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Reflections on 40 years of futures studies and *Futures*

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Forty years is a very long time in publishing, so *Futures* is to be congratulated not only for having survived this time but also for having continued to break new ground and to sustain its role as the 'flagship' journal of the field. That said, the latter has passed through a number of stages and is currently in a state of 'structural ambiguity'. Why is this?

1. Range of futures/foresight activity

A recent study into the State of Play in the Futures Field (SOPIFF) confirms that futures ideas, thinking and methods have diffused into countless different contexts around the world [1]. There are few people anywhere, for example, who have not heard the term 'scenario' and, indeed, many thousands have actually used them for a range of purposes. By contrast, and more generally, few would nowadays be unaware of the profoundly diminished futures heralded almost daily in the world's news media by the latest IPCC up-dates and similar reports of environmental and other major problems.

Yet if we look for evidence of any moderation in the underlying growth dynamic that is driving the current diet of 'bad news' one must say that such evidence is very difficult to find. The issue was highlighted rather pointedly by Thomas Friedman in a column which suggested that the growth in CO₂ emissions from a couple of new Asian cities, Dohar and Dalian, was sufficient to counteract most of the efforts of those in rich countries to moderate theirs [2]. The piece did not even venture into related concerns such as China's current dependence on coal for baseline energy, the continued destruction of tropical rainforests or other indicators of long-term global change [3].

The SOPIFF study was commissioned by the Foundation for the Future, Seattle, and completed in 2007. It is a pilot survey based on a sample of available work, so its conclusions are suggestive rather than authoritative. Yet the results provide a fascinating window on activities worldwide through several novel criteria that include: social interests (in FS work), methods, focal domains and capacity building [4]. Very briefly, the rank order of results in these areas is as follows.

1.1. Social interests

1. Pragmatic (here and now, status quo oriented) work.
2. Progressive (looking for innovative solutions) work.
3. Civilisational (big picture, longer term) work.

1.2. Methods

1. Systemic (integrating systems thinking and tools).
2. Linear (straightforward extrapolations).
3. Critical (including social construction tools/methods).
4. Integral (systematic and in-depth coverage of ontologically different domains).

1.3. Focal domains

1. Structural (dealing with the external collective world).
2. Inter-subjective (dealing with societies and cultures).
3. Behavioural (dealing with individual behaviours).
4. Psychological (dealing with individual interior worlds).

1.4. Capacity building

1. Establishing conceptual foundations.
2. Focusing on methods and tools.
3. Attention to enabling structures and processes.
4. Attention to the social legitimations of futures work.

While these categories provide only a simple gloss on a more detailed picture, they clearly reveal some of what appear to be structural distinctions in the field. To typify the two 'poles' of current activity, therefore, we can say that the first of the two following profiles is dominant, while the second characterises only a small minority.

1.4.1. Profile 1

Focus on pragmatic social interests, systemic and linear methods; structural focus on the collective external world and conceptual/method-and-tool-oriented with respect to capacity building. (On the whole this is conventional work carried out mainly on behalf of existing centres of political and economic power.)

1.4.2. Profile 2

Focus on long-term, civilisational social interests, use of critical and integral methods, integration of focal domains including individual behaviours and meaning-making capacities; and moving beyond methods and tools to consider the social legitimisation of futures/foresight work. (Such work tends to be carried out by academics, would-be social innovators and occasionally by leading-edge research institutes.)

While this is an avowedly simple summary it fits into an overall picture in which the great majority of futures work being currently undertaken is largely conventional, short-term, pragmatic and therefore, to varying degrees, subordinated to the economic and political powers of the day. If this is correct then its 'intervening power' is minimal and it will do little to serve humanity's deeper underlying interests. It will not be able to help society 'change course' or realise any of the 'alternative futures' that were so in vogue only a few years ago. Profile 2 characterises a very different type of work in that it is more innovative, far-reaching, in-depth and concerned to establish futures/foresight work as a socially valuable form of action and work. But it is uncertain how long this nascent tradition will take to become established and influential.

2. Current status of the field

One of the most positive things that can be said about the development of futures work in general over the last 40 years is that it has given rise to an exceptionally wide range of specialities in many different fields. Some of these have given rise to new university courses with their own literature and journals¹. So one way of interpreting the performance of the field is to point to its nascent offspring and give it credit for having had some part in their creation. On the other hand, the futures field has also had its failures. One of these is the near-universal failure to have futures concepts, tools, thinking and appropriate methods incorporated into educational systems worldwide as part of parcel of their 'core business'. This is not entirely the fault of futurists, of course, since bureaucracies are legendary in their ability to resist innovations of all kinds. Still, the lack of progress here does have profound social costs such as: lack of awareness of solutions to global problems; arrested capacity in succeeding cohorts of students to respond; lower levels of grassroots support in societies generally for those politicians who would act more effectively if they could and, overall, reduced 'steering capacity' for 'real', forward-looking, leadership at any level.

