

# Opinion: Is America “the land of the future”?



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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to consider the view that America is “the land of the future”. It argues that, owing to its sponsorship of a model of development that is exploitive and unsustainable, this is no longer the case and that US futurists, in particular, need to consciously re-evaluate their roles and work.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *The paper advances a cultural critique of US hegemony. It considers background myths and their role in creating “American exceptionalism” in various fields, including futures studies. It also critiques free market ideology, the role of corporations, market failures and the economics of exploitation. This leads to issues of truth and power and the view that a continuation of an ideology of “free enterprise” leads to the collapse of the global system.*

**Findings** – *The paper suggests a number of strategies for futurists to consider as ways of opening out their vision beyond current limitations.*

**Practical implications** – *A rationale is outlined that can support shifts in more progressive directions and moves toward more fruitful work.*

**Originality/value** – *The American futures enterprise is currently at risk from its uncritical association with dysfunctions in US society, culture and economy. The paper draws attention to some of these and indicates possible ways forward.*

**Keywords** *Culture, United States of America, Market economy*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

The US was in trouble right from the beginning. In a key passage Gore Vidal quotes . . . Benjamin Franklin who, on reading the constitution, commented, “I believe farther that this is likely to be well administered for a Course of Years and can only end in Despotism as other Forms have done before it, when the People shall become so corrupted as to need Despotic Government, being incapable of any other.” Cue in George W. Bush, two centuries later. “Franklin’s blunt dark prophecy has come true: popular corruption has indeed given birth to that Despotic Government which he foresaw as inevitable at our birth,” says Vidal.

C. Middendorp, “Knee deep in gore”, *The Age*, 16 April 2005.

“It’s here we got the miracle first, the cradle of the best and the worst” (Leonard Cohen, *Democracy*).

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## Introduction

America[1] as the “land of the future” is a persistent twentieth century myth indissolubly linked with its distinctive culture and pattern of development, its wealth, power and technological prowess. While the nation was founded on dreams of liberty and freedom (notions that were at variance even then with the oppression of native peoples and slavery), such dreams have continued to fade. The founding myths are at odds with present reality for one key reason – the US empire embodies a form of “development” that cannot be sustained, even by the rich. It follows that many aspects of the US currently require careful

and critical attention. Much higher levels of clarity and understanding are needed if it is to change its modus operandi and re-direct its efforts.

Worldviews are, however, self-evidential to those who hold them, so there are powerful constraints upon any such efforts. While many articulate accounts of “America’s ills” can be found and no shortage of home-grown scholars, pundits and critics of all types, the “ship of state” continues on its ponderous and increasingly risky path.

This paper is a work of synthesis that draws on the US and other work. It attempts to bring clarity to a number of key issues. Besides cultural myths these include neo-Liberal market ideology, the role of certain large corporations, how the US exceptionalism manifests in futures studies and economics, issues of truth and power, and some of what appear to be “missing links” in the overall debate about national directions and purposes. No one should doubt the seriousness of these issues. The time for polite (or impolite) evasions is clearly over because our world, humanity’s only home, is edging toward transitions that can hardly be framed either within the mass media or most other conventional discourses (Fry, 1999). Yet at some level we all know that everything is at stake.

It is also important to give full credit to those futurists and others based in the USA who have been among the first to respond to the contradictions of modernity and to call for urgent responses (Meadows *et al.*, 2005; Henderson, 2006; Brown, 2007). Some have worked, with others, to build the field of futures studies and applied foresight (Bell, 2003, 2004; Dator, 2002). Some, however, have either overlooked, or become over-identified with, the very sources of wealth and power that are, to a significant extent, responsible for the encroaching global dilemma. This puts the legitimacy of much mainstream work in question and raises real concerns about its viability. The underlying concern, however, is not to endorse current “anti-American” sentiment, since we are all to some extent complicit, but rather seek clarity on these issues and, in so doing, strengthen and equip the global Futures Field for the expanded social and cultural role that now beckons.

### Five propositions

No one who knows the US can fail to be impressed by its multi-hued character, its dynamism and the achievements of its people in nearly all fields of human endeavour. This is not merely politically correctness genuflecting in the direction of popular music, art, literature, scientific and technological skill and the rest. To live or travel there is to come to know a diverse nation of people each struggling in their own way to make a decent life and bequeath something of value to their children and the future.

Equally, however, what cannot be avoided is that America is also a vast experiment carried out on an unprecedented scale. The “ways of knowing” that became naturalised there have been read upon the wider world in countless ways. The single-minded pursuit of wealth and the wide range of commercial and development practices that went with it attained global reach. The US “know-how”, whether in the form of elaborately produced films, pocket computers or cruise missiles, blankets the Earth. In a sense we can say that, to some extent, “everywhere is America”, so we need to understand where its trajectory is leading. Its innovations, along with its impacts and spiralling resource demands, have become close to universal – at least for the rich. Consequently, its default vision of the future also became universalised. But this vision turns out to have been defective from the start. In the light of its current reality, the idea that any one nation can be exclusively identified with “the future” requires careful examination. Consider the following:

- The phrase “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer” reflects a structural truth, i.e. that extreme levels of wealth at the centre have been achieved at the cost of death and decay at the margins. This is no accident – it is the result of deliberate and long-standing policy. It will be suggested below that the US model has been applied with cold deliberation to benefit itself regardless of the human and other costs. Its view of development and nation building is always presented as a civilising crusade against the forces of evil. But as Solzhenitsyn (1973) noted, the line between good and evil passes through every human heart. It is within as well as without[2].

