

# Recovering the Future

## General Introduction

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*Recovering the Future* represents a series of explorations within the field of Critical Futures Study. The word 'critical' is important and can be explained by considering the title.

The phrase 'recovering the future' raises an immediate question: in what sense can that which has by definition, not yet happened, need or permit recovery? The future is, in principle, open. Yet for something to be recovered it must first be lost. There is therefore a second question: what is it about the future that has been lost?

The answer to both questions is encapsulated in Schell's brief, but devastating, assertion that 'formerly the future was given to us; now it must be achieved.' If that were merely the opinion of one person it would hardly be worth our attention. Criers of doom have been with us for a long time. Yet today there is every reason to believe that Schell and others are essentially right when they suggest that the future can no longer simply be assumed. There are a number of cogent reasons why it has indeed become problematic.

In one sense this is not new. Life has always been uncertain. The spirit of *fin de siècle* has appeared whenever a prevailing cultural matrix has broken down and people have sensed the insecurity and anguish of unwelcome change. But I take the view that our particular time is characterised by a sense of breakdown and loss of certainty that is qualitatively different from previous historical experience. For one thing our difficulties are no longer local but global. An incident in the Gulf can affect economies around the world. Acid rain recognises no international boundaries and we may never be able to count the full cost of major industrial accidents such as have occurred at Bhopal and Chernobyl. Again, crude statistics show that at no time has there been 6 billion people alive on planet Earth, that tropical forests and their fauna have never been under such sustained assault, that debts, famines, pollution disasters and other technology-led insults have few, if any, historical parallels of this magnitude. The result is a collective loss of confidence and vision: an inability to see the future in any other than disastrous terms.

One of the clearest ways to trace the decline of optimism during the present century is to chart the fate of the Utopian impulse. Those who have done so have also documented the rise of anti-Utopia, or Dystopia - the rise of negative views of futures. Today we are so accustomed in our fiction, films, TV programs and so on, to moods of cynicism and despair that they no longer seem unusual. However, the cost is very great, especially among the young. Very many surveys have showed that young people frequently believe either that there is unlikely to be a future or that it will simply be not worth having. The attitude is not quite universal for some means of sheltering from the breakdown do remain. Yet negative attitudes and feelings are pervasive. They give rise to feelings of hopelessness and despair that further stimulate the many forms of chronic escapism and induced mindlessness pursued within the naive but powerful marketing cultures of all developed societies. However, the

argument is not a moralistic one. Appropriate responses can be both pragmatic and visionary. If individuals, groups and societies cannot envisage future states of affairs in which substantial improvements can be effected the present becomes that much harder to bear. Who really enjoys the prospect of bringing up children who will be at risk of permanent under-, or unemployment? Who could feel secure while being the target for pre-programmed nuclear missiles? Who would want to explain why it was that much of the wildlife died out or why people who went out into the sunshine were increasingly likely to get skin cancer? These are not trivial matters. They affect every society on earth and each individual.

I take the view that no one who has looked at the evidence can sustain the view that the outlook for humankind is anything but very bleak. That, I believe, is proven beyond any doubt. What I question is whether such an outlook is necessarily depressing. One of the futures tools in this book shows how the response to what is feared can be separated from the fear and used for other ends. In wider terms the book seeks to show that there are indeed grounds for qualified optimism. All is most certainly not lost, though I fear we will have a very hard time indeed if we do not revise many of our commonsense ways of understanding and dealing with the world. And that is why my approach to futures has to be a critical approach. It has very little to do with criticising *per se* and everything to do with standing back from our immersion in cultural and academic traditions in order to perceive their sheer partiality. It is only by 'Taking Issue With the Way Things Are' (Part Two) that we can begin to see how they could be different. Therein lies the rub. For there are very many individuals and groups with powerful interests in keeping things the way they were, and such interests are not easily countered. Yet constructive responses are possible and some are explored here.

