

The Foresight Principle: Cultural Recovery In The 21st Century

By Alex Burns (alex@disinfo.com), Disinformation®, 22 October 2002.
<http://www.disinfo.com/pages/dossier/id1951/pg1/>

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Richard A. Slaughter

Westport, CT: Praeger and London: Adamantine Press Ltd., 1995

Introduction: The Future Is Not What It Used To Be

In the post-dotcom crash world, mentioning Futures Studies to an audience usually conjures up associative images of *Futurehype*: Alvin Toffler analysing the Persian Gulf War as a military-entertainment videogame, John Naisbitt hawking the latest *Megatrends* to psychographics-savvy corporations, or the micro-scandal of *Wired Magazine*'s past connections with the Global Business Network.

Dotcom industry analysts are revising their scenarios accordingly. *The Long Boom* had a half-life of several years. *The 500 Year Delta* had a course-correction. Hans Moravec is still working in his conscious robots, Mark Pesce is devising new Virtual Reality applications, and the Living Universe Foundation is creating a mini-colony for its Aquarius stage. Biotechnology and nanotechnology are still emerging as 21st century revolutions.

These initiatives reflect a certain style of Futures Studies that emerged during the late 1960s: largely American and European-based, and placing faith in the predictive power of social planning and the Faustian promise of new technologies to regenerate cultural recovery. The *telos* of this style was the cosmopolitan-global business community and world federalism that was depicted in the space station sequence of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The custodian of this style is the US-based World Future Society.

Within years of gaining public prominence, this techno-centrist style of Futures Studies clashed with the new mindsets and realities that emerged during America's tumultuous social upheavals. The failure of Robert McNamara's policies during the Vietnam War highlighted blind-spots in scenarios planning. The utopian visions of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society failed to resolve economic inequities and social divides.

When the Club of Rome released its study *Limits to Growth* (1972), many futurists focused on its 'overshoot and collapse' scenario and the 'global problematique'. [1] The ensuing controversy over computer models helped the counter-emergence of deep ecology and peace studies movements. The Club of Rome's dystopian outlook also infiltrated popular culture through a film mini-cycle, refracting speculative future visions through current social anxieties. *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) examined how Behaviourism might integrate young criminals into society. *Silent Running* (1972) portrayed space-based forests as the final environmental preservation strategy to the 'global problematique'. *Soylent Green* (1973) hinted at grim solutions to overpopulation

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and resource scarcity. *Rollerball* (1975) fetishized designer violence as a corporate form of social control. *Logan's Run* (1976) depicted a group-oriented society whose foundation is a death ritual. This dystopian outlook reached its apocalyptic determinism with the films *T2* (1991) and *12 Monkeys* (1996), where technological innovation dwarfed human agency and individual freedom. Dystopian logic also dominates Bill Joy's essay "Why The Future Doesn't Need Us", which provoked widespread debate about genetics, nanotechnology, and robotics.

Diversity and growth within Futures Studies has been overshadowed by dystopian fears, early controversies, and the uncritical acceptance/misapplication by companies of pop futurism and trends analyses. There are parallel histories of Futures Studies and multiple viewpoints about its aims. The World Future Society has matured into an institution with significant public outreach programs. The World Futures Studies Federation has emphasized multicultural perspectives and relativistic/knowledge-based thinking. Australian futurist Richard Slaughter has expanded the boundaries of Future Studies even further with his book *The Foresight Principle*.

Introducing The Foresight Principle

Richard Slaughter defines Foresight as the "deliberate process of expanding awareness and understanding through futures scanning and the clarification of emerging situations." [2] This human process is an extension of innate brain/environment perceptions. Four key applications of Foresight are "assessing possible consequences of actions, decisions . . . anticipating problems before they occur . . . considering the present implications of possible future events . . . [and] envisioning desired aspects of future societies." [3] Slaughter's presentation of Foresight later evolved into Strategic Foresight.