- In order to protect what in recent times has been described as a “non negotiable” way of life the US has resorted to increasingly uncompromising measures to impose its will, its version of reality, on others. This is not merely a question of a policy of assassination of politically inconvenient opponents (Church Committee, 1975), or the illegal rendition of terrorist suspects to places where they may be more easily “interrogated” (Mayer, 2005), morally bankrupt though such practices clearly are. It is also a case of waging unjust wars in various parts of the world in which countless numbers of innocent people have lost their lives. The estimate provided by peace researcher Johan Galtung is quite simply shocking. He writes that “the number of people killed in overt Pentagon-driven military action after the Second World War is now between 13 and 17 million” (Galtung, 2007, p. 147). Or to take a specific example, how, we wonder, are the people of Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos to respond to the spectacle of an ageing Robert McNamara, Lyndon Johnson’s one-time Defense Secretary, admitting that the reasoning upon which that war was based was “a mistake”? (Sony Pictures, 2003) The list is long and the facts so painful they are dispensed to humanity’s collective shadow. When considered consciously, and from the point of view of our common humanity, fundamental human values of respect, reciprocity and the like, it is a burden beyond geographical limits.
- There is no easy way out of the self-imposed trap that the US has constructed, nor, indeed, for other nations that have chosen, or been seduced, to follow it. Many development processes have enormous momentum or irreversible consequences; they are addictive, unidirectional, not easily changed. If you build suburbs of poorly built houses, they require endless attention. If you drain the fertility from soils, it is not easily replaced. If you pump toxic materials into the environment you will not only decimate the wildlife, you will find all sorts of toxic effects bouncing back on the human population as well. If you clear forests with their vast volumes of complex living systems that you do not understand in the first place, you can never replace them with mere area designated for human use, nor can you recover species unknown to science that were thoughtlessly eliminated in the process. (Wilson, 2006; Preston, 2007) In other words, a form of “development” based on endless growth and mining ancient natural capital steadily compromises the present and future alike. Tony Fry rightly calls this “defuturing” (Fry, 1999), the “downside” of development.
- Very many strategies and diversions provide solace from the pressures and terrors of an ever-more threatening reality. They include psychological defence mechanisms such as avoidance, denial and repression. They include lifestyle factors summarised by the term “cocooning”, i.e. sport, an ever-growing pharmacopoeia of mood altering substances, SUVs and commercial TV. They also include cultural factors such as standing armies, advanced weapons systems, dysfunctional political institutions and a “war on terror” that is more accurately a “war on Terra”. (Is it not now clear that war in a fragile and compromised world is a zero sum game with no possible “winners”?) In these and so many other ways we see the evidence for what has been called “delusional America”, a country that cannot see the sources of its own dysfunctions that lie deep within its own myths and self understandings (Moravcsik, 2005).
- Finally, the basic point is that futures that emerge from this context are simply untenable. They are “more of the same but much worse” – more instrumental power, more science and technology bearing no clear relationship to real human needs, more unsustainable growth, more poverty and death at what are seen as “the margins”, more environmental devastation, climate change, further drift toward extreme and de-humanising futures. The souring of the American dream is certainly an issue for the world, but it also exerts malign effects at home, as is demonstrated in the continuing erosion of civil liberties and capacity for intelligent dissent (Wolf, 2007; Klein, 2007).

### Cultural myths

All cultures are based on a limited selection from the immense range of cultural resources available (Benedict, 1935). The evaluation of specific cultural resources that become authoritative is a matter for in-depth research and debate in specific cases. What is clear is that these processes are seldom subject to reason or logic. Some cultures dictate that

women deform their necks, lips, feet or other parts of the body. Some conceal the human form while others go naked. Some cultures see spirits in landforms and wild creatures while others see only “resources” and dollar signs. American culture was formed from just such specific sources that included notions of a “new beginning”, a sense of “being different” and an ingrained religiosity that even now takes fairly extreme forms in present day fundamentalism. It generated a distinctive and pervasive set of myths, assumptions, beliefs and practices that came to be as invisible as the air we breathe. They are taken as natural, as “the way things are” and thus are seldom, if ever, reflected upon clearly. Nevertheless, they serve to structure daily life, economic activity, government, the media – and futures enquiry – in a range of powerful ways.

It seems likely that most members of all cultures will, on the whole, tend to accept the dictates of their own culture at face value. The social sanctions against questioning or overthrowing any aspect of an inherited culture can be severe. Disturbing questions may come either from exceptional individuals “within” who learn to “think for themselves” (and thus may be perceived as threats) or from “without”. It is certainly easier to question cultural assumptions if one stands, lives, operates outside of the culture in question. The “outsider” by definition does not share the same commitment to a particular worldview. It follows that a “fresh look at America” will emerge from two sources: advanced thinkers and practitioners “from within” and clear thinking ones “from without”. And that is what we find. An example of the former is Seymour Lipset’s book “American Exceptionalism: a Double Edged Sword”, in which he analyses what he calls “the American Creed” in terms of: “liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism and laissez-faire.” Near the end of the book appears this summary. The American Creed:

fosters a high sense of personal responsibility, independent initiative, and voluntarism even as it also encourages self-serving behaviour, atomism and a disregard for communal good. More specifically, its emphasis on individualism threatens traditional forms of community morality, and thus has historically promoted a particularly virulent strain of greedy behaviour. At the same time, it represents a tremendous asset, encouraging the self-reflection necessary for responsible judgement, for fostering the strength of voluntary communal and civic bonds, for principled opposition to wars, and for patriotism (Lipset, 1995, p. 268).

Here we see the two sides of Lipset’s, and the US’s, real dilemma – a set of cultural resources that have a number of clearly positive elements but also some deeply worrying ones. Lipset’s analysis strives to be even-handed, paying tribute to the former and identifying some of the latter. It is fair to say that the book is fairly conservative and fails to engage with the worldwide dysfunctions that have emerged, in part, through a “disregard for communal good” and the underlying “virulent strain of greedy behaviour.” Indeed, in the years since the book was written, the evidence of widespread disregard and greed has become ever more obvious, especially though a string of high profile corporate scandals (see the following).

By contrast, if we then turn to a later account by outsiders, we find a correspondingly starker and perhaps more cynical picture. Gone is the balance between what is considered desirable and what is not. In “American Dream: Global Nightmare” by Zia Sardar and Merrill Wyn Davies we find an uncompromising analysis and forthright critique (Sardar and Davies, 2004). The authors have surveyed the terrain and derived what they call “the ten laws of American mythology”. In summary, they are as follows:

1. *Fear is essential* (without fear there is no America).
2. *Escape is the reason for being* (America is founded on the premise of escape from oneself: the place to recreate oneself in a more desirable, a truer, idealised form).
3. *Ignorance is bliss* (America is honest about neither its own history nor that of the rest of the world).
4. *America is the idea of a nation* (the icons of nation are sanctified because the nation itself is invested with sacred significance).
5. *Democratisation of everything is the essence of America* (each aspect of life can and should be democratised).

6. *American democracy has the right to be imperial and express itself through empire* (far from being the prototype site of opposition to colonies and empires, imperialism and empire are there in America right from its inception).
7. *Cinema is the engine of empire* (the project of America, the notion that America is the idea of nation, was formalised and made manifest in cinema).
8. *Celebrity is the common currency of empire* (the ability of American celebrities to dominate the attention of the entire world is the foundation of an empire built on and for trade and commerce).
9. *War is a necessity* (war has become America's reason to be).
10. *American tradition and history are universal narratives applicable across all space and time* (global hegemony now becomes synonymous with the export of American history and tradition that can be applied and imposed on anyone, anywhere, anytime).

To most Americans, and especially those who count themselves as colleagues and friends, this makes uncomfortable – even confrontational – reading. But defensive responses can also be unhelpful: deny such interpretations, demonise the authors and avoid thinking further. The fact is, however, that where dysfunction and denial run deep then, at some point, uncomfortable issues must be brought to full awareness where they can be dealt with. That said, this particular critique is probably over-stated[2].

This essay assumes the obvious – that many Americans are, to some extent, aware of these issues. Yet it is not clear how many consciously acknowledge the significant blind spots and enormous costs associated with US exceptionalism. As Sardar (2007) puts it in a later piece “the practical effects of US power on the rest of the world are invisible to ordinary Americans. The all-consuming sounds and symbols of America talking to itself effectively silence the opinions and attitudes of the rest of the world. And that is a serious problem.”

Let us be clear. It is emphatically not the case that these issues and concerns do not apply elsewhere; clearly they apply to varying degrees in many other places. Rather, the point is that the US is the main source, inspiration and driving force. Currently it alone possesses overwhelming instrumental, military, political, trade and cultural power and it has used these to the full. The US exhibits the extremities of modernity more powerfully and profoundly than anywhere else on the planet, and arguably with more widespread effect.