Conventional education tends to be so conservative and woolly that it hardly ever gets close to providing the young with the insights, tools and strategies they need if they are to survive and flourish in this 'Brave New World'. And yet even here there is the prospect of a 'Quiet Revolution' (Part Three), one of several in fact. I really don't know if futures in education can be considered as another subject. I *do* know that when it is well prepared and properly presented it is enthusiastically received by students who go on to develop more positive and constructive attitudes towards futures. And that explains my title.

It is my hope that *Recovering the Future* will provide some respite from expectations and visions of disaster and decay. For it is entirely possible that if enough people want to see major changes in their lives and in their society they will be able to bring them about in a multitude of quiet, yet effective ways. I have no simple formula for recovering the future. (To imagine that futures can be reduced to formulas is itself a serious mistake.) I do know that it can be achieved by persons of goodwill who are prepared to move out of seductive comfort zones and to engage with the power structures and issues wherever and whenever they appear. The central proposition of the book is that by recovering our individual sense of the future we may steadily recreate what has for too long been missing from our public life: a quality of participating consciousness in space in time.

## **Part One: Exploring the Extended Present**

The underlying purpose of studying and considering possible futures is to enrich our understanding and ability to act now, in the present. Past and future can both be used as imaginative contexts for escapism or for generating new insight. They are the two poles of an extended present that connects us with origins and with consequences.

What we normally take to be the present is a very narrow aspect of a much wider reality embracing aspects of past and future. This limited present, the ‘here and now’, emerges from the past and is also powerfully shaped by our beliefs about futures. The present is a kind of shifting fulcrum from which our consciousness ranges in pursuit of understanding. How did we get here? What do we want to achieve? These are questions that concern everyone.

To begin to move out of our unconscious immersion in a limited here and now to a wider extended present is to participate in one of the most crucial shifts of our time. For it is very clear that all of the problems we face are complex and interwoven. They cannot be articulated, let alone resolved, from within the reductionistic categories of traditional academic, legal, commercial or political discourse. Such discourse itself needs to be reframed within wider meta-level frameworks of understanding and interpretation - frameworks that contain the permanent possibility of subjecting their own assumptions to questioning and further reframing on new levels.

The intent of critical futures study is to help create part of this wider meta-framework. Its starting point lies in an analysis and critique of the futures field as it had developed in the USA by the early 1980s. This is the subject of the first part of the following paper. The second part is more demanding on the reader, but it repays close attention since it covers some of the deeper issues and concepts that arguably increase the critical power of this field. Some consequences of such developments are set out in the third section. The paper as a whole represents an introduction to the essentials of a critical futures method.

The second paper describes one of the tools of such a method: the transformative cycle. Essentially this is a method of sketching in some of the main features of change processes. It helps to operationalise the notion of an extended present by looking at recurring stages that arise again and again in many contexts. By so doing the T-cycle provides a variety of insights into continuity and change.

Chapter three is a selection from *Futures Tools and Techniques*, a book I produced for use in a range of educational contexts. The book represents a practical consequence of using a critical futures approach. Each exercise takes up concepts from the futures field and suggests a variety of uses. It has been trailed in several countries and is being continually up-dated in successive editions. Taken together, these three opening chapters provide an introduction to the field of critical futures study.

## **Part Two: Taking Issue with ‘the Way Things Are’**

As a child and a teenager I often found myself perplexed by the contrasts between literal understanding (‘the bible means what it says’) and interpretation (‘my reading

of this text suggests that ...'). It was some years before I understood that literalism and realism were founded on some simple, but profound, mistakes about meaning, language and perception. Similarly, it took me over 30 years to realise that what we take to be a concrete and 'finished' social reality ('the way things are') is an illusion. The laws and certainties promulgated by my parents, teachers and significant others turned out to be based on historically conditioned and culturally relative assumptions (England is the centre of the world; don't give money to beggars ... etc).

