriguing differences: lush vegetation, sandy

beaches, coral reefs, birds and many other forms of wildlife. Before long, however, I discovered that behind the carefully curated images of peace and tranquility lay a rather different reality. Aldo Leopold was one of several American conservationists who recognized the costs of "progress" and the dangers inherent in uncritical worship of "growth" as an unqualified good. I quickly came to see Bermuda as a microcosm of the global system where these issues were playing out on a larger scale. Leopold offered a different view, namely that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

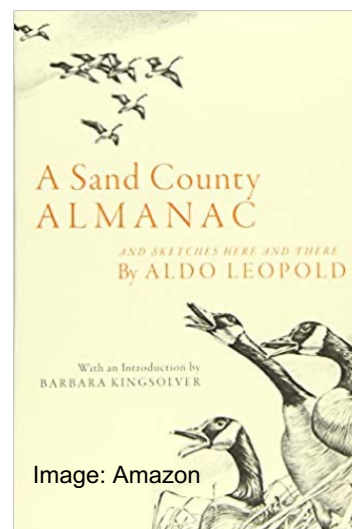


Image: Amazon

The Pentagon of Power

If Aldo Leopold was an early guide toward depth appreciation of the natural world, Lewis Mumford was the equivalent regarding the story of human civilization. He argued that from the pyramid-building period in Egypt onward the dehumanization required to maintain large-scale and oppressive organizations of men and machines had emerged time and time again. He sought to distinguish between "democratic" and "authoritarian" technologies and wrote about what he called the "magnificent bribe" where "complex technological systems offer a share in their benefits in exchange for compliance." I was

Futures Enquiry, cont'd.

I was fortunate to discover [The Pentagon of Power](#) at such an early stage as it provided a durable basis for interrogating the nature and products of the high-tech revolution that have continued to unfold to our collective cost ever since.

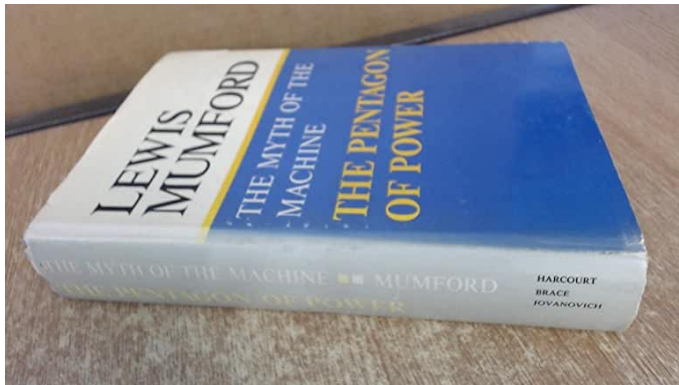


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The Limits to Growth

In retrospect, I regard the [Limits to Growth](#) project as the most significant work of the 20th Century. Over time it provided a credible rationale for moving away from the debased, crisis-ridden, world we have in fact inherited. What was then ground-breaking research on global trends made it clear that if humanity wanted a safer path into the future, some vital decisions and choices were needed. It was a true gift to a world already under duress, but economists, politicians, businesspeople and other powerful groups saw it as threatening to their own immediate interests. Their response was to

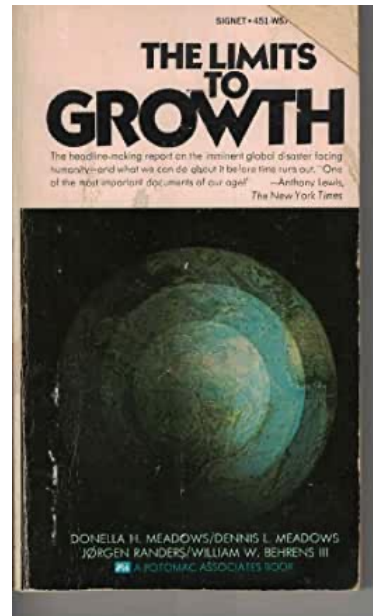


Image: Amazon

collectively undermine, delegitimize and eliminate it. In that tragic fact lies the dilemma that humanity would face half a century later when the most palatable options would fail to resolve the “overshoot and collapse” world we now face.

