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Future as fantasy: forgetting the flaws[☆]

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Abstract

This paper looks critically at the practice and relevance of future studies, from the point of view of the large poor and marginalised sections of humanity. It puts forward nine propositions on the methodological and political problems with future studies. Future studies is dominated by western, instrumental perspectives and by pro-rich and corporate concerns, and it ignores alternative cultural perspectives as well as the interests and concerns of the majority of human beings. Also, it is oriented little towards policy and praxis and, consequently, has had little impact on the course of changes in and the driving forces shaping the real world. While putting forward an agenda for futurists, the paper concludes that future studies can become more meaningful and relevant for the large mass of humanity only through a radical democratisation of political economy on the one hand and of the categories of knowledge on the other. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The future is in fashion! And, we are told, it is glorious. In this fantastic future, there will be smart homes, designer babies, computers that will fit in your pocket, cars that will run on water, three-dimensional fax machines that will reproduce/fabricate objects, “the blind will see, the deaf will hear”, and, wait a minute, there will be life without end¹! Yes, did you not hear that the present gener-

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¹ The media is full of these predictions everyday. A few examples are in Refs. [1–3]. The last piece reports that according to Ian Pearson, a **futurologist at British Telecom**, “...in a 100 years or so, man may find his body a liability and may voluntarily decide to give it up...before giving up his body, the person may get a back up of his brain on the network and then download it onto an android (an android is a robot in human appearance).”

ation will be the last to die? This is the apogee of Man's dominion over nature, the Christian injunction that has so powerfully influenced the course of human history in the last few centuries. We had already conquered life, through the process of cloning; now we are on the threshold of conquering death!

Do we have any reasons to disbelieve these grand dreams of the future that the "futurists" and the media are selling to us? Where does "future studies" stand in the manufacture and selling of these dreams? Is it there to scrutinise these dreams so that it can either ratify the product, or tell us that we are being taken for a ride?

From my location in planetary society as a Third World intellectual, and the exposure that I have to the "knowledge base" of future studies from this perspective, I believe that future studies does, potentially, have an important role to play in scrutinising future fantasies, perhaps even in influencing the way we dream about the future. But, as is often the case, the rift between potential and reality is large.

2. Nine propositions on future studies

I would like to put forward a set of propositions about the nature, relevance, the uses and the misuses of future studies. These propositions are deliberately intended to be provocative, but more important, they point towards very real problems with the nature and practice of future studies.

2.1. Proposition one

To paraphrase that 19th century prophet, Karl Marx, *the futurists have only interpreted the world in various ways! The point, however, is to change it*².

Future studies can have no rationale unless it helps us build a world that is more humane, just, peaceful and beautiful. There is no doubt that most futurists do recognise that the purpose of studying the future is to work towards changing it. Richard Slaughter writes, for instance, "...futurists are not, by and large, interested in describing problems, but in exploring solutions" [5: 29]. Despite this, however, few futurists are also political or social activists. The contrary, in fact, is perhaps more likely to be true: many a successful social or political activist is a visionary. It may be argued, of course, that the futurist does not him/herself has to be an activist, but that her ideas have strongly influenced the direction of thinking and the course of events in society. This argument is certainly valid, but I do not know to what extent can some futurists and future studies in general be credited with such influences in society.

This fundamental defect or limitation is compounded by the fact that the nature of *interpretation* within future studies has been too one-sided and therefore flawed. This takes us to the second proposition.

² "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" [4].

2.2. Proposition two

Future studies is over-burdened, paradoxically, with a modernising past associated with the western technological civilisation, and is, consequently, dominated by instrumental rationality, while neglecting other worldviews and cultural perspectives. It has thus largely revolved around western, technology-oriented, materialistic concerns, and has made insufficient attempts to understand the world and the future from other perspectives. In the process, it has even ignored other systems of knowledge, which had and continue to have great practical relevance to the people of non-European societies. It may be argued, in fact, that since constant change is a defining feature of modernity, future studies is the logical outcome of the knowledge system of modern society. Consequently, it privileges the notions of economic growth, “development”, “progress” and technological obsolescence, while devaluing other systems of knowledge that do not fit within western theories of progress or the western system of science and technology.