More time was needed to make it clear that some very significant chunks of contemporary life were not what they first seemed. This became evident when I lived for some years in Bermuda. Now ostensibly the island is a tourist paradise. That is how it represents itself externally, how it markets itself. It says, in effect, 'this is the version we want you all to believe.' But when you live there you come to know very soon that it is far from being what it claims to be. You see the damage, the lost aspirations, the crime, confusion and desperation flowing from the post-war development process. You realise that here they may have once been a kind of paradise, albeit for whites only, but now there is none. In its place is a cynical economic machine that works very hard to define the dominant social reality in ways that will keep the dollars flowing in.

The postcards purchased by tourists provide images of sandy beaches, colourful gardens, white-roofed houses, horse-drawn carriages and amiable policemen in shorts. They correspond to the 'official' reality. Yet underlying this is the reality of environmental decline, abject dependence upon the outside world, endemic social conflict, economic opportunism (Bermuda is an 'off shore tax haven' for many well-known multinationals) and military domination. The airstrip that facilitates the arrival of tourists is part of a large military base from which American aircraft fly each day to play cat and mouse with Russian submarines. At all times there is an aircraft aloft which carries the emergency codes for nuclear retaliation, should it ever be needed.

Living for several years in Bermuda was more instructive than any amount of time spend in conventional education. For the latter tends to promulgate the dominant myths and stories of a culture whereas the former showed that such myths and stories only exist for the convenience of a small minority who benefit thereby. Society was never designed to be fair and equitable, to care for the environment or act as a steward for future generations. In fact it was never really designed at all. It evolved through domination, struggle, crisis and conflict. The 'winners' are those who can make the system work for them. The rest simply have to get by as best they can. And that is why one of the most responsible things one can do is to 'take issue with the way things are'.

In the context described in the main introduction, it is clear that our species has reached a critical phase in its development; one that calls most of all for a qualitative shift of consciousness. The problems and issues that confront us can no longer be understood or solved from within the very frameworks of value and meaning that created them in the first place. One needs, first, to see very clearly how things are and, second, to see how they could be different. Part two takes up this theme in four areas.

The Machine at the Heart of the World looks critically at a selection of children's media and suggest that, far from offering a credible or nourishing view of the world, they present contradictions and confusions that have much more to do with marketing conventions than with the needs of the young. Future Vision in the Nuclear Age argues that the elimination of nuclear weapons is not really a technical issue at all. It suggests that the avoidance of genocide and the shift toward more sustainable futures are mainly dependent upon developments in human consciousness and capacities.

Metafiction, Transcendence and the Extended Present tackles the question of how writers of speculative fiction can come to grips with the world predicament and therefore infuse their work with a much-needed source of new energy and insight. Ironically, as the article was being written, Ursula Le Guin was finishing her novel Always Coming Home which arguably does just that. Finally, Cultural Reconstruction in the Post-Modern World examines some deeper notions that can help us to re-frame our perception of the world and hence create more durable and sustainable versions of it.

### **Part Three: Futures in Education - A Quiet Revolution?**

During more settled times it would have been perfectly reasonable to suggest that education be centrally concerned with drawing on the lessons of the past, with conserving and transmitting a clearly-defined body of knowledge. Today, however, such an approach is no longer possible or convincing. The search is on for patterns and principles by which to organise and deliver educational services in ways that meet a multiplicity of human, social and economic needs. The task is not an easy one for there are many claimants and competing views about the 'what and the how' of it.

My basic suggestion is that however the debate is finally settled (if it ever is), the new pattern will contain a significant futures component. Since many are unsure of just what this means, chapter 8 is An Introduction to Futures in Education. It summarises the 'nuts and bolts' of a futures approach covering such areas as origins, rationales, examples, content and process. A Human Agenda is an edited version of a keynote address given to the Futures in Education conference held in Melbourne during November 1986. It locates educational work within the futures field as such and outlines several key concepts in words and diagrams. It comments briefly on educational and economic futures and gives an outline Model Futures Curriculum that may be of use to intending innovators.

