

The Transformative Cycle: a Tool for Illuminating Change

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Introduction

Much writing about futures, and certainly most media productions dealing with futures subjects place a great deal of emphasis on external change. That is, changes in structures, buildings, technologies and environments. Yet underlying and mediating such material transformations are more subtle processes involving power struggles, values, languages and epistemologies. Some writers have attempted to address these underlying concerns but to my knowledge, few have approached the social/cultural/technical nexus of change by considering transformations of meaning.¹ Yet it is here in the human world of needs, symbols and purposes that all innovations and changes have their origin.² Furthermore it is in this inner world of value and meaning that changes in external environments exact their greatest toll.

Sensitive writers provide ample evidence for this view. For example, Donald Schon wrote eloquently of the 'uncertainty and anguish' experienced by individuals as the old order decays and the new is not yet clearly seen.³ Dunphy articulated what is involved. He writes,

there is a deeper, more pervasive sense in which accelerating change affects our personal lives. Man is a symbolic animal and he seeks meaning in life. He does not live by bread alone. It is at the symbolic level that change hits us hardest, because it so frequently tears apart symbols which have provided our lives with meaning and continuity.⁴

It is easy to get bogged down in discussions about meaning since the issues involved are far from simple and everyone brings unstated presuppositions to bear upon them. I therefore discerned a need for a structurally simple way of approaching the question of change and negotiations of meaning.⁵ I wanted to cut through the complexity and provide a means of illuminating some of the main processes in a way that would reflect something of their dynamism, without being too simplistic. The result of that search is a tool or technique that I called the transformative cycle, or T-cycle for short. It draws on some of my early work on critical futures study and suggestions made by OW Markley.⁶ The paper outlines the basic four (or five) stage cycle, comments briefly on some of its proven applications and suggests other possible developments.

Outline of the Basic T-Cycle

1. Breakdowns of meaning

Since the dominant mood in Western cultures is frequently one of uncertainty and decay of meanings I have found it useful to begin the cycle at this point. This stage can encompass a wide range of phenomena but basically it refers to understandings, concepts values and

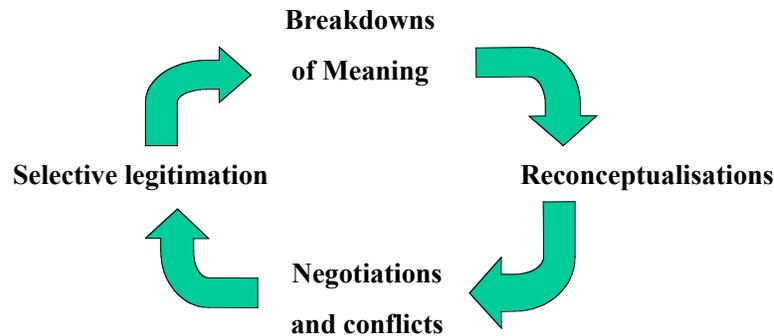


Figure 1: The basic model

agreements which once served to support social interaction but which now, for one reason or another, have become problematic. Under this heading we might wish to include concepts of work and leisure, health, sexuality, progress and defence. Each of these terms stands for a complex formation of ideas, understandings and meanings that once could be taken for granted because they reflected the prevailing 'common sense'. Yet as Donald Michael and others have pointed out we now no longer have a firm and monolithic sense of what is 'common' (in the sense of being widely shared).⁷ The technological revolutions of which so much had been expected proved to be more ambiguous and subversive than anyone could have foreseen.

It is tempting to see breakdowns of meaning as dysfunctional. But of course, while many breakdowns can be conceptualised as 'problems', that is not a necessary conclusion. If racism is becoming unpopular that could hardly be called a problem. Perhaps it is not becoming unpopular fast enough.