For instance, “Our Common Future” [6] visualised by the World Commission on Environment and Development, is the common future as seen from the perspective of the dominant west. Although the report made the phrase “sustainable development” fashionable, its central concern was still manifold economic development, with suitable managerial steps to see that it should not have the negative environmental consequences. Shiv Visvanathan writes of Brundland’s “non-magical cosmos”:

Their entire discourse is still written in the language of a monetised economy... it never acknowledges nature for itself. Nature is never seen as a dwelling. It is only a resource, or a tool-shed. It is not *oikos*, a word which denotes prudence and care, the world of the housewife or tribal [7]

In this dominant orientation of future studies, efforts made to get into the skin of other cultures and to learn from their modes of living and their visions of the future are rare³. For instance, the effort made by Helena Norberg-Hodge to learn from Ladhak is exceptional [9]. While it is inspiring to learn about the Ladhaki ways of living and thinking — how they are able to do so much with so little and live such peaceful and contended lives — it is also tragic to see their culture crumbling against the onslaught of modernity.

2.3. Proposition three

As a helpful tool to map the discourse within the broad field of future studies, Richard Slaughter has suggested four levels at which futures work is done: pop futurism; problem-focused study; critical study; and epistemological study. This

³ Even when such an effort is made, it may involve distortion/misrepresentation unless handled with great sensitivity. For instance, according to Vincent Tucker, “Schools of thought such as Orientalism and disciplines such as anthropology speak for the Other, often claiming to know those they study better than they know themselves” [8: 13].

classification helps us state the third proposition: *future studies has been dominated by pop futurism, which, in turn, is dominated by “techno-futures” — grandiose visions of the future built upon the foundations of wonderful and miraculous technology.*

An obvious question which comes to one’s mind is: why is such techno-optimism so popular? One obvious answer is that technology *does* work, and its demonstrable power *is* often miraculous. It is not difficult, therefore, to be carried away by the optimism that something so demonstrably powerful will be able to take us to the golden age of abundance and absolute power.

The message of a new report to the Club of Rome, for instance, is that the technology to enable us to do much more with much less is already available. The title of the report speaks for itself: *Factor Four: Doubling Wealth, Halving Resource Use* [10]. Francis Fukuyama, of the “end of history” fame, goes further. He asserts that it is technology that will take history forward to a phase of “post-human history” and he exults in the possibility.

The open-ended character of modern natural science suggests that within the next couple of generations, biotechnology will give us tools that will allow us to accomplish what social engineers of the past failed to do. At that point, we will have abolished human beings as such. And then a new, post-human history will begin [11]

But there are at least two other answers, which are less obvious, but which nevertheless help us see the fascination with technological utopia in new light. One, argued brilliantly by the historian David F. Noble, is that the true inspiration of much of advanced modern technology lies not in rationality but in the other-worldly quest for transcendence and salvation:

Religious preoccupations pervade the space program at every level, and constitute a major motivation behind extraterrestrial travel and exploration. Artificial intelligence advocates wax eloquent about the possibilities of machine-based immortality and resurrection, and their disciples, the architects of virtual reality and cyberspace, exult in their expectation of God-like omnipresence and disembodied perfection. Genetic engineers imagine themselves divinely inspired participants in a new creation. All of these technological pioneers harbor deep-seated beliefs which are variations upon familiar religious themes [12]

Noble argues that the “religion of technology” is dangerous, for it continues to drive our enchantment with unregulated technological advance, while making us forget our earthly and social existence, here and now.

This leads us to another reason for the widespread fascination with techno-utopia. The belief in technology as solution is the easiest escape route from the problems facing us in the present. Instead of trying to locate our problems in the context of our own irresponsible actions, and to make an effort for self-regulation, the solutions are externalised in the form of technology. Since the problems are solved with the

aid of technology in the future, responsibility for the same problems in the present is evaded. For instance, the techno-optimists tell us that tomorrow's cars will run on hydrogen, derived from water. So the depleting reserves of fossil fuels as well as the pollution caused by their use are no longer a problem. At one stroke, the problem of responsible use of fossil fuels is avoided while simultaneously giving a great feeling of optimism for the future.

2.4. Proposition four

Future studies has primarily served the interests of large business corporations and the military-industrial complex in developed countries, who have the resources to fund futures research, but whose vision is very self-centred. It is well known that the tools of future studies have been used widely by business corporations, especially in the USA and other developed nations. Simply put, future studies, like any other academic or research activity, requires the investment of resources, which have only been available with the affluent nations and with large business corporations, who have supported futures research with their own interests in mind.