Chapter 10, Critical Futures Study - A Dimension of Curriculum Work, is a mildly provocative piece that explores some of the curriculum implications of this approach. It briefly considers notions of temporality and argues for the inclusion of critical/interpretive skills in curriculum discourse. Futures Study in Higher Education: the Case of RMIT was written following its centenary conference in 1987. The paper attempts to show how well grounded futures work can help institutions of higher education adapt to changing conditions and perhaps achieve a more culturally productive role.

### **Part Four: The Answer is a Journey**

#### **Introduction to 'Delicate Immortal Meanings'**

The notion that rapid change is altering every aspect of our lives has become an accepted cliché that we no longer think unusual. Yet few observers have noted that it points beyond the present toward very different futures. Outside the often-disappointing speculations of science fiction writers and the influential but spurious images generated by films, there is a distinct lack of credible images of futures to help give definition to some of the consequences of change. This imaginative gap between ‘change’ and what it implies is evidence of the short sightedness of our culture, its absorption in the here-and-now. How might we move beyond the impasse? The answer is implicit in the previous chapters: by understanding what has gone wrong, by recovering our ability to know and act, and by pursuing different ends.

That’s all very well, but the most frequently asked question is ‘what can I do?’ The question has very many good answers but only the confident or the foolish will give precise directions. One can make suggestions about this book, that critic, this workshop, that course. But I have come to believe that the best answer is to say that *the answer is a journey*. It is simultaneously a journey of self-discovery and external exploration. The self-discovery part is about finding out ‘who one really is’. Another word is vocation and it is a world away from a narrow, imposed vocationalism. It has a great deal to do with the skills and disciplines of quiet listening or reflection. The important thing is to look and listen in the right ways and to learn this one should ideally ask those who are already good at it. Once one has discounted the hucksters and charlatans there remain many capable people who can help others find their vocation.

The external exploration is a search for materials, resources, concepts and understandings through which to make sense of the world. It is true self-education and the key items involved already exist. Those who persist in looking tend to find them. Hence a slightly expanded answer to the question could be something like this: ‘you could embark on a journey of inner and outer discovery. As you do so you will find everything you need, including the nature of projects you could undertake and any associates (if any) who may help’. To my mind this is a reasonable answer, particularly since it is non-directive.

*Delicate Immortal Meanings* is a story about the very beginning of one such journey of discovery. It is fictional in one sense, yet true in another since it reflects aspects of our lives and world that have been widely under-valued and overlooked. The story is a practical embodiment of suggestions made in earlier chapters, particularly chapters 1 and 6 (of *Recovering the Future*). It attempts to contrast two modes of consciousness and to evoke a sense of interconnectedness. It recapitulates the central theme of the book by looking into the abyss - and then beyond it toward the recovery of vision that our culture so clearly needs. The point is not just about the validity of this particular vision so much as the wider capacity to create and utilise visions which transcend the banal catastrophes generated by a short-sighted but powerful technological culture.

## Notes

Some chapters of this book were previously published as follows:

Chapter 1 as Toward a Critical Futurism, *World Future Society Bulletin* 18, 4, 1984 19-25 and 18, 5, 1984 11-21, Bethesda, MD, USA.

Chapter 2 *Educational Change and Development*, 8,2, 1987 11-16, Deanhouse, Lancaster, UK.

Chapter 3 *Futures Tools and Techniques*, University of Lancaster 1987.

Chapter 5 *Futures*, 19, 1, 1987 54-72. Guildford, UK.

Chapter 6 *Foundation* 35, Winter 1985/86, 52-65, NELP, London.

Chapter 7 *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 21, 3, 1989, 255-270, Taylor & Francis.

Chapter 8 *Studying the Future* 10-20, CFF/ABA, Melbourne, 1989.

Chapter 9 *Futures in Education: The Report* 13-25, CFF, Melbourne 1987.

Chapter 10 *Curriculum Perspectives* 6, 2, 1986 64-68, ACSA, Murdoch Univ., Australia.

Chapter 12 *Gollancz/Sunday Times SF Competition Stories* 1987, 35-42, Gollancz, London.

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