2. Reconceptualisations

At any one time there are many ideas and proposals for change being put forward in a range of contexts and media: in books, papers, journals, TV programs, films, plays, artistic events and so on. By no means all of these are associated with the futures field. However, the latter is one of the main social arenas rich in attempts to reconceptualise aspects of the human predicament. To look carefully at some of the field's major works is to recognise that futures writers have long attempted to come to grips with a series of breakdowns of meaning and have put forward a wide range of proposals.⁸ A few of the ideas in circulation include: non-nuclear defence, ecological ethics, post-patriarchal families, small-scale production for local needs and carbon taxes.

But it is characteristic of new ideas that they almost invariably challenge existing structures and the interests embedded within them. Hence very many reconceptualisations fail to make any impact. Some of them are simply not good enough and may even deserve to fail. Others may have great potential but they are put forward by powerless and 'invisible' groups (ie, those with no media impact and no ready access to it). At any rate nearly all new ideas - particularly if they represent a significant departure from existing social perception or social practice - encounter disinterest or resistance. The former fall out of sight while the latter continue to the next stage.

3. Conflicts and negotiations

Conflicts arise for many reasons. If new ideas are pursued with skill and vigour then conflicts are usually inevitable. Just consider the reactions of the tobacco industry to anti-smoking lobbyists, oil companies to 'green' energy alternatives or transnationals to any notion of social democracy. In many cases an older structure (and those whose self-interest it supports) perceives a threat to its continued existence and mobilises resources to defend itself and repel the threat. Structures do not have to be particularly ancient to adopt this adversary stance. The nuclear industry around the world provides many examples of this type of response (though the deployment of sophisticated PR skills may sometimes appear to soften these conflicts).

This part of the cycle can be split into two distinct stages since one cannot assume that conflicts will ever reach the stage of negotiation. To negotiate requires at least that the two (or more) sides are willing to listen to each other and therefore some presumption of parity - at least for the purposes of discussion - is needed. Where this equivalence cannot be created or sustained there is a profound difficulty for the would-be change agents. They may decide to give up or to re-assess their tactics. Some resort to violence and regress to ever more extreme and non-rational means of making their point (eg, terrorism). The path from conflict to negotiation may be a long and arduous one. It calls for high-level skills, persistence and support. On the other hand what were once called 'peace and conflict studies' have come a long way and offer real support even in some of the most extreme circumstances.⁹ Some conflicts unfortunately get permanently 'stuck' at this stage. But in other cases a resolution is found and the conflict caused by the new impacting on the old is resolved. Some new suggestions are selectively legitimated.

4. Selective legitimation

Far more proposals are generated at any one time than could possibly be taken up and implemented. Hence selectivity is essential. What may give cause for concern is that we can make no presumption that selection criteria are fair or adequate. Nor can we assume that the 'best' proposals are adopted. Best, according to whom? So the model does not suggest that this process of change *necessarily* corresponds with notions of improvement. It may involve regression - as when popular protests are put down by force or when political factions resort to assassination or kidnapping.

Of course it matters greatly who accepts the newly legitimated proposals. The public realm is itself can be viewed as one of the mainstays of the old order which has suffered under the onslaught of modernism. So it may well be that the process of selective legitimation directly serves particular interests and validates meanings which work against the majority. This

has certainly occurred in certain Third World countries where the activities of various trans-national corporations can be seen in this light.

Nevertheless, there are examples of legitimation that appear to represent tangible improvements in human welfare. Among the latter we might include the emancipation of women, the principle of sexual equality, environment protection measures, organically grown food, democratic elections and the UN Bill of Human Rights.