Such exceptionalism goes further. It dictates that the US is not simply another country among equals pursuing common ends. Rather it is in category of one and represents “a messianic dream of global dimensions; its mission is to *be* the human future” (Sardar and Davies, p. 118), hence the title of this essay. Since, as noted, there is every reason to believe that this particular future leads inexorably to global decline, we have little choice but to seek to understand the reasons and possible remedies.

To make real progress individuals and countries alike need to “look beneath the surface”, acknowledge their delusions, shadow aspects, privileged selves and the like, and then take action to correct or integrate them. Being clear, therefore, about the kind of myths summarised above provides opportunities for self understanding and healing. We need to recognise, moreover, that while myths can play powerful roles in the social order (validating some options, de-legitimising others) they are not always quite what they appear. There are times when “what is abstracted from history to serve as a sustaining myth can be a lie”. For example, “the myth of the US as a reluctant superpower, as a nation that ‘had greatness thrust upon it’ . . . is a partial, self-serving and ultimately self-deluding idea” (Sardar and Davies, 2004, p. 119).

The facts of history are there to be understood and interpreted. So, for example, it can be suggested that American policies “reflect a single minded determination to extend and perpetuate American political, economic and cultural hegemony – usually referred to as ‘leadership’ – on a global scale” (Sardar and Davies, 2004, p. 210). There is no shortage of evidence of this dynamic at work, with the result that the US now bestrides the globe in every possible arena. But many Americans have enormous difficulty coming to terms with this. As Sardar and Davies, 2004, note:

At the heart of the American psyche there is a fissure bridged by a preference for disassociation, willingness to look the other way – to look at the big picture of the grand ideals and forget, ignore or merely deny the troubling realities . . . The American Dream is a motif imposed on history as much as it is a product of history . . . Reality “out there” exists to be reconfigured, made to conform to legend. But there are times when this approach to reality becomes a discernable lie.

They then add:

There is no self-awareness here that the ideals of the Republic are way past their “sell by” date – that, at the end of the day, it is American mythology that needs to be replaced with something more life enhancing (Sardar and Davies, 2004, pp. 201-211).

Yet, as noted, to intervene in this process of collective self-deception is no easy task, especially with the “unreality industries” in full swing, ever ready and able to divert time, money and attention away from “the real”. As the authors note:

The ideology of empire is the same ideology that made America. To question American empire is to fundamentally question the American self. The result is, quite simply, that America is never ready for the intrusion of reality. The reality of the American empire exists not within the comfort zone of the American Dream, but as the global nightmare of effects . . . (Furthermore) the costs and consequences of empire can and do make their way to the American homeland (Sardar and Davies, 2004, p. 234).

I will return to this last point in the following. Here, and in summary, it is sufficient to note that the myths that support US exceptionalism do so at enormous cost. What we label as “exceptionalism” reflects a widespread failure to understand and deal with the dysfunctions embedded within US culture. It “prevents Americans at every turn from understanding themselves and their relationship to the world, as much as what kind of a world is out there” (Sardar and Davies, 2004, p. 59) For all their apparent confidence it is ironic that so few leading futurists working in the US context have, thus far, found it possible to address these issues at all, let alone to do so effectively. So before moving on I will briefly consider how this manifests in American futures work.

### Exceptionalism within American futures studies

It is not difficult to find examples of the working out of these myths within the realm of US FS. Careful attention to well known works by high profile US authors and editors demonstrate how a powerfully US-oriented view of the world prevails. Examples include:

- For the *Encyclopedia of the Future* most of the entries are written by Americans and most of the “top 100” futurists in the world are considered to be American (Kurian and Molitor, 1996).
- For Jay Ogilvy, a pioneer in the US and a founder member of GBN, the shift “from the church to the state to the market” is an unquestioned good (Olgivy, 2002).
- Of all other countries, the US has a futures association that claims “world” status, even though it is nearly 100 percent American.
- For the WFS’s journal, *The Futurist*, what is now termed *foresight* was invented in the US by Americans. Its wider provenance is ignored (World Future Society, 2004).
- For *Future Survey*, reviews of American work are plentiful but the editor does not believe in the existence of a “futures field” so issues and core materials that deal with discipline building are downplayed or ignored (Slaughter, 2001, Slaughter *et al.*, 2008).

There are plenty of examples of this kind. What needs to be understood is why the task of bringing greater clarity and coherence to US futures work has not been more thoroughly engaged by those with the greatest stake in it: US futurists themselves. It is not as though this is a new problem. Here, for example, is a summary of conclusions reached by Barry Hughes back in 1985. As Davies notes, Hughes’s book:

“World Futures: A Critical Analysis of Alternatives” . . . showed how the worldview of American futurists is deeply ingrained in their theoretical assumptions and the selection and interpretation of their data so that their predictions in fact are little more than a reflection of their prejudices (Davies, 2001)[3].

The question now is, how can these matters be brought into awareness, openly faced and worked through? It is useful, perhaps, to look at a recent example. In so doing the issue – and responses to it – can be seen more clearly.

Since its inception the Millennium Project has been a paradigmatic example of American exceptionalism, notwithstanding its earlier attempts at legitimization through a problematic association with the United Nations University. While one can only admire the human effort, idealism, planning and skill that went into the external organisation of its global network, its internal assumptions, worldview and self-understanding have always been deficient, thereby inhibiting its capacity to deliver useful results. Here is a passage from the 2004 *State of the Future Report*. It states that:

The development of genuine democracy requires cultural change, preventing AIDS requires cultural change, sustainable development requires cultural change, ending violence against women requires cultural change and ending ethnic violence requires cultural change.

The report adds:

The tools of globalisation, such as the internet and global trade, should be used to help cultures adapt in a way that preserves their unique contributions to humanity while improving the human condition (Millennium Project, 2004, p. 2).

While at one level we may want to accept that this should be the case, the weight of evidence suggests that it is not. Is globalisation a tool – or an ideological and political project? Ulrich Beck coined the term “wild globalisation” in part to draw attention to many of the overlooked costs. He adds that “it is not the fact that capitalism produces more and more with less and less labour, but the fact that it blocks any initiative towards a new social contract, which is robbing it of its legitimacy” (Beck, 2000, p. 63). And the internet? There is much more to it. Geoff Sharpe comments on its “emergent uncertainty”. He writes that “proliferating media are naively taken to offer freedom from established constraints while the new constraints of novel forms of life remain as if half hidden as they await exploration and public recognition” (Sharp, 2007). In other words, globalisation, the Internet and global trade are ambiguous. They “improve the human condition” for some while degrading it for others. They are not simply “tools” that can be turned to one application or another but vast meta-systems that are intimately connected to dominant definitions and centres of political and economic power. Brief though the above passages are, they fall into a familiar pattern in which a trite diagnosis is read out upon other cultures with little awareness or recognition of the complicity of the US in creating and sustaining global dysfunctions. The term “cultural change” is repeated several times but the dynamics of such change, especially with respect to the USA, have yet to be explored in a futures context.

