

Futures Beyond Dystopia: Creating Social Foresight

Richard A. Slaughter

Introduction

The world we are living in is, in many respects, an illusion. Or, to put it more precisely, it is founded on illusions. That is, much that is conventional, taken-for-granted, the 'way things are' does not stand up to close examination. The affluent Western world has become entranced by its wealth, its success and its ever more compelling technological prowess. But it pays little more than superficial attention to the consequences of its spiralling demands, to the ways it constantly transfers costs elsewhere and 'elsewhen' into the ever-receding future. Short-term thinking has become the norm and it protects us from ever taking seriously our collective attempts to consume the future.

We need to see these phenomena much more clearly because, at present, they are leading us to a world that no sane person would choose for themselves, let alone hand on to their children. It is, in my considered view, a world that is stripped, mined out, polluted, denuded of non-human life and compromised beyond all hope of repair. It is a world that may also be overrun by machines we can neither see nor control. In other words the most likely futures before us are irredeemably Dystopian in nature. They have already been explored, in essence and sometimes in considerable detail, in many Science Fiction books, films and TV programs.

One of the reasons for the commercial success of the movie *The Matrix* (both at the box office and the 'sell through' on DVD) was the fact that it powerfully depicts a fictionalised version of our real world predicament. The everyday world appears to proceed pretty much as usual. But underneath it lies a much more ugly reality that challenges everything human beings stand for and aspire to. *The Matrix*, therefore, provides a compelling metaphor for the condition of humanity in the early 21st century. It is not normally possible to bring such 'subversive' notions to full awareness. The social sanctions against so doing can be severe. In fiction, however, we can allow ourselves a glimpse at the truth without directly challenging the prevailing social order. We can experience our anxiety and fear in the safe confines of a book, a movie theatre or TV screen, where they can also be safely resolved, at least for the time being.

Back in the 'real' (unreal?) world of daily transactions 'downbeat' views of the future are not popular. They are deemed 'negative' and 'unhelpful'. The truth, however, is much more interesting. As the quote above by Ashis Nandy suggests, negative, downbeat, dystopian futures may be more useful than we realize. One of the main tasks of Futures Studies (FS) is the constant exploration of near-future 'landscapes'. The information, knowledge and insights so gained are used in a thousand ways by people and organisations to decide, strategise and, overall, 'steer' more carefully into the future. In 'mapping' these near-future landscapes foreknowledge of areas of danger or difficulty is very valuable. Ships at sea use charts to avoid dangers. Aircraft pilots use weather profiles to avoid storms. Walkers use terrestrial maps to avoid a variety of physical

dangers. In other words, our species has had long practice of futures scanning in order to avoid danger. Why would we now set that capacity aside when we need it most?

Overall, there are two basic motivations for looking ahead and studying the future. One is to avoid dangers. The uses of foresight for this purpose are as old as humankind. The second is to set goals, dream dreams, create visions, make designs; in short, to project upon the future a wide range of purposes and intentions. This second motivation also has ancient origins. Both can be seen operating from the earliest times.

Yet upbeat futures also have their own detractors for other reasons. One is that people simply don't believe in 'Pollyannish' dreams that are based on little more than wish-fulfilment. That is entirely understandable, but the objection risks missing the point. The other is that those who constantly sponsor and promote a consumerist lifestyle do not want people to feel contented, happy and genuinely optimistic about the future for their motivation to purchase and spend ('retail therapy') would then be reduced. But, in fact, there is a far, far deeper vein of what might be termed 'qualified optimism' that arises over time from immersion in the futures domain. It acknowledges the dangers we face and employs this knowledge consistently and constructively. It leads to clarity of insight and firmness of purpose. It reduces anxiety and builds empowerment. Far from being an inevitable decline into Dystopia and the end of the human experiment, the future presents a fascinating array of options that enrich the present.

This book is written out of a conviction that (1) current trends in the world do appear to lead directly to Dystopia, a diminished and premature end; (2) that understanding this can help to enable the motivations and capacities to change an otherwise depressing outlook; and (3) that Futures Studies (FS) has finally 'come of age'. The latter has moved well beyond its earlier limitations and can now be applied more widely and consistently to help facilitate a wide range of social and cultural adaptations.