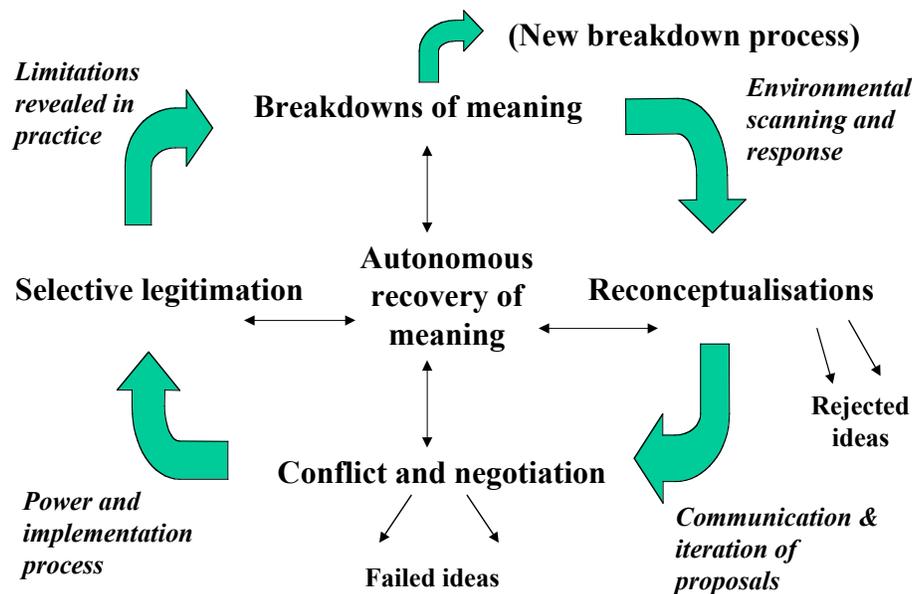


Figure 2: An elaborated T-cycle

Figure 1 showed the cycle in its basic form. But this is only a beginning. Figure 2 depicts a slightly elaborated cycle. To begin with, at any stage there exists the possibility of 'autonomous recoveries of meaning'. That is, processes which encapsulate all or part of the whole cycle without obvious reference to wider constituencies. One example of this is the Australian writer who had found a way of drawing on Aboriginal sources to create modern versions of nature spirits. He had incorporated the latter into a series of stories for children with the express aim of providing them with a more symbolically rich vocabulary of meanings to use in relation to the natural world. In my view he succeeded admirably.¹⁰ Successful examples of this kind have the power to affect any stage of the cycle. (Hence the small feedback loops in Figure 3.)

A more obvious elaboration follows from the fact that legitimated meanings will not normally return to the same breakdown process. The passage of time may well have altered the original context and hence the new meanings may be incorporated into a new, or renewed, synthesis. If the meanings involved are sufficiently powerful to attract wide support, quite new states and conditions of existence are possible (eg, an effective bill of

human rights). This is one major reason why futures may be studied and created but not predicted. It is also worth distinguishing between *failed suggestions* (ie, those which did not achieve a serious hearing) and *rejected suggestions* that were simply ruled out of court. The first task of any new idea is for it to receive serious consideration! This applies both to those in positions of power and to ordinary people who have retained the capacity to co-create their lives. ¹¹

The cycle can be divided into four broad sectors (though there is some interpenetration between them). The first is an *environmental scanning* process that may be passive or active. ¹² In the passive phase the breakdown is experienced as external and inevitable. In the active phase it is subject to critical analysis and some form of intervention. One result of the careful use of the T-cycle is to help facilitate a movement from one to the other. In the second sector the dominant process is that of the *presentation and negotiation of meanings*. Here ideas are deployed and many fall away as noted above. It is noteworthy that empirical/analytic traditions of enquiry tend to de-focus this area and substitute a concern for empirical analysis or top-down models of forecasting and planning. Much the same could be said of the *power process* that draws on political, linguistic and epistemological sources, following the newly legitimated processes of wider macro-change.