Globalisation, new technology, the internet and, especially, “global trade” as it has been promoted and developed by powerful US interests (including the IMF and the World Bank) not only cannot help solve global problems but also in many cases – either by accident or by deliberate strategy – make them worse (Perkins, 2004; Klein, 2007). The same oversights are reflected in an otherwise admirable piece that attempts to take a positive stance on the Middle East. Three well-considered scenarios are offered but the paper is prefaced by the following heading: “a new story is needed for the Middle East” (Glenn and Gordon, 2005). That is clearly the case but what seems to have been overlooked is that a new story is needed for the USA!

Until that new story is in place and the US is transforming from within, it would make a great deal of sense for futures practitioners to take a step or two back and engage with the task of engaging with, if not actually solving, problems that return to source in American dysfunction and power. For example, an essay by Eric Alterman, Professor of English at the City University of New York offers “a short history of the neoconservatives” in the US and some implications of their rise to power over several decades. (Alterman, 2005)[4]. The latter part of this story is also covered by Francis Fukuyama in his book “After the Neocons”. It is a story that intersects in many ways with the concerns of futurists. A glance at the web site of “The Project for The New American Century”, for instance, offers the following:

If we shirk our responsibilities, we invite challenges to our fundamental interests. The history of the twentieth century should have taught us that it is important to shape circumstances before crises emerge, and to meet threats before they become dire. The history of this century should have taught us to embrace the cause of US leadership (Project for the New American Century, Statement of Principles, June 3, 1997).

With a few notable exceptions it would seem that the US futures community has failed to provide an informed commentary upon, let alone a critique of, these powerful cultural, political and economic forces that operate in its midst. Running through the neo-conservative project, and also much conventional US work, is an unconscious adherence to neo-liberal market ideology. So we now turn to consider what this means.

### Drawbacks of free market ideology

This is obviously a complex issue so comments here are restricted to a few salient points, as follows:

- market failure is much more widespread than is commonly believed;
- neo-liberal market ideology benefits the US but is damaging to its own long-term interests and that of the rest of the world;
- the modern US corporation is a threat to human survival; and
- the Iraq debacle illustrates the limits of US ideology.

In an admirably concise and clearly written book called “How to Argue With an Economist” Lindy Edwards diagnoses what, in Australia, is called ‘economic rationalism’ (the view that market-led economics provide an appropriate guide to how societies should be organised). She begins by stating that:

Economic rationalism’s greatest weapon is not its institutional power. Its longevity is not guaranteed by its role in the government’s decision-making process alone. Its greatest source of power is that its practitioners *believe* in it. (Edwards, 2002, p. 24) (emphasis in original.)

This alerts us to the fact that, in this area, objectivity is nowhere to be found. Rather what is at stake, to a large extent, is intangible, factors not seen with the physical eye in the external world but with what might be called “an inner eye” of knowing that permits access to social commitments that, by definition, require depth knowledge of the human and social interiors. It follows that “the shape of our economy is dictated by the battle for our minds” (Edwards, 2002, p. 70).

Edwards makes it clear that, in her view, economics per se is not merely a science but also an ideology or, in brief, a way of seeing or knowing. Moreover, like all others of its kind, it is an ideology that actively “constructs” the world in some very specific ways. For example, although most educated people recognise that human beings are “the authors of their societies”, economic rationalists believe otherwise. For them “social and cultural issues are not on the map . . . of their view of how society works” (p. 67). Moreover “economic rationalists . . . are blind to the relationships between people. They ignore the value of having strong communities and good personal relationships” (p. 79). Furthermore, “under economic rationalism there is no government to protect the vulnerable. There is no one to curb the power of the major corporations. There is no sense of a community that will come together to manage our collective lives” (p. 91).

The writer concludes that “at the heart of the free trade debate is an issue about control and responsibility. It is an issue of whether authorship of society should rest with the market or with our collective efforts to manage ourselves” (p. 100). Edwards goes on to say that the way to contest this view of the world is to understand it in its own terms, question its fundamentally diminished view of human and social life, contradict its assumptions and identify failures of the market to deliver socially viable results.

Futurists obviously need to respond to these concerns or give up their claims to be saying anything worthwhile about the present or the future. The idea that the market is neutral and gives rise to “trickle down” wealth for all is manifestly false. So is the idea that sovereign

states are becoming less relevant and so it is fine for governments to be “hollowed out” as they sell off state functions to what, in the US is called “private enterprise”. In recent years it has become clear that, given the principles upon which the latter tend to operate, this is a recipe for disaster (Klein, 2007).

### Are some corporations psychotic?

Critiques of the “downside” of corporate expansionism and power have been accumulating for some time, as has evidence of widespread social unease about trade agendas and international agreements favouring the globalising corporate sector. The defeat of the proposed Multinational Agreement on Investment (MAI) some years ago demonstrated that effective resistance to corporate power is possible. Occasionally, however, a new player appears that manages to capture widely felt perceptions and to express them in clear and helpful ways. Such is the Canadian independent film, “The Corporation”, and the book of the same name by Joel Bakan. What is impressive about both is that they avoid the shrill over-statement that bedevils much of what might be called the “literature of dissent”. Moreover, particularly in the film, much of the substance, and all of the examples, are drawn from the corporations themselves.

Bakan uses the device of “personality profiling” to assess the health or otherwise of the corporation and argues that it must be considered psychotic. Anita Roddick (2004), helps to explain this. She is quoted as saying that “the language of business is not the language of the soul or the language of humanity” . . . “it’s a language of indifference; it’s a language of separation, of secrecy, of hierarchy.” She adds, “it’s fashioning a schizophrenia in most of us” and it is the latter that “saves them from becoming psychopaths” (Bakan, 2004, p. 16). Bakan comments that “the corporation itself may not so easily escape the psychopath diagnosis, however. Unlike the human beings who inhabit it, the corporation is *singularly* self-interested and unable to feel genuine concern for others in any context” (Bakan, 2004 p. 60) (emphasis in original). Later he offers the following summary:

As a psychopathic creature, the corporation can neither recognise nor act upon moral reasons to refrain from harming others. Nothing in its legal makeup limits what it can do to others in pursuit of its selfish ends, and it is compelled to cause harm when the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs. Only pragmatic concern for its own interest and the laws of the land constrain the corporation’s predatory instincts, and often that is not enough to stop it from destroying lives, damaging communities, and endangering the planet as a whole (Bakan, 2004, p. 109).

If this is, in fact, the case, then as futurists we need to ask ourselves some difficult questions. The futures field exists because many people realised that the future had become problematic, that human beings had to begin to take some responsibility for the course of events, that social foresight is one way of bringing historical dilemmas into full awareness such that they can be consciously engaged. This being so, then placing futures expertise at the services of unreformed corporations appears regressive and unhelpful. One response is to point toward moves to adopt the “triple bottom line” (provided by financial, social and environmental indicators) and also moves to promote “corporate responsibility”. Is this an illusion? And is Bakan right when he claims that “corporate responsibility is an oxymoron . . . as is the related notion that corporations can, like their government counterparts, be relied upon to promote the public interest. Corporations have only one duty: to promote their own and their owner’s interests” (Bakan, 2004, p. 134)? I tend to think that this analysis captures a great deal of corporate activity. Yet we must also acknowledge that there are exceptions, of which Motorola may be one (Moorthy, 1998) and the Interface carpet company, led by CEO Ray Anderson another.