Overall, humanity is now set on an 'overshoot and collapse' trajectory and the sum total of futures and foresight work has thus far had little impact. The prospects for humankind and its world therefore grow ever more dystopian, especially when the repressive potentials of advanced technologies are factored in [5]. As always, however, the widespread recognition of this fact will galvanise hitherto-unprepared societies to act in far greater concert than is currently the case to manage the now-inevitable transitions that lie ahead. If ever there was a time for the species to 'wake up' and 'pay attention' to the changes being inscribed ever more deeply upon its world, then that time is now. The most useful role for futures/foresight work is to assist in this process of 'waking up' to humanity's self-constructed plight [6].

3. Role of Futures, the journal

If we change the focus back to the journal *Futures*, we can see that it has a significant part to play in this process. It has a high quality international board (albeit one that is less directly involved in policy and decision-making than it was a decade or two ago). For 40 years it has showcased new and leading-edge work while, at the same time, attending to the more technical nuts-and-bolts requirements of those working within the many futures-related sub-specialities. It has provided a stream of special issues, some of them highly innovative in their own right and forerunners of later publications that emerged from them. It also has a wide international audience and readership (though the details are unclear due to commercial-in-confidence restrictions that have become more onerous over time).

¹ For example those dealing with: globalisation, risk, innovation and strategy, long-range planning, social and cultural evolution, the integral perspective and countless 'future of' specialisms.

A sound strategy for a sceptical non-futurist to gauge the usefulness of the futures/foresight field is for he or she to take an honest and open-minded look at the core futures literature, including this journal [7]. Over 40 years it has provided us with a rich and unparalleled resource that can now be accessed on-line through many university libraries. While this access is certainly not freely open to all comers, the back issues of the journal have many uses. For example, looking back to the March 1969 issue one can find a paper by Robert Jungk on what he called 'look-out institutions' and what I later called IoFs (Institutions of Foresight) [8]. It provides a starting point for considering the extent to which this proposed social innovation has been taken up, developed and applied. In this and countless other examples, the progress of futures ideas, proposals and practices can be established. A careful look back reveals the main currents of futures activity and the evolution of concepts, trends, paradigms and practices within the field. I sometimes think that we under-value this resource—especially when those who should know better dismiss it out of hand as being 'academic'. I have found it indispensable in, for example, researching how various issues have developed over time and also for locating high quality content for successive updates of the Knowledge Base of Futures Studies (KBFS) [9].

4. Conclusion

I take the view that the futures field is at an advanced stage of development internally with a broad suite of tools, methods, practitioners and an impressive literature. But its applications are very uneven, the bulk of its work remains doggedly conventional and its most advanced expressions have yet to make their mark. Apart from the pressing need for greater social legitimation, one of the most significant stumbling blocks probably has more to do with human nature than with futures and foresight per se. It can be seen in the way that the differences that exist between practitioners of different persuasions often seem to become more important and divisive than the pressing concerns for humanity's future that supposedly underlie them. Perhaps this is inevitable in any field, the games and traps of the human ego being what they are. Yet, at the same time, the challenge has never been greater to transcend conflicts, disputes and divisions and to re-focus on the dynamics of the transitions ahead. Two works that achieve this with distinction are Andy Hines and Peter Bishop's book on *Thinking About the Future: Guidelines for Strategic Foresight*, which should be read by everyone, and Will Steffan's book *Global Change and the Earth System: A Planet Under Pressure* [10].

What is certain is that a succession of non-negotiable factors will test humanity as never before. It is headed for a perfect storm comprised

- global warming and sea level rise,
- peak oil and its aftermath,
- regional environmental collapse,
- economic and financial instability, and
- social upheavals and migrations on a scale never seen before.

In this context what the world needs is not inter-tribal rivalry but a coherent, convincing and capable futures/foresight community to assist with two key tasks. The first task is the need to 'wake up' to humanity's predicament; the second is to more consciously and effectively manage the multiple transitions from growth (which further inscribes the 'overshoot and collapse' trajectory) to sustainability (which requires very different values, assumptions and practices across the board). Quite possibly the most accurate and succinct statement about these prospects were penned a few years ago by biologist E.O. Wilson who wrote:

We have entered the Century of the Environment, in which the immediate future is usefully conceived as a bottleneck. Science and technology, combined with a lack of self-understanding and a Paleolithic obstinacy, brought us to where we are today. Now science and technology, combined with foresight and moral courage, must see us through the bottleneck and out [11].

The futures/foresight profession, vocation or field stands at these very crossroads. Whatever the future actually holds, the journal *Futures*, and others like it, have a major hand in resourcing us for this exceptionally challenging journey into new territory.

References

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