The first section of Slaughter's book examines the evolution and costs of the Western industrial worldview, and explains why social innovation outpaces institutional gridlock. "The late 20th century infrastructure," Slaughter contends, "is a scientific and engineering miracle." [4] The dark side of this miracle has included the dominance of reductionist over systemic perspectives, exploitation of natural systems, the abuse of scientific and technological research for irrational ends that become self-perpetuating, and the dominance of 'having' (consumerist-material) over 'being' (humanistic-spiritual) modes of existence. [5] Slaughter then examines and critiques the limited thinking that dominates political governance and educational methods, and the false realities created by commerce and the media. Finally he profiles the major Futures Studies institutions, practitioners, and wider social movements. This includes a useful sub-section that gives an overview of Future Studies methods and techniques, ranging from environmental scanning and the Delphic survey method to global modelling and discourse analysis. [6]

From Megatrends to Ideas

Many corporations and people apply Foresight techniques, but usually on an ignorant or unconscious basis. The 'overshoot and collapse' controversy and the 26-year gap between the first scientific papers about the Greenhouse Effect (1974) and 92 countries

signing the Montreal protocol (1990) reveals a fragmented social response to environmental crises and human existential problems. [7] The perceptual barriers that prevent more application of Foresight techniques include an over-emphasis on empiricist and fixed space-time thinking, personal disempowerment and fear, and disregarding Futures Studies as irrelevant or too costly. [8]

Social Imaging and the Cultural Memepool

One tactic of re-positioning Futures Studies has been to shift the focus from trends to ideas. [9] This shift re-frames Futures Studies from a predictive field to being about innovative problem-solving, the capacities and possibilities for change, the range of images within the cultural memepool, and how to create preferable futures for individuals, groups, and societies. Two examples of the shift from short-term micro to long-term macro-thinking are Stewart Brand's Long Now Foundation (creating a 10,000 year clock to expand humanity's sense of time and responsibility) and cosmological Deep Time (the evolution of our universe from the Big Bang until the present and beyond).

Social imaging has often polarized into utopian and dystopian streams, from Sir Thomas Moore's *Utopia* (1516) to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Slaughter notes that because we are symbol-creating people who grow through cultural evolution and social meaning-making, "change often hits us hardest at the symbolic level." [10]

The misuse of social imaging techniques to data-mine the cultural memepool is one implication that Slaughter doesn't explore enough in this section. The most disturbing example of this was Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (1924-26), which fused the Enlightenment Project's "Will to Knowledge" with Friedrich Nietzsche's "Will to Power", transforming the realm of ideas into perverted action. Another misuse has been by dictators who destroy the feeling-sense of alternative options and futures by drawing on past history to legitimate their power-base and policies (such as Romania's Nicolae Ceaucescu assimilating the Transylvanian vampyre mythos and Iraq's Saddam Hussein invoking the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar). The past successes of 'from-below' political revolutions has been largely due to activists creating (and sustaining) a compelling alternative future to the political regime, then targeting its weak-spots during critical moments. While governments have long recognized the power of Futures Studies, its methods and tools are still being disseminated in activist circles and social movements.

Why Science Fiction Literature Extends Foresight Capabilities

Foresight capabilities rely on the human capacity for manipulating abstract thinking and generating multiple scenarios. Science fiction literature can be a way to explore this, especially through alternative history. [11] The most evocative stories of this sub-genre reveal that the dynamics of history are not pre-ordained but influenced by chance and hazard.

While it's common knowledge that many Golden Age science fiction writers were advocates, the fact that key stories were shaped by Futures Studies discourses is less appreciated. Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy (1951-53) featured Hari Seldon's psychohistory (a predictive tool of civilization evolution, drawing on socio-economic baselines and mass group behaviour). Asimov's vision was shaped by late 1940s operations research, cross-impact assessments, and statistical methods of time/series analysis and statistical regression. Novels by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle reflected the application of Futures Studies by planners for nuclear warfare scenarios and macro-economic/monetary policies. J.G. Ballard's mythopoeic future was imprinted by his Shanghai childhood and World War II internment by the Japanese, the 1960s media and Apollo space program. Science fiction literature's ability to reshape Futures Studies became clear when William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) created a social space that accelerated the Internet's emergence. Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (1930) and *Star Maker* (1937) influenced a generation of Futures Studies advocates, including Jack Sarfatti and Esalen's Physics-Consciousness Research Group.

Speculative fiction hones our social imaging abilities and, provided that we read and actively reflect, can shift our perspective from the micro to macro-view. It provides a laboratory to re-examine the cultural evolution of the human species. As the *Star Trek* (Gene Roddenberry) and *Star Wars* (George Lucas) series have shown, speculative fiction can provide the artificial mythologies that transmit Futures Studies to a mass audience. Speculative fiction that taps Futures Studies research also deepens our collective cultural memepool.