It is inevitably the case that the “normalising” and “naturalising” tendencies of living in the US make it harder to see the full impacts of market-led economics and the rise of corporatism than elsewhere. Certainly, viewed from the “outside”, the domination of mass media by commercial interests does seem pathological. How is it that vast tracts of public space have become dominated by commercial messages? Who gave permission for this to occur? It is not merely that adults are targeted by endless commercial messages that stimulate “me-ness”, waste, empty consumption, obesity and meaninglessness. What is

particularly startling is the way that childhood has been sliced up into significant “demographics” and ever more finely graduated market segments. Somewhere in the resulting mess childhood, as a meaningful human category and stage of development, has been compromised and for some even lost. The long-term implications are profound. As Bakan notes, “as the corporation comes to dominate society – through, among other things, privatisation and commercialisation - its ideal conception of human nature inevitably becomes dominant too. And that is a frightening prospect” (Bakan, 2004 p. 138). Moreover it is not difficult to see where this leads: “in a world where anything or anyone can be owned, manipulated, and exploited for profit, everything and everyone will eventually be” (Bakan, 2004, p. 139). In other words, these are the grounds, the cultural sources, of dystopian “overshoot and collapse” futures that futurists and SF writers have known about for many decades. As depicted in highly dramatised forms in films such as “The Matrix” trilogy, it is a technically over-determined world in which the human species loses its humanity and its grip, falling back into an entropic trap of its own making. This is as far from ‘sustainability’ as one can get. And yet it appears to be a direct consequence of the official ideology of some of the world’s most powerful organisations. Those who call themselves “transhumanists” consider that going to such extremities may even be a good thing!

Within FS “technology” is often portrayed as a “key driver” in its own right. It would, in fact, be more accurate to say that the current emphasis on “technology” is emergent from a social order in which trans-national corporations pursue their own very specific and limited interests in competitive positioning, the “killer app” and shareholder value with surprisingly little thought for the current impacts on the wider world or the kinds of futures implied. Why have we collectively reached such a dangerous stage in human history? What happened to make it so? Bakan offers the following explanation:

Over the course of the twentieth century the world stumbled, haltingly and unevenly, toward greater democracy and humanity . . . Social programs and economic regulations . . . were created as a part of a broad mid-century movement by western governments to protect their citizens from neglect by the market and from exploitation by corporations. Beginning in the latter part of the century, however, governments began to retreat. Under pressure from corporate lobbies and economic globalisation, they embraced policies informed by neo-liberalism. Deregulation freed corporations from legal constraints, and privatisation empowered them to govern areas of society from which they had previously been excluded. By the end of the century, the corporation had become the world’s dominant institution (Bakan, 2004, p. 139).

Yet, as Bakan acknowledges, “history humbles dominant institutions”. There are ways to reign in this “remarkably efficient wealth-creating machine . . . (that) is now out of control” (Bakan, 2004, p. 159). Suggestions set out (in greater detail) in the book include:

- improving the regulatory system;
- strengthening political democracy; and
- creating a robust public sphere.

In a rationale very reminiscent to that articulated by futurists around the world, the author reminds us that “corporations are our creations. They have no lives, no powers, and no capacities beyond what we, through our governments, give them” (Bakan, 2004, p. 161-164). Here we again come face to face with an issue that earlier arose in the context of critical FS: the need to understand and actively deal with issues of social legitimation, power and embedded interests. Any adequate approach to FS must bring these elements fully into the picture.

### **Economics of exploitation**

In this view, the need to “reinvent the corporation” is an urgent task. In its current form it is a social innovation that is incomplete, out of control and unsustainable. This is part of a much larger issue: the need to reform the current model of economics and, especially, to redress US domination of the world trading system. Here is a sample of some widely quoted, but often overlooked, facts extending back over a 40 year period:

- In 1968 Americans were said to constitute 5 percent of the world's population but consumed 24 percent of the world's energy. At that time, and on average, one American consumed as much energy as two Japanese, six Mexicans, 13 Chinese, 31 Indians, 128 Bangladeshis, 307 Tanzanians, or 370 Ethiopians (Ehrlich, 1968).
- In 1998, and while millions of people around the world starved to death, Americans, it was claimed, spent \$30 billion a year on diet programs. One-third of the US population at that time was said to be significantly overweight. They owned roughly one-third of the world's automobiles, drove about as many miles as the rest of the world combined, and were far and away the largest per capita producers of carbon dioxide (Bill, 1998).
- A 1999 Almanac edition of the Defense Logistic Agency's news magazine *Dimensions* stated that the DESC "purchases more light refined petroleum product than any other single organization or country in the world. With a \$3.5 billion annual budget, DESC procures nearly 100 million barrels of petroleum products each year. That's enough fuel for 1,000 cars to drive around the world 4,620 times" (Karbusz, 1996).
- In 2001 the US is said to have produced 22 percent of world's total industrial carbon dioxide emissions (Mindfully.org, 2001).
- A 2004 survey of "cultural imperialism" occasioned by the rise of the US-dominated internet found that at that time the numbers of internet hosts (in millions) were as follows: the USA 115.3; Japan 9.2; The Netherlands 3.1; Canada 2.9 and the UK 2.8. These figures suggested that 'globalisation' was highly skewed, being driven in part by technical and linguistic power. The researcher commented that "web sites created in the US dominate the information flow in cyberspace. A vast difference between America and Japan, by more than ten times, shows how US content has become the majority on the internet" (Wyanto, 2004).
- In 2006, and according to an American Forces Information Service News Article, the US military was using between 10 and 11 million barrels of fuel each month to sustain operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. This amounts to 330,000-360,000 barrel per day and is more than double the amount of oil used in the Gulf war (Karbusz, 1996).
- In 2007, the US Government budget statistics showed that spending on defense was about 20 times that spent on international affairs – \$552.5 billion on the former and only \$28.5 billion on the latter (US Government, 2009).

Some of these figures will obviously have changed over time but the overall pattern is well established and clear. The US way of life, as currently constituted, involves the consumption of a disproportionate amount of the world's resources. This, in turn, distorts the world trading system, concentrates wealth, creates tension and further exacerbates poverty. George Monbiot is a well-known critic of the current economic system who draws widely on such sources and is a persuasive voice arguing for a more just and equitable world order. Currently, he writes, there is "one rule for the rich and another for the poor". In today's world he suggests that:

the US reaps three significant subsidies from poorer nations. The first arises from the fact that dollar reserves must be invested in assets in the United States, which boosts US capital accounts. The second is that poorer nations must pay around eighteen per cent interest on the dollars they borrow, yet they lend them back to the US at 3 per cent. The third is that a government issuing currency obtains what is known as *seignorage*: the difference between the value of that currency and the cost of producing it. Not only are the IMF and the World Bank helping to destroy the economies of weaker nations, but they are also helping to sustain the economic dominance, and therefore the political hegemony, of the USA (Monbiot, 2004, p. 155).