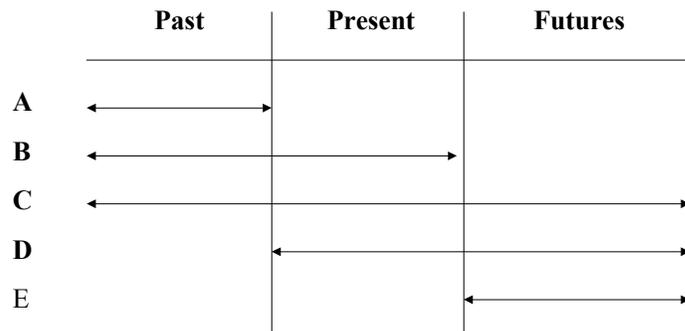


Figure 3: Temporal Range of Uses of the T-Cycle

The T-cycle can be run retrospectively, in the present, in the future or in some other combination of these. The basic options are set out in Figure 1. With option A the cycle is applied retrospectively to an historical issue for which sufficient knowledge exists. In B the cycle embraces an issue that began in the past and remains current. In C there is access to the full temporal range. Here one may play 'What if?' games and speculate on the further evolution of well-recognised change processes. D begins from the present (which need not correspond with the notion of a fleeting moment) while E permits structured speculation about new possibilities. With such a wide scope and range of choices it is clear that one must be careful in defining one's area of interest and in deciding what counts as evidence. For example, the term 'breakdown' may be too simple. Other processes may be involved -

perhaps value changes or structural shifts of some kind. Reconceptualisations may generate counter-processes that may take the form of an inhibiting backlash. Conflicts may rise and fall, moving in and out of focus. There is ample room for discussion about what might be meant by legitimation and exactly how it is achieved

Uses of the T-cycle

Despite the burgeoning complexities that threaten to overwhelm any such exercise, the T-cycle has so far proved useful in three types of context.

1. As a general-purpose workshop and teaching tool

Here I have found that the main value is in the way that the cycle enables people to contextualise their ideas and concerns. For example, those who are living through the breakdown of unemployment, poor housing, crime, divorce etc. often tend to withdraw from the wider scene and to feel depressed and helpless. Just to understand that such personal experiences are usually part of some wider process immediately takes pressure off individuals and facilitates a search for effective responses.

The tool also permits us to organise implicit knowledge into a meaningful pattern, to highlight relevant sub-processes and therefore bring into focus that which had been hidden. That is, to widen the frame of reference and the boundaries of concern. This is an important skill and process in its own right. For Western cultures in fact occupy broad spans of time and space and yet in an often contradictory fashion deliberately encourage numerous regressions to a cramped and under-dimensioned present.¹³

I have used the T-cycle with teachers and teachers in training, but it can also be simplified for use within schools by older students providing that specialised language is replaced with more suitable terms such as problems, suggestions and solutions. Students do require initial help both with collecting and assessing evidence and moving through the stages of the cycle.

2. As a tool for the analysis of change within specific institutions.

The T-cycle has been used with the planning division of a large technology institute as part of a professional development process. In that context, the exercise uncovered questions about institutional inertia, the specific ways that reconceptualisations had been encouraged or frustrated, the main channels and modes of communication, interpersonal factors, the varieties of direct and displaced conflict involved and the fate of meanings which had, at some time, and in certain specific ways, been legitimated. The discussions that arose were so rich and productive that it became necessary to add a further stage to permit selective closure on some of these questions.

3. As a tool for research and cultural criticism

I suggested above that too much attention is frequently paid to the surface of technical and environmental change. This is partly because the surfaces of technologies are more visible than meanings, values and purposes. Dominant positivist and empiricist traditions support approaches that emphasise the former and de-focus the latter. The identification of a whole era with a series of technical developments (ie, the so-called 'information age', or age of

‘space exploration’) has become so commonplace that it can seem difficult to reflect on the consequences. But it is essential to reclaim the initiative from abstracted technological imperatives, and their associated power structures, and to insist that the locus of identity and governance rests with people *qua* people and in their autonomous notions of human need, human potential.