Always Coming Home

Ursula K. Le Guin was the daughter of a writer and a cultural anthropologist. While growing up she absorbed an entire inner landscape or lexicon of human, social and cultural phenomena that formed the creative grounds from which her later works emerged. This rich and inspiring [book](#) marks a clear step in my own development of understanding. It concerns a culture known as the Kesh who “may have lived sometime in the future” in Northern California. What most interested me was the sheer richness of lives made possible through a deliberate focus on communication, ritual and meaning making. Equally, the Kesh allowed themselves access to certain advanced technologies which were given strictly limited influence. The book provides a powerful contrast to our own reality in which cultures have been degraded while technology has become increasingly powerful and dangerous.

Futures Enquiry, cont'd.

The Collapse of Complex Societies

The privilege of extensive travel has allowed many people of my generation to experience firsthand the ruins of earlier civilizations. This makes it difficult to avoid the fact that that none of the latter are permanent. The credibility of collapse scenarios has been further reinforced as the *Limits to Growth* (LtG) narrative, and its many related studies, since the early 1970s. Today, however, “collapse” no longer presents as a local possibility but an outcome of dominant global trends. The author of *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, Joseph Tainter, takes a cool, objective and historically grounded approach to this vast subject.

While many other books have been written about social collapse, this is the one that digs deep into cultural history and poses some of the big questions. It also considers signs that collapse may be occurring, or about to occur. His central theory explores the notion that complexity generates increased per capita costs. The decline of complexity at the margins is one that can readily be detected when earlier gains in social services and related provisioning are eliminated. The underlying question, however, is: Who is really listening?

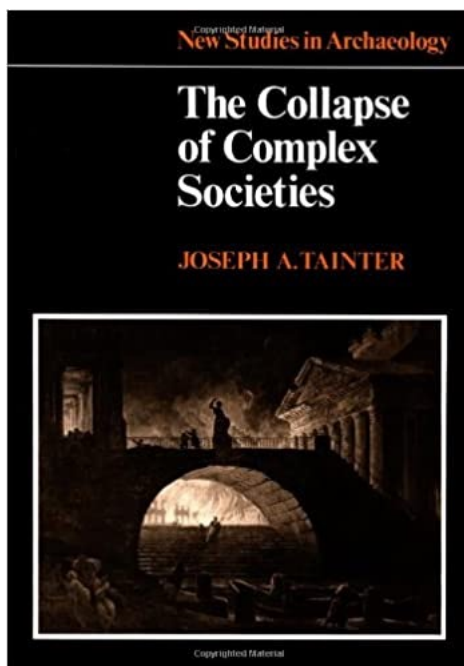


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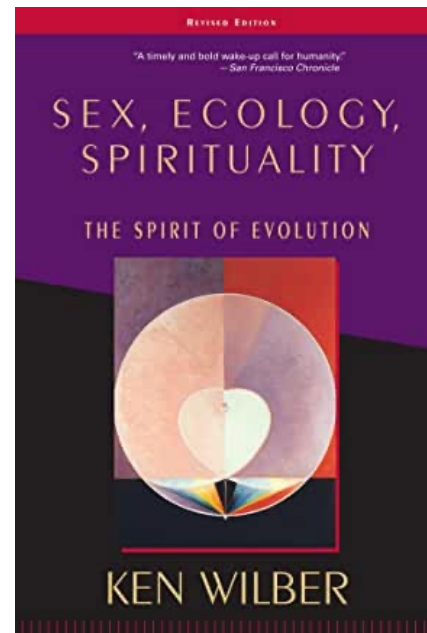


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Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution

During the mid-1990s, I was actively seeking depth understanding and inspiration. It's no exaggeration to say that I found both in Ken Wilber's *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* (SES). No other book, before or since, has provided me with quite a potent combination of intellectual rigor and inner (spiritual?) energy. Close attention to this book drew on everything I'd learned up to that point and helped me fit it together within a more embracing, higher-order whole. This is an aspect of what Wilber calls "vision-logic." Having drawn for some years on an Integral perspective and critiqued technology-led accounts of social change I was then attempting to evolve a broader approach to futures work. It was one that moved away from forecasting, prediction and empiricist surfaces to focus on the interior domains as portrayed by Le Guin and highlighted in Wilber's four quadrant model (interior / exterior; individual / collective). SES provided a deeper immersion in this domain of enquiry and action during some of its most productive years.

Futures Enquiry, cont'd.