It's important to note that this is not simply a problem created by the US but, rather, one that it inherited from the earlier colonial period. It is indeed "a story as old as empire" (Hiatt, 2007). Monbiot writes that "the wealth or poverty of peoples will remain affected by the strength or weakness of their national economies. This, in turn, will be affected by the relationship between them". He then adds that:

For the past 500 years, this relationship has been, essentially, predatory. The countries, which, as a result of various historical accidents, were among the first to establish the international networks on which the current trading system was built, fashioned them to ensure that wealth flowed from their weaker trading partners into their own economies. By and large, this pattern has persisted, surviving both the transition from informal coercion to formal colonialism, and from colonialism back to informal coercion (a state of affairs generally described as “independence”) (Monbiot, 2004, p. 139-140).

Monbiot traces the current domination of the world trading system back to the Bretton Woods agreement convened after World War Two. Here the US was able to broker an arrangement that helped embed its power and pre-eminent status. The US had “won and engineered a perfect formula for both continued US economic dominance and the permanent indebtedness of the poor nations” (Monbiot, 2004, p. 168). And 60 years later:

The case for an International Clearing Union, or a body built on similar principles, appears stronger than ever. The predictions made by Keynes and other prominent economists have come true, and the evidence that the IMF and the World Bank are not working confronts anyone who is not deliberately disregarding it (Monbiot, 2004, p. 169).

With this in mind it becomes increasingly clear why futurists need a far clearer grasp of the underlying sources of social and economic dysfunctions. They cannot be grasped without venturing into areas that have been widely ignored. Futurists need to recognise the need for critique and its essential role in helping us “probe beneath the surface” of conventional understanding. Wars have been (and currently are being) fought in the name of democracy. Yet:

When a confederacy of exalted thieves in Wall Street, Tokyo and the City of London, whose interests are precisely opposed to those of the people of the nations they plunder, can tell those nations what their economic policies will be, democracy is reduced to a dress code. (And yet) the gift that Keynes offered us . . . is a world in which the poor nations are neither condemned to do as the rich nations say, nor condemned to stay poor (Monbiot, 2004, p. 171).

One reason for this is the promise of an International Clearing Union to bring greater order and equity to the current system. Another is that “the financial system is built on a fantasy: that the debts on which it has constructed its wealth will one day be redeemed”, but this seems increasingly unlikely (p. 176). The conclusion? Reforming the global financial and economic system is in the long-term interest of all. The current obsession with neo-liberalism, “free market” ideology, the continued obsessive and narrow pursuit of US interests, are, in the long run, against everyone’s best interest.

Like others before him Monbiot suggests that:

The world possesses sufficient resources, if carefully managed and properly distributed, to meet the needs of all of its people, possibly for as long as the species persists. It is only because they are badly managed and poorly distributed that so many human beings are deprived of the means of survival (Monbiot, 2004, p. 181).

So here is the nub of the issue. In my view the US has sponsored a growth-addicted system that is responsible both for the rapid and unnecessary degradation of natural resources and also for the poverty and suffering of untold numbers of human beings. Work such as Augar’s “The Greed Merchants” and Hiatt’s “A Game as Old as Empire” (Augar, 2005; Hiatt, 2007) provide much of the detail behind a summary statement of this kind. Were this otherwise, current forms of Islamic extremism and other related conflicts that now divert world attention would never have emerged.

## Market failures

In “How to Argue With an Economist”, Libby Edwards suggests that an effective way to get one’s point across is to use the kind of language that economic rationalists understand. So to speak of environmental deterioration or species extinction is generally ineffective in this context. It makes more sense to speak of market failures.

Not long ago my wife and I spent a week on a tropical island in the presence of a number of species of wild birds. Their innocence, beauty and gracefulness were breathtaking. At the

same time I realised that we were witnessing what might be considered an anachronism or, at least, a form of reality that had existed for millennia, long before markets were invented, but now universally threatened. The market, as it exists today, is not only ignorant of, but also parasitic upon, this ancient natural world and has literally no idea of what it may signify. Yet, as someone put it, “the economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the ecology.” Now economists, financiers and corporate high flyers may find it easy to block out this reality. But the comparison reminded me of a film I had seen many years ago called “On the Edge of the Forest.” It was narrated by E.F. Schumacher, author of “Small is Beautiful” and other works that challenged economic orthodoxy (Schumacher, 1974). On one side of the narrator stood an intact forest that provided a wide range of “services” (such as flood control and species habitat) but, as it stood, literally, had no obvious economic value. On the other side was a clear-felled area where no trees remained, but the latter had acquired a market value through the sale price of the wood. It was a dramatic demonstration of the way a portion of the biotic world had been eliminated in order to sustain the human economy.

Edwards discusses three levels at which market failure can occur, as follows:

1. social sources of market failure – e.g. when people don’t behave like the models;
2. traditional market failure – e.g. when people do act like the models, but circumstances distort the market; and
3. dynamic versus static sources of growth – e.g. when real life acts like a perfect democracy in the short term, but gets it wrong in the longer term (Edwards, 2002, p. 123).

In the first instance, market failure can occur when particular groups obtain market power and gain wealth and power at the cost of others. This clearly applies to the global system as well as within countries. Another source of failure is when economic activities actively damage social and/or environmental systems. Traditional market failure (i.e. that recognised most easily by economists) is recognised in relation to the following list:

- *monopoly* – when there is only one business in the market and a lack of competition;
- *externalities* – when the product inflicts costs or benefits on the wider community that are not included in the market price;
- *public goods* – items that can only be provided collectively; and
- *information failure* – when lack of information stops people from behaving in their own best interests (Edwards, 2002, p. 119-120).

What the previous list demonstrates is that there are multiple cases of market failure all around us, many of them so commonplace that it can be difficult to spot them. For example, Bakan referred to corporations as “externalising machines” that actively seek to defer as many of the costs of production as possible onto society and the environment (Bakan, 2004, p. 60-84). Another example is the way the economic theory asserts the value of “perfect information” such that the consumer can make “rational” choices. But what else is the entire marketing and advertising industry but a blatant and powerfully institutionalised attempt to replace information with images that, in most cases, are exaggerated, misleading and at times false?

So when futurists of the stature of Jay Ogilvy talk about the ability of the market to enable millions of decisions “automatically” and thus substitute for government regulation, it seems to me that the “unreality industry” has taken up residence inside the futures field (Ogilvy, 2002). Markets obviously have a role in human affairs but, like many of the corporations now over-confidently striding the world, they need to be regulated and controlled so that they in fact, not merely in theory, operate according to values that are both long term and viable. Currently this is not the case and no amount of propagandising will make it so.