The T-cycle can therefore itself be understood as part of an approach to futures work that is centrally concerned with *the recovery of meaning*. As such its research potential is considerable. There are very many issues, dimensions of meaning, which have been taken away from ordinary people and handed over to experts and agencies of various kinds.¹⁴ But the latter can never be relied upon to innovate in useful and convivial ways. Some have vested interests in obsolescent structures, meanings and purposes. On the other hand many of the most potent sources of social and cultural innovation lie at the cultural margins in the self-help groups, the citizen protest movements, the radical fringes and so-called counter-cultures.¹⁵ It is here that the apparent abstractions of the model take on new life for as Ivan Illich once remarked, ‘the future cannot be planned it can only be lived’.¹⁶

Conclusion 1 (1987)

The T-cycle is a technique with so many ramifications that this discussion has necessarily been compressed and I have resisted the temptation to append numerous examples. The reader may wish to try that. I would, however, warn against the temptation to reify the cycle. That is to regard it as an aspect of the ‘real’ world rather than a very partial account of some limited aspects of it.

The view of pervasive change implied by the cycle does not show up important continuities of language, culture and tradition that lend a measure of stability-in-change. I personally think that futures writers tend to stress change too much so I want to stress the importance of continuity and to caution against mistaking the tool for an account or theory of social change.

Nevertheless, as an approach to understanding the evolution of major issues it may be an aid to reflection, a tool of analysis, a fairly straightforward way of representing changes of meaning. The latter are often experienced as being remote, impersonal, in some sense ‘out there’. Hence perhaps the major use of the T-cycle is the way it permits individuals to set aside their feelings of helplessness and to engage more fully in the essentially human process of cultural innovation. By providing insights at this level it supports the view that technologies and the dilemmas they create may be influenced by the preferences, perceptions, actions and judgments of individual people and groups.

I would like to suggest that this approach helps us to redirect our attention away from the overexposed and over-hyped external surfaces of technologies as they are continuously marketed and represented to us. As the prospects of purely technological utopias grow ever more improbable we can use tools of this kind to turn our attention back to the source: the vast continent of our own barely-explored inner life.¹⁷

Postscript (2003)

Origin of the model

The original idea for the paper grew from my observation that certain well-known futurists began their careers by developing an account or critique of an issue or problem that they perceived to be confronting humankind. Over time, however, their work changed from what might be called 'problem description' to the 'exploration of solutions'. Things then began to get interesting because the latter seldom appeared welcome. You might be lucky and see quick returns on your effort. But it was much more likely that any attempt to create long lasting solutions, or social innovations, would take decades. Even then, nothing was certain. Hard-won achievements could be lost overnight. What was going on?

The model helped me to understand that question. I subsequently trialled it in a variety of contexts, some of which were briefly written up. But, although I had found it useful, I had no idea if others would. After all, it did pose something of a challenge to the conventional futures understanding and practice of the time. It suggested that many of the key dynamics of change were not 'out there' in the familiar outer world but, in some sense, 'in here' in the inner human world of meanings and symbols. But reliable maps of those inner worlds were lacking. I sensed that there were some important truths to be discovered, but was not at all sure how this might be achieved. So I continued on my own journey of discovery and innovation by working with an evolving set of ideas and practices that I termed 'critical futures studies'. Even though it proved useful time and again in hands-on workshops, I did not feel comfortable giving undue prominence to a largely untried tool. I was also uncomfortable with the habit of some who have sought recognition through self-promotion and the marketing of methodological fragments to the uninformed. Better, I thought, to let the T-cycle rest and see what transpired.

Reassessment

What happened is that in 2002 the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI) ran a course unit on futures methodologies and an outstanding student elected to take a closer look at the T-cycle and to evaluate it as a possible tool for the foresight practitioner's tool kit. At the same time other students had been using it to help map a variety of themes in their work. So, after having let this item 'lie fallow' for about 15 years, it began to emerge again and, in so doing, in a sense 'demanded' to be taken more seriously. What this illustrates, yet again, is that processes of methodological innovation in FS are necessarily collective, not merely individual.

Re-reading the original paper in 2003 one cannot help but see things a bit differently. For example I referred to the subversive potential of technical revolutions, but it was then a little early to be aware of how subversive post-modernism, economic rationalism and global marketing would turn out to be. Nor was it yet clear how the use of a range of post-modern tools and perspectives of enquiry would become central to any intelligent view of futures work.