Institutionalizing Foresight

The dystopian strain of science fiction reflects our civilization's critical path of macrohistory. The 19th century's progressive industrialism gave way after World War I to the 20th century's regression and insecurity. Slaughter envisages that the 21st century will be a catastrophe period, because unresolved systemic problems will create instabilities: "environmental and cultural systems could 'flip' very suddenly from one state to another." [12]

As a vanguard against this scenario eventuating, Slaughter has advocated the creation of Institutes of Foresight. He co-founded the Australian Foresight Institute at Swinburne University in 1999. He also profiles the major Foresight/Futures institutions, including the Congressional Clearing House on the Future (US), Eric Drexler's Foresight Institute (US), the Council for Posterity (UK), and the International Futures Library (Austria). Each of these institutions has survived funding problems and governance/political upheavals, and unlike the Middle Ages model of universities, are implementing Foresight techniques. Their work ranges from highlighting dangers and publicizing the near future to helping organizations evolve appropriately and facilitating workshops for people to overcome fears and dystopian social conditioning. Slaughter also explores the QUEST technique, [13] which blends environmental scanning with strategic workshops.

Foresight and Education

Predictive types of Futures Studies have often failed to predict the long-term implications of decision-making and policies. The Strategic Defense Initiative, for example, imprinted some Generation Xers with a fatalistic worldview, creating receptivity to Romantic-influenced Darkwave and Goth imagery. Slaughter's extensive background in education brings a unique viewpoint to how Futures Studies can create positive realities for young people.

While he raises concerns about violence and the power of images directed at the subconscious mind to mould behaviour, [14] Slaughter carefully avoids the shrill moralism that defined the Culture Wars of the early 1990s. Instead he contends that young people's anxieties reflect the uncertain transition from industrial to post-industrial society. "Those trapped within the transition process," he observes, "are often unable to grasp the new picture, only the old one is being lost." [15]

The solutions that Slaughter outlines are designed to shift a person's *loci* of control from being affected by external problems to the ability to cause positive change and re-connect with society. They range from metaprogram changes (changing fear into motivation) to new resources (Futures concepts and ideas) to time-lining (the future is part of the present) to life-span re-scripting ("design your way out of the industrial era"). [16]

Cultural Recovery and Regeneration Civilizations

The final chapter of Slaughter's book gives a brief overview of Transpersonal research as a method to regenerate civilizations. Ken Wilber's comprehensive and integral map of knowledge offers futurists a broader lens to examine civilization/culture cycles than pop futurism. Slaughter also cites Charles Laughlin and Sheila Richardson's 'Homo Gestalt' (a person able to tap transcendent insights and new cognitive/perceptual processes to envision new realities) as a possibility of where the human species might evolve towards. [17]

Slaughter's final section is an annotated 200-book bibliography, featuring authors such as J.G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick, Ken Wilber, Riane Eisler, Jacques Vallee, Gregory Bateson, and Fritz Schumacher, amongst many others.

Clearly written with insight and passion, Richard Slaughter's *Foresight Principle* enhances the knowledge-base of Futures Studies. The principles and practical techniques that Slaughter outlines will help readers to transform a "world-sensing" technique that has been "an *implicit unconscious* process" into "an *explicit conscious* process" central to everyday life.

Endnotes:

- [1] Richard A. Slaughter. *The Foresight Principle: Cultural Recovery in the 21st Century*. Westport, CT: Praeger Press and London: Adamantite Press Ltd., 1995. 52.
- [2] Richard A. Slaughter. Ibid. xvii.
- [3] Richard A. Slaughter. Ibid. xvii.
- [4] Richard A. Slaughter. Ibid. 11.
- [5] Richard A. Slaughter. Ibid. 17-20.
- [6] Richard A. Slaughter. Ibid. 38-39.
- [7] Richard A. Slaughter. Ibid. 52.
- [8] Richard A. Slaughter. Ibid. 53-55.
- [9] Richard A. Slaughter. Ibid. 59-60.
- [10] Richard A. Slaughter. Ibid. 88.
- [11] Richard A. Slaughter. Ibid. 84-85.
- [12] Richard A. Slaughter. Ibid. 94.
- [13] Richard A. Slaughter. Ibid. 78-82.
- [14] Richard A. Slaughter. Ibid. 119-120.
- [15] Richard A. Slaughter. Ibid. 117.
- [16] Richard A. Slaughter. Ibid. 118-132.
- [17] Richard A. Slaughter. Ibid. 156.