Collision Course. Endless Growth on a Finite Planet

Forty years after the publication of *Limits of Growth*, researcher Kerry Higgs went back to primary sources and re-examined the whole narrative. Her book, *Collision Course*, is a highly readable critical review written after her successful completion of a Ph.D. that had examined the data in depth. She confirmed, as others had done, that the methods were indeed sound and, more remarkable still, when major trend data were applied to later real-world data, they had closely tracked what had actually occurred. She confirmed that the study was properly seen as “an alert to an apparently unconscious world to the longer-term consequences of exponential growth as the human enterprise ballooned.” We are, as Higgs rightly points out, currently facing “extreme versions of the problems set out by the Meadows team.” This book speaks directly to what E.O. Wilson called our “Neolithic obstinacy,” chronic short-term thinking, and the fallacies embedded in the “triumphalist human story.” (2)



Image: Amazon

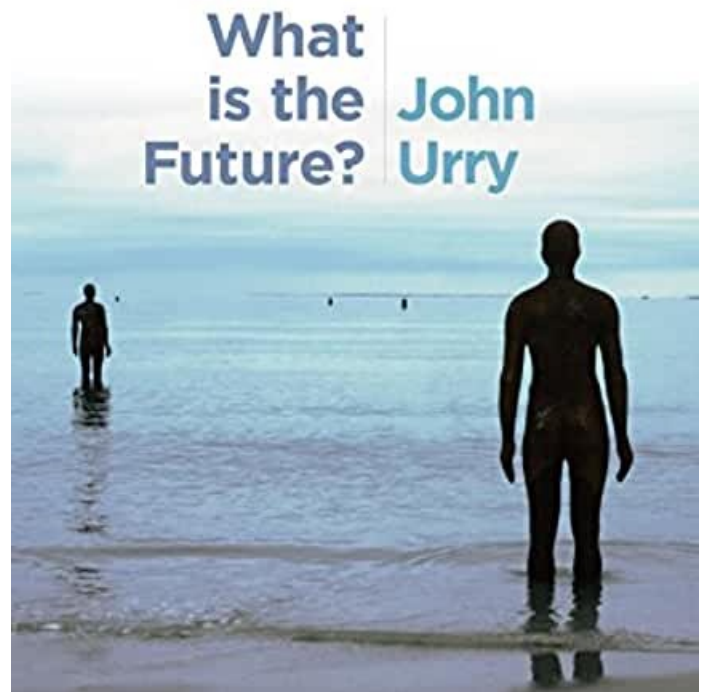


Photo: Amazon

What is the Future?

John Urry had a long and productive career in the Sociology Department of the University of Lancaster. I'd known him briefly when I was a student. This background stands out clearly in his book, *What is the Future?*, both in the details and the general approach. For example, one of the things he makes clear at the outset is that “futures are incredibly contested, saturated with conflicting social interests.” I found this reassuring since it was central to my early accounts of Critical Futures Studies written many years earlier. Part one deals with a fairly conventional “brief history of the future” showing how it has been interpreted and used over centuries, as well as a familiar range of futures-related literature. Part two, on “complex systems and the future,” represents the core of the book since it mediates productively between Urry's long-standing commitment to understanding social phenomena with a deep appreciation of the core concerns of futures studies. Parts three and four of the book deal with extensively workshopped scenarios. Few people have embraced futures work with such depth and insight. Seeking to “reclaim” and “mainstream” the terrain of futures studies certainly qualifies as a prime directive for us all. (3, 4)



Photo: Microsoft

The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene

The authors, Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, suggest that standard accounts of the human project tend to focus mostly on innovations and achievements that embody a triumphalist view of history. The overall tone of *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene* is celebratory and expresses a strong sense of “species pride.” But this serves to obscure other, less welcome, aspects of progress such as costs, dependencies, and long-term consequences. In this view many of the threats that now loom large in our day originate back in earlier stages of human history. Indeed, some of the inventions and changes hitherto seen largely as “successful gains” also brought “progress traps” in their wake. These include early domestication, at least two periods of globalization, the scientific and industrial revolutions, the present IT revolution and the current period of “global overshoot.” Such considerations reveal the critical role of stories, which, in turn, led me to focus on the real costs of “skewed narratives” or multiple fictions actively pursued by the rich, powerful and the misguided.