Some of the examples I used became dated and were changed. (For example, not everyone would have remembered the long-running conflict over cruise missiles at the Greenham

Common airbase in the UK, so this was left out in the later version.) On the other hand the perceived threat of regression to terrorism and violence proved more accurate than anyone at the time could have realised. Some of the issues addressed in the model have been starkly illustrated not only by the September 11 atrocity but also by the repeated outbursts of violent protests at the venues of world trade meetings. Something is clearly going on here that requires our attention and evokes stages of the cycle.

A strong theme to emerge from the original paper is the centrality of social construction in futures work. Questions of power and legitimation in the social order are inextricably bound up with the value laden normative concerns of all futurists. Consequently I have come to believe that it is naïve in the extreme to attempt to work in this area without a deep understanding of these processes. It remains all-too-common, however, for futurists to focus their attention on *external* realities while continuing to ignore the inner ones that make their work possible in the first place! The last sentence of the original paper made reference to the ‘vast continent of our own barely-explored inner life’. It is here that the most profound gains have been made in the intervening years.

Critical to integral futures

In retrospect it has become clear that critical futures work – the attempt to fully consider the social grounding of all human activity – was an essential stepping stone that led toward the even larger, broader and deeper perspective that we now call integral futures. The latter allows us to see where the great domains of human existence, both inner and outer, fit in a wider pattern. Moreover, within each of those domains there is a great deal of clarifying structure that brings depth understanding and keen insight to matters that had hitherto seemed to be too confusing and contested to permit satisfactory solutions.

Serious futures workers now have access to integral concepts, tools and methods with sufficient power to strengthen and transform their practice. In place of confusion there is clarity. Instead of weakness we have strong, durable methods and approaches. From working at the social periphery, integral futures workers can now work directly and powerfully with central social issues and concerns. These are huge gains.

The four quadrant metaperspective is outlined elsewhere.¹⁸ One aspect of it is what Wilber termed the ‘eight native perspectives’. These are inner and outer views of each of the four domains. Since the T-cycle operates centrally within the two left hand (LH) quadrants, the four perspectives to be found there can be used to deepen our understanding both of the model and of the phenomena with which it deals. A careful analysis of the model suggests that it deals most centrally with three of them. These are:

- the external view of social collectives;
- the shared inner world of social collectives; and
- the unique inner world of the individual.

These are indicated on Figure 4. They lead us respectively into the following areas of enquiry. First into cultural anthropology, neostructuralism, archaeology and genealogy. Second into hermeneutics, collaborative enquiry and epistemology. Third into phenomenology, introspection, meditation and the deep understanding of the waves, lines, streams, stages and states that together define inner human existence. At first this may seem distant from FS as it has been understood. Yet consider the following. The

breakdowns of meaning referred to in the basic T-cycle refer to structures and discontinuities at the interface of the inner world of individuals and the inner aspects of social worlds. Or, in plain language, such breakdowns are specifically about how a unique individual comes to terms with stresses and contradictions in the social context in which he/she lives. Put positively this can lead to what Beck calls 'biographical solutions to systemic contradictions'.¹⁹ Put negatively (ie as a failure of adaptation to circumstances) this is the territory of denial, avoidance, the regression to substitutes, violence, suicide and the rest. The T-cycle is only a first step toward mapping the complexities involved, yet that step can be a vital beginning on a longer journey.