According to Richard Slaughter, this is one of the two major challenges that future studies faces:

[the]...long-standing, and arguably too-close, association with the existing centres and instruments of social and technical power, namely large corporations, scientific research institutes and government departments — including the military. Such associations are not necessarily “wrong” because the implementation of foresight is a structural necessity for all organisations. Yet critical futures study suggests that placing FS exclusively or predominantly at the service of dominant social and technical interests may be ethically and pragmatically unhelpful in the long run if it perpetuates a one-sided world-view and a continuing slide toward dystopian futures. Thus mainstream futurists may need to explore the transformative possibilities of working with the already powerful. Such work should also be balanced by more socially critical, empowering approaches, particularly with communities, the marginalised and mainstream education [5: 33]

Of course, the outcome of futures research is not only sub-serving economic and political interests, but also making sense out of reality. The two books *Megatrends* [13] and *Megatrends 2000* [14] are good examples of oversimplified analysis put forward as the gospel, and primarily intended for the business audience. Critiquing the analysis in these two books, Slaughter notes aptly:

So what is the motivation for such works? In a word, marketing. The apparently authoritative identification of such trends is a symbolically (but not substantively) powerful resource that can be sold to anyone seeking a competitive “edge” during difficult times. Their popularity within business environments and elsewhere is due undoubtedly to the way they interpret and simplify the world. In other words, “megatrends” provide a largely false sense of security, a way of gaining a seri-

ously distorted impression of “the big picture” without the further effort of critical thinking [5: 278]

2.5. *Proposition five*

Future studies has little or no relevance to a majority of the people of the world: the poor and the “people without future”. If it has been serving big business and the affluent nations, how could it have been serving the poor? Futurists tell us of the “smart home” (that will perform a number of routine tasks, such as augmenting supplies, automatically for its habitants) that we can look forward to. But how many inhabitants of this planet will have a home at all? By 2050 the number of ecological refugees (who will be forced to migrate due to famine, water shortages and environmental degradation) is expected to be about 50 million, while another 100 million people living in low-lying coastal areas will be displaced due to sea-level rise caused by global warming [15]. One-third of the children to be born in India in the earlier decades of the 21st century will be low birth-weight babies, with inherent limitations in physical and mental growth in later life. The homeless, the ecological refugees, the low birth weight children and the people in numerous war-ravaged zones are all likely to be the “*people without future*”. How much attention has future studies paid to the foreclosed future of these people?

2.6. *Proposition six*

For a variety of reasons, which include a narrow focus, the inability to predict with precision, and the frequent exclusion from decision-making structures, *future studies is of little consequence to the colossal changes taking place in the real world.* If future studies is intended to help us make informed choices about the future, it has hardly been able to influence the course of events in the present in such a way as to have a significant impact on the future. Whether it is the highly iniquitous global economic order, the nature and impacts of global economic policies and the flow of capital, global criminal mafias at work, terrorism, the developments in cutting edge technologies, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the occurrence of wars and ethnic conflicts, natural disasters or health epidemics, there is very little that future studies has to show in terms of its role in influencing or reacting to the course of such pivotal global events and trends.

2.7. *Proposition seven*

As a corollary to the earlier propositions, *future studies as a discipline has had very little impact on public policy.* It has rarely been able to carry out the kind of work that can have a deep impact on public policies and has hardly been able to influence key decision-makers in different societies. No doubt, there are exceptions — for instance, the parliamentary Committee for the Future, in Finland — but

on the whole foresight has not been acknowledged and used by governments as a principle of public policy.

2.8. *Proposition eight*

There is a huge gap between the insights and consciousness of the futurists, on the one hand, and the consciousness and actions of ordinary human beings as well as the more powerful decision-makers, on the other. Despite the insightful critiques and futuristic ideas of Lewis Mumford, Ivan Illich, Schumacher and scores of other critical thinkers and futurists, the impact of these on mainstream thinking and policy is minimal. Yes, there is, perhaps, a growing “alternative” community of activists and intellectuals influenced by the insights of alternative futurists and critical modernists. But the impact of these futurist thinkers on mainstream society and on the “paradigm of progress” is still very limited. While future studies has been able to develop important perspectives on the human condition, there has been little success in spreading these perspectives beyond the rarified world of the academia. The variety of future studies that has reached the wider world is, as acknowledged by the futurists, the “pop” variety, which is one-sided and poor in terms of alternative and critical perspectives.

2.9. *Proposition nine*

The role that future studies can play in a globalising world is unclear. Globalisation is characterised by the free flow of capital, profits, economic goods, as also cultural products. However, there are two major barriers to comprehensive, overarching globalisation. One is the restriction on the free movement of human beings — the nation state, which represents economic, political, racial and cultural barriers — continues to be an entity to reckon with. Two, while cultural products might flow freely, there are deep-seated barriers, often implicit, to the flow of worldviews, values, epistemologies and ontologies.

One of the problems with globalisation is the link that it creates between certain forms of creativity, knowledge and skills and the global market. As a consequence, certain forms of knowledge and skills, usually linked to western science and technology, and the practitioners of these, prosper, while a variety of indigenous forms of knowledge and skills, and their practitioners, are discouraged and pushed to the brink of extinction. Indeed, this phenomenon has been with us ever since the beginnings of colonialism, but now it takes place in the post-colonial context in which the erstwhile colonies are politically free to take their own decisions, albeit in the economically integrated world. Thus, for instance, the skills of modern “management”, computing, communications and engineering are highly rewarded, while traditional medical systems, agricultural practices and crafts languish.