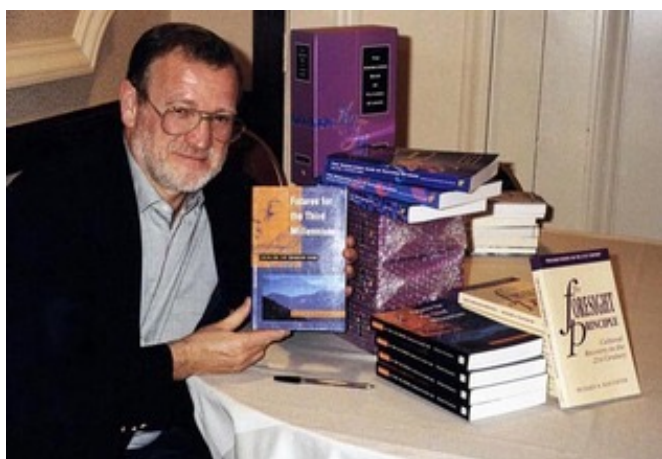
The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power

There are very few works that unambiguously demonstrate that something new and significant has emerged. Shoshana Zuboff’s opus, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, is an exception that would have garnered high praise from Lewis Mumford, among others. Based on careful research into the historical record, Zuboff takes us back to show exactly what happened when unprotected human space was invaded and monetized long before anyone was aware of the fact. She traces later developments forward to our own time in a detailed and penetrating account that allows us to “find our bearings” and respond. Governments come out badly, particularly the U.S., where multiple failures to comprehend what was happening allowed the Internet oligarchs to expand their power, reach, and wealth beyond any reasonable limit. It’s a story of intergenerational exploitation and theft that absolutely requires systemic and powerful responses. The author tracks a few of these and many other players have since emerged to carry this essential work forward. (4) My own recent book, *Deleting Dystopia*, could not have been written without it. (5)

Futures Enquiry, cont'd.

Full Circle: A Search for the World That Comes Next

Scott Ludlam is known in Australia as a former Greens Senator in the Western Australian parliament. Since then, he's travelled extensively and witnessed first-hand some of the ways the present distribution of power and wide adherence to "extractivist" economic imperatives have disenfranchised entire populations and brought the world to the edge of chaos. The very nature of this organized human effort, the structure of economies themselves, created a situation in which "the present form of our industrial metabolism (became) ... not merely extractive but actively predatory." Ludlam understands the wider implications of exponential growth. Human demands on the global system rapidly becomes unsustainable and rapidly exceeds the world's stock of available resources. But he also has a profound appreciation for life. What helps to distinguish this book from others is a "parallel narrative" that evokes key stages in the development of life on planet Earth. Locating our common origins in this vast tapestry lifts the book up and out of 'disaster analysis' mode. We are reminded of our incalculable debt to the blind processes of life out of deep time. Any entity that fails to value



Richard Slaughter. Photo: Amazon

and protect the products of its ancient biological heritage cannot do so without undermining themselves. It's another reminder that the human species has been doing just that for a very long time indeed. The difference, now, is that the path that has led us here has been so clearly revealed. (6, 5)

Notes:

- (1) Slaughter, R. (2018a) The Genius of Frank Hampson. <https://foresightinternational.com.au/remembering/>
- (2) See Slaughter (2015) review of Higgs, K. Collision Course. <https://foresightinternational.com.au/review/higgsk-collision-course-endless-growth-on-a-finite-planet/>
- (3) Slaughter (2018b) Urry, J. What is the Future? Foresight 20, 4, 446. <https://foresightinternational.com.au/review/urry-what-is-the-future/>
- (4) Slaughter, R. (2020). Confronting a High-Tech nightmare: Review of Zuboff's The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, Journal of Futures Studies, 24, 4, 99-102. https://foresightinternational.com.au/wpcontent/uploads/2020/07/Slaughter_Confronting_High_Tech_Nightmare_JFS_24_4_2020.pdf
- (5) Slaughter, R. (2021). Deleting Dystopia, Foresight International / University of S Queensland. Open Access publication: <https://usq.pressbooks.pub/deletingdystopia>
- (6) Slaughter, R. (2021). Review of Ludlam, S. Full Circle. <https://foresightinternational.com.au/wpcontent/uploads/2021/08/Full-Circle-Review.pdf>
- (7) Bussey, M. (2021) Precarity and beyond, Futures 133, 102798.
- (8) See Integral Futures: Introductions. <https://foresightinternational.com.au/introductions>