A further feature of our time is ambiguity. One can find examples of 'good' and 'bad' news everywhere. But simple conclusions are just that. They overlook the processes of selection, exclusion and cultural editing that occur within human minds and all social institutions. It is only by having due regard for inner and outer realities that we can begin to get anywhere near the truth. And that is one of the central claims advanced here. To say anything of value about 'the future' requires far more than a conventional reading of the latest external trends. It also requires 'depth' and 'balance'. That is, depth of understanding of the here-and-now, and a considered balance between the inner and outer dimensions of the human life world. These facts have long been overlooked in many contexts, including that of FS. Yet 'expanding the frame of futures enquiry' in this way leads directly to new personal, professional, organizational and social options, some of which are explored here.

With this in mind it remains true, however, that any sober reading of the 'state of the world' strongly suggests a long-standing drift along a path that can only end in oblivion. The evidence that the species is living upon the earth in ways that actively work against

its long-term survival is overwhelming and will not be repeated here. To deal with this we need to recognize a number of things including:

- our collective powers of self-deception;
- the active role of unhelpful worldviews, ideologies and embedded ‘ways of knowing’;
- new ways of gaining clarity and insight, and
- an understanding of the dialectic of foresight and experience.

It follows that there is not now, nor can there ever be, a blueprint that leads to viable human futures. There are, however, a series of institutional arrangements, practices and processes that can support moves in that direction. Some of them are examined in this book. Overall, they suggest pathways to more humanly compelling futures, to futures beyond Dystopia.

During the mid-20th century the Dutch Futurist Fred Polak despaired of the loss of the cultural ability to retain sustaining images of futures. In his view, viable images of futures were the key to real progress. And, it is true, that the latter half of that century was dominated by Dystopian views. Many of Polak’s detailed observations remain pertinent. But it is not the case that the ability to envisage different and better futures has vanished forever. Rather, the powers involved have been malnourished over recent decades. They have slipped from sight, as it were, but have most certainly not been lost. The fact that this can be stated with such apparent confidence will hopefully become clear as the book unfolds.

The book reviews the development of FS in the late 20th century. It considers the earlier American dominance of the field and pays due credit to its achievements. It then critiques the core American tradition and attempts to account for some of its structural weaknesses. It is important both to honour the fact that it was a formative tradition within the field and also to understand why it failed beyond a certain point. It is suggested that later developments led to more critically well-grounded, socially aware and practically helpful approaches.

It is at this point that sharp-eyed critics may spot what at first looks like some important gaps in the argument presented here. Where, for example, are the chapters on politics, economics, trade and finance? One answer is that to treat such topics fully would require a longer, and perhaps very different, book. A second response is that politics, economics, trade and finance are all urgently in need of reconceptualisation and reconstruction. Currently they are operating largely out of taken-for-granted ‘flatland’ concerns and are very much ‘part of the problem’. Each has been thoroughly worked over and critiqued for some years. But these powerful entities remain strongly resistant to any suggestion that their principles and practices should be revised in line with a different set of values, assumptions and presuppositions. Such options are simply not on offer. Nor, perhaps, will it be until irresolvable crisis overtakes them and these change-resistant systems are forced to adapt to changing circumstances. At that time other assumptions, ‘ways of knowing’ and the social innovations that spring from them, may too have their ‘day in the sun’,

their opportunity to demonstrate their social utility in a altered world. In the current context it therefore makes sense to concentrate our attention on those sectors of society where one can most directly seen the potential for catalytic change. That is why this book concentrates on developments in FS and social learning strategies.

Two key phases in the development of futures enquiry are outlined here. The first is the shift from conventional futures thinking and capability to what may best be called a ‘critical’ paradigm. Conventional futures work gives rise to activities that can be described as ‘pop futures’ and ‘problem oriented’ futures. Both have their uses. But, in lacking critical and applied power, they cannot do much more than rehearse different combinations of existing options.

The second phase is the shift from critical futures thinking to an engagement with the integral paradigm. The latter has been steadily developed over some 20 years by Ken Wilber who some consider to be perhaps the world’s leading philosopher and synthesist of knowledge. Both of these developments take us, and the futures field, into new and breathtakingly broad territory. The central claim of this book is that together they abundantly illustrate a wealth of strategies, approaches, social innovations and the like that, arguably, have the potential to lead the human race in quite new, hitherto unexplored, directions.

That is, to futures beyond Dystopia.

Richard Slaughter
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