I want to finish this section with an example of “market failure” that goes right to the heart of this discussion. It derives from a book by Tony Juniper that tells the story of a rare species of bird, the Spix’s Macaw (Juniper, 2003). It is a species that had flourished unhindered for

centuries but, when a first specimen was collected in 1819, its fate was sealed. Juniper's book takes us through what happened. First, the bird's habitat had been reduced by the growing human population of Brazil. But when collectors became aware of this "rare bird" so it was accorded an economic value – a value so great as to make it very attractive for local people to trap and sell them to overseas collectors. What happened next is also interesting. As this market in the Macaw became established, the demand vastly exceeded the supply, driving prices up to astronomical levels. From an economic point of view this reflects the "normal" operation of the price mechanism, indicating the ability of markets to adjust supply and demand "automatically". In this case, however, the birds became valued not for what they actually were (i.e. their role within an ecosystem, a part of nature to be respected) but for their symbolic importance as rare items of symbolic value. As a result the birds were rendered finally extinct in the wild and now linger on only as a scattered remnant population in captivity. This is Juniper's summation. He writes:

To blame all of the ills of the Spix's Macaw on the few people who happen to own the last ones would . . . be too easy. Returning the Spix's Macaws to the wild will depend on the wild still being there. It is now quite clear that if there is going to be a long-term resolution between the needs of endangered species and the world's fast-growing population, then the rest of us must appreciate our own contribution to the final ravaging of this planet's natural resources that is now taking place. Cheap petrol, meat, metals, paper, wood, sugar, coffee and the rest of the seemingly endless flow of commodities that those of us lucky enough to live in developed countries use and waste with such abandon come at an ecological cost rarely reflected in the prices we pay. Footing the bill for our growing demands are the earth's last remote ecosystems and most beautiful species. There can be a different way, but we are very far from embarking on it (Juniper, 2003, p. 273).

Thus markets are not merely fallible. If left to themselves they look set to destroy the very resources upon which they feed and the societies they are supposed to serve. Perhaps their conclusive and final defect is that they are inspired by "past perceptions of problems and needs"; they operate very much in the "here and now" and are utterly lacking in the very qualities of providence, care, prudence and foresight that the world so plainly needs.

### Missing links

Thus far this discussion has touched on a range of concerns including US cultural myths, free market ideology, psychotic corporations, exploitive economics and market failures. What remains to be explained is how these elements fit together, how they cohere to create and maintain a global hegemony that benefits a tiny minority but threatens everyone else. A full account would obviously take more space than is available here. So this discussion is necessarily compressed.

As noted, one of the most valuable features of US society, and other democracies, is a widespread belief in openness and the right to one's own opinion. Used rightly, and assuming it is not overwhelmed by more powerful forces, free speech can be seen as offering a vital corrective, a feedback process through which concerned citizens can, as the phrase goes, "speak truth to power." Two individuals who have taken a strong public stance against unrestrained corporate and political power are John Perkins and Naomi Kline. Perkins' book "Confessions of an Economic Hit Man" provides one of the clearest accounts yet written of how US economic and political hegemony was planned, created and sustained over recent decades. Part of Perkins "job description" for a leading US firm was:

to encourage world leaders to become part of a vast network that promotes US commercial interests. In the end, those leaders become ensnared in a web of debt that ensures their loyalty. We can draw on them whenever we desire to satisfy our political, economic or military needs (Perkins, 2004, p. xi).

After working for many years in this environment Perkins slowly realised that he was part of a vast global deception. It was not, he is clear, merely a conspiracy, for that would have been more easily challenged. Rather, in his view, it was something far more dangerous – a view of the world founded on untenable assumptions, chief of which was the view that "all economic growth benefits humankind and that the greater the growth, the more widespread the benefits" (p. xi). Yet the truth was very different:

In their drive to advance the global empire, corporations, banks and governments (collectively the *corporatocracy*) use their financial and political muscle to ensure that our schools, businesses and media support both the fallacious concept and its corollary. They have brought us to a point where our global culture is a monstrous machine that requires exponentially increasing amounts of fuel and maintenance, so much so that in the end it will have consumed everything in sight and will be left with no choice but to devour itself (p. 50).

The “corporatocracy” he is writing about is comprised of just the elements discussed above. It is a close-knit fraternity of powerful people who inhabit high positions in the kinds of organisations noted, who move around the world at will, consider themselves equal to, or above, kings, presidents and, indeed, the rest of humanity. Yet the roots of their confidence and power lie in assumptions, associations and beliefs that are seldom or never brought into the light of day or questioned. The case of Saudi Arabia is instructive. Here Perkins’ notes the two key objectives that drove his work and that of others: “maximising payouts to US firms and making Saudi Arabia increasingly dependent upon the United States.” He adds:

it did not take long to realise how closely the two went together; almost all the newly developed projects would require continual upgrading and servicing, and they were so highly technical as to ensure that the companies that originally developed them would have to maintain and modernise them . . . US engineers and contractors would profit handsomely for decades to come (p. 87).

Ironically, it was the widespread transformation of Saudi society in pursuit of the US’ own strategic interests that became one of the sources of the terrorist backlash. In case after case in many different countries, Perkins outlines the approach dictated by his employers. The latter relied on him to produce inflated energy demand forecasts that were used to justify apparently generous loans from the IMF and/or the World Bank (both of which are Washington-based institutions). Then, as infrastructure projects were developed, local elites became rich but other long-term problems arose. The latter included widespread impoverishment, social unrest, environmental decline and growing levels of debt. The cynicism and complete lack of empathy reflected in these strategies were also noted by Lipset and they strongly support the accusation that US capitalism, in this form, is dysfunctional in the extreme.

Perkins discovered how those caught up in this system were:

blind to the consequences of their actions (and were) convinced that the sweatshops and factories that made shoes or automotive parts for their companies were helping the poor to climb out of poverty, instead of simply burying them deeper in a type of slavery reminiscent of medieval manors and southern plantations (p. 128).

He realised that the dream that had ostensibly motivated the system was indeed a nightmare and that “the real story of empire . . . has little to do with what was exposed in the newspapers.” Indeed, “the real story is that we are living in a lie” (p. 216) “Things are not as they appear” and the media cannot be trusted to tell the truth because they too are “part of the corporatocracy” (p. 221).

Perkins rightly re-iterates that he sees no evidence of a conspiracy – not a conscious one at least. Rather, a set of assumptions, a view of the world has become naturalised, normal and unquestioned by otherwise well educated and capable people. As noted above, this points to a pressing need to understand, account for and challenge the ways these hidden, but very powerful forces, arise and are reproduced in social contexts. Naomi Klein is one of those whose work does just this.

Several years ago, over a period of weeks, a series of repetitive TV reports showing then US administrator in Baghdad, Paul Bremer, meeting with local leaders, shaking hands and ostensibly depicting a “hand over” to a new Iraqi administration, later to be followed by a government. The images were factual in the sense that the meetings obviously took place. But there was something disturbing about them too. They were fundamentally misleading because to interpret them required more than facile TV images – it also required a deeper knowledge of the context than viewers could reasonably be expected to have. Enter Klein and her visit to Baghdad where she found a city prevented from aiding its own recovery. Even the construction of the concrete blast barriers (dubbed Bremer barriers by locals) had

been contracted out to overseas companies, while local concrete factories lay idle. She sketches in a little of the background in this way:

When Paul Bremer shredded Iraq's Baathist constitution and replaced it with what *The Economist* greeted approvingly as "the wish list of foreign investors" there was one small detail he failed to mention: It was all completely illegal (Klein, 2004, p. 47).