What role can future studies have in this kind of a world in the throes of globalisation?

Can it help us in creating a more equitable and democratic world? Can it help us in evolving meaningful controls on capital and on technology unleashed? Can it

enable the diverse cultural forms of knowledge and skills to survive? Can it shield ecological and cultural niches from the onslaught of homogenising modernity? Can it help the cultures and civilisations of the world to develop respect for each other and to dialogue as equals? Can it, through all this, help us in democratising the process of envisioning and creating the future?

The enterprise of future studies can be justified only if it can attempt, with at least some degree of effectiveness, to do all this.

3. An agenda for futurists

In keeping with the spirit of this paper and the nine propositions made above, it will be in order to suggest some ways and possibilities through which the community of futurists can attempt to overcome some of the limitations of future studies that have been pointed out.

3.1. Political engagement

First of all, future studies, or the community of futurists, has to engage much more directly with the political task of creating a democratic future by trying to democratise the global social order in the present. The questions of poverty and ecological survival are among the most vital questions for half of humanity. In the absence of this task, future studies will become an esoteric exercise. We can be sure to expect the highly skewed global social structure to give rise to elitist and distorted visions of the future.

In this context, we may take note of the UN initiative to hold a Millennium Summit in September 2000, along with the 55th session of the UN General Assembly, and the recently launched report, “We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century” by the Secretary-General of the UN. It is important for the community of futurists to engage closely with such global policy initiatives, besides participating in the socio-political realm at the grassroots and the national level.

3.2. Public debate

The hype about the new millennium notwithstanding, the perspective of future studies has hardly been brought to bear upon public debate on various issues. This is particularly the case in India and other developing countries, but it appears that the situation in the developed world in general is not very much better. The perspective of long-term thinking and foresight should inform much of public debate. This requires, on the one hand, that futurists intervene in public policy issues and debates, on the other, that experts and participants in sectors such as the economy, education, international relations, health, media and so on are educated about futurist methods and perspectives. Futurists may not prefer or agree with the assertions of certain kinds of “pop” futurism, but the task of communicating with the wider public remains valid and desirable.

3.3. *Focusing on alternative futures*

It is about time that futurists got down earnestly to discovering and elaborating visions of the future from non-western perspectives. This would be the first step in keeping alive the possibilities of alternative, pluralist futures. Pioneering work in this direction has been done by South Asian scholars such as Ziauddin Sardar, Sohail Inayatullah and Susantha Goonatilake, but much more needs to be done⁴.

Another aspect of this task is critiquing the west from within and seeking out alternative possibilities for the future. According to Vincent Tucker

The task of deconstructing and demythologizing the project of the West is an urgent one. If we are to understand the current crisis in development it is essential that we deconstruct this myth in the same way that we would deconstruct the myths of other societies [8: 21]

The path-breaking work of Ivan Illich falls in this category. A fairly large number of western scholars are now engaged in this endeavour⁵. But it is essential that both the aspects of this task are not left only to western intellectuals. A special effort should be made within future studies to support research on non-western knowledge systems and alternative visions of the future by indigenous scholars and bearers of knowledge.

3.4. *Freedom from technological domination*

There has been much concern in social science discourse with religious fundamentalism, but relatively little attention has been paid to the fundamentalism of the “religion of technology”. The arrogance, recklessness and the speed with which technology is advancing, the motives that inspire technological advance and the alienation of technology from basic human needs and values are all pointers that this may be the most destabilising and dangerous element in the future.

Among the most important items on the agenda of futurists, then, should be: how to devise democratic forms of control over technology?⁶ This may be done, for instance, through creating a global body comprising eminent scientists, philosophers, religious leaders, statesmen and the representatives of different cultures, which can supervise and regulate the advances in technology and deal with the ethical and social fallouts. It is up to the futurists to work towards different ways in which the un-caged tiger of technology can be tamed.

The future has already been colonised by the West, notes Ziauddin Sardar. I believe that future studies may constitute part of the answer for our emancipation from this colonised future, but only if it transcends sterile discourse to help us rad-

⁴ For instance, Refs. [16–18]. See also Refs. [9] and [19].

⁵ For instance, Ref. [20].

⁶ As Slaughter writes, “the solution to the problem of technological domination is not technical in nature; it is political and, in its deepest sense, human” [5: 223].

ically democratise, on the one hand, political economy (and social ecology), and on the other, the categories of knowledge.

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