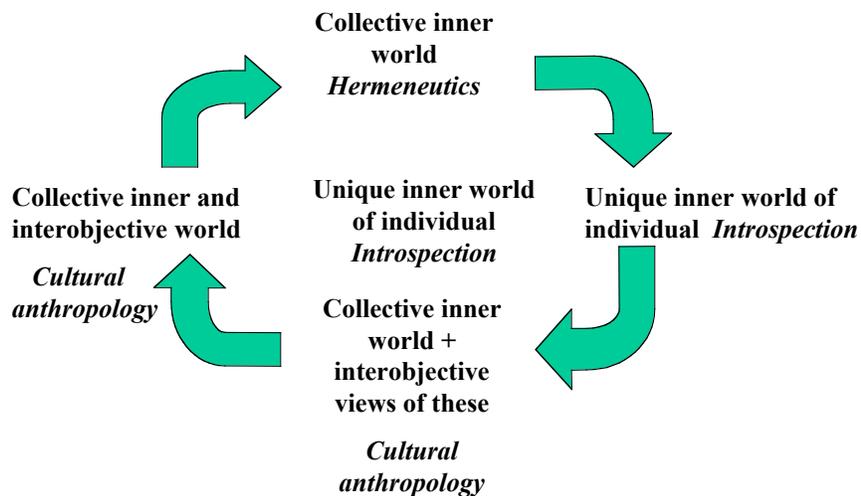


Figure 4: The T-cycle and 'native perspectives'

If we consider the stage of 'reconceptualisations' we can quickly see that the individual's ability to operate here will be strongly determined by his/her level of development. To put the matter at its simplest, *pre-conventional* responses will be driven by basic ego and animal instincts. *Conventional* responses (that equate to the bulk of conventional planning and unsophisticated FS) will merely re-shuffle pre-existing elements in routine ways. It is only when we get to the realm of *post-conventional* insight and capability that we can expect to see the emergence of what is truly new, novel and extraordinary.²⁰ The key point is this: the integral perspective throws a challenging new light upon the practitioner, bringing into focus the adequacy (or otherwise) of his/her development. In a nutshell: *conventional work always leads to conventional results, whereas post conventional work will generate reconceptualisations that are ground breaking and truly innovative.*

When we come to the conflict and negotiation stage we are clearly dealing with the interface between the inner and outer aspects of the social collective. I would say that it is, in fact, impossible to be constructively engaged here without a deep understanding of, and

grounding in, *both* worlds of reference. Here is where the hermeneutic interest in negotiating the shared inner worlds of collectivities is central. It is significant to note that, twenty years ago, hermeneutics was regarded as one of the elements of critical futures studies (with its focus on social/cultural interiors). That seemed fairly radical and 'out of the box' at the time. Now this historically-rooted discipline is revealed more clearly as a structurally vital part of the wider integral frame.

Finally to consider the issue of the selective legitimation of new social arrangements (social innovations) is to be pitched right into the heartland territory of social construction theory and practice. This is the crucible in which social sanction is given or withheld. If the practitioner finds the area 'too challenging' or 'too deep' then he or she probably should not be operating here at all! Issues of social interests, social power, who gets to define and who gets excluded have emerged as central issues in critical and integral futures.²¹ Where these are not seriously and consciously engaged, futures work soon regresses toward self-indulgent play disconnected from the worlds of reference of real people and dynamically evolving cultures.

Conclusion 2 (2006)

The T-cycle was first conceived twenty years ago and took most of the intervening years to emerge into practice. It is one of the many 'newer' tools in the professional toolkit of the 'integrally informed' practitioner.²² Like some of the more standard tools (such as scenarios and environmental scanning) it has benefitted greatly from the rise of integral studies per se. The latter has provided it with greater depth, range and coherence.

Yet we should also bear in mind that it is still by no means an adequate model of social change. On the other hand, it provides a way of gaining insight into some of the many processes involved. It throws light on areas that would-be innovators should usefully consider if they want to increase their chances of success. In the integral context the model also points back to substantive areas of enquiry through which practitioners can deepen their understanding of complex social phenomena. This provides both a challenge and a rich opportunity to the futures/foresight profession to collectively up-grade its human and professional capacities.

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Note

The original paper was first published in *Educational Change and Development*, 8, 2, 1987 11-16, Dept. of Educational Research, University of Lancaster, subsequently reprinted in Slaughter, R. *Futures for the Third Millennium: Enabling the Forward View*, Prospect, Sydney, 2000, 231-240. A revised and up-dated version was published in Australian Foresight Institute, monograph 6, Swinburne, Melbourne, 2004, pp 5-20.