Few doubt that access to oil was one key factor in the invasion[5]. The fact that US troops protected the oil ministry but allowed the museum holding priceless records of early civilisations to be looted revealed much about underlying US concerns, including a profound blindness to cultural value beyond its borders. But Klein makes it clear that of equal or greater significance is that Iraq was seen as an opportunity to create yet another dependent market for US corporations. She comments, however, that "the great historical irony of the catastrophe unfolding in Iraq is that the shock-therapy reforms that were supposed to create an economic boom that would re-build the country have instead fuelled a resistance that ultimately made reconstruction impossible" (Klein, 2004, p. 53).

She then offers an interpretation that draws a parallel heavy with irony:

Iraq was to the Neocons what Afghanistan was to the Taliban: the one place on Earth where they could force everyone to live by the most literal, unyielding interpretation of their sacred texts ... (but) ... they created, instead of a "free market", a failed state that no right-thinking investor would touch (Klein, 2004, p. 53).

When we realise that terms such as "freedom", "democracy", "open markets" and the like are essentially code words that mean very little until their underlying implications are spelled out in some depth and in relation to real places where poverty, environmental decline and endemic conflict have been created, and only then, do we begin to see how reality is layered, how the TV news provides only fragmentary surface impressions. It is then obvious why we need to probe "beneath the surface" to know anything much at all about what is "really going on." Nor should we be surprised that, in a later piece looking at the aftermath of the December 26, 2004, tsunami, Klein finds the very same system of value and control operating. She writes of:

the rise of a predatory form of disaster capitalism that uses the desperation and fear created by catastrophe to engage in radical social and economic engineering ... (adding that) reconstruction work has been revealed as a tremendously lucrative industry, too important to be left to the do-gooders at the UN (Klein, 2005, p. 31).

She adds that "shattered countries are attractive to the World Bank ... they take orders well." The same process can be observed in many countries, including Afghanistan and Haiti. Now, in the aftermath of a devastating tsunami:

as in other reconstruction sites, from Haiti to Iraq, tsunami relief has little to do with recovering what has been lost ... governments have passed laws preventing families from rebuilding their oceanfront homes. Hundreds of thousands of people have been forcibly relocated inland ... The coast is not being rebuilt as it was – dotted with fishing villages and beaches strewn with nets. Instead governments, corporations and foreign donors are teaming up to rebuild it as they would like it to be: the beaches as playgrounds for tourists, the oceans as watery mines for corporate fishing fleets, both serviced by privatised airports and highways built on borrowed money (p. 32).

Overall, therefore, these "reports from the field" once again shed new light on dominant US-led ideologies and cultural myths. It seems to me that the current system suits a few very well indeed. But the full costs have been displaced "elsewhere" and "elsewhen." In my view, it is a destructive, immoral and completely unsustainable way of approaching the world. Though the denials may continue for some time this is looking more and more like a failed experiment, a path to abandon at the earliest possible opportunity.

### Truthfulness and power

If there is any truth in the above analysis then we have to accept that the viability of this world is very much at stake. A form of development that involves gross addiction, denial, endemic violence and misappropriation on a vast scale is self-defeating in its own terms. It does not provide a continuing basis for maintaining social wellbeing. Why, then, is it so difficult for

those in positions of power to “come clean” about the human prospect? The signs are not hard to read and they’ve been there for some time.

Part of the answer is found in a book by J.R. Saul in which he noted that:

*corporatism* . . . is profoundly tied to a mechanistic view of the human race. This is not an ideology with any interest in or commitment to the shape of society or the individual as citizen. It is fixed up a rush to use machinery – inert or human – while these are still at full value; before they suffer depreciation (Saul, 1997, p. 162).

This helps to explain why, as Keynes maintained, markets need to be constantly and intelligently directed by those with a sympathetic view of the wider world, rather than passively followed and allowed to wreak havoc. But it does not go far enough. Why do otherwise intelligent people refuse to see the all-too-clear signs of “overshoot and collapse” that surround us?

One reason has emerged repeatedly above - a dominant corporatist ideology that de-focuses the realities of the wider world and substitutes a set of more compliant abstractions that are mistakenly used to represent that world. The complete dependence of the economy on the ecology is forgotten, repressed and put out of sight. But there is also another factor at work. It is revealed and clarified in a book by Sonia Shah called “Crude – The Story of Oil”. Here she identifies what may be a fundamental stumbling block for many people in positions of power and responsibility. After noting that “the oil industry is under no obligation to sate global desires for crude”, she goes on to say that:

as long as consumers don’t cotton on to the fact that the oil supply they depend on is in permanent decline and prudently decide to wean themselves off it, the crossover between supply and demand could trigger many lucrative years of high oil prices.

She then comes to the nub of the issue:

Some within the industry perhaps genuinely believe the economists, who argue that higher prices will always lead to more resources and so resource depletion can never be a genuine problem. Others, however, must have realised that their future livelihoods depend on the obscurity of the coming peak. If the industry wanted to stay in business for another century and beyond, it would do well not to let on that the world’s favourite fuel is anything less than perpetually abundant (Shah, 2005, p. 137).

Taken together these comments bring us to the point of clarity that we need. Saul’s comment eliminates any remaining residual confidence that we might have that markets per se can, by themselves, help humanity move toward viable futures. Shah’s perceptive insight tells us why those running businesses, governments, government departments and the like can so seldom “come clean” about the deteriorating human prospect. To do so, especially in commercial contexts, would amount to a denial of the very system that provides them with income, privilege and power. Moreover, it would destroy “confidence” in themselves and their organisation.

It may be something of a shock to realise that it is almost impossible to tell the truth from within the ambit of profit and power. To do so (and there are always a few brave souls who are willing to try) is to risk everything in the hope that one can “make a difference.” But the personal risks are indeed great, as whistle-blowers the world over have discovered.

### **“Free enterprise” equals the collapse of the system**

Let me now draw the threads of this argument together. We know that the global outlook is very challenging indeed. Indeed it is more challenging even than the members of the US National Intelligence Council itself realised since its 2020 Project report completely overlooked US complicity in creating and exacerbating the global dysfunctions outlined here (Slaughter, 2004). Furthermore, we have the accumulating evidence of informed observers who have been reading the signs and telling us for several decades how dominant powers urgently need to re-think, re-vision their view and our shared tenancy of this small planet (Brown, 2007; Meadows *et al.*, 2005).

Why have such sources been widely ignored? There are at least two main reasons. First, because the issues they raise do indeed challenge some of the primary assumptions upon which the social and international order is based. Second, because those operating according along the lines described above have successfully employed the very strategies outlined here. In essence, they have been able to displace widespread current concerns into a future that, perhaps rather cynically, they have supposed they will not live to see. The overshoot and collapse future, however, is no longer a distant prospect. There is growing evidence to suggest that we are already living in the time of “peak oil”, the “overshoot” phase, and therefore, unless some sort of “planned transition” is undertaken very soon (a prospect that still remains distant) “collapse” is unlikely to be much further ahead.

In an article for Newsweek International Andrew Moravcsik had this to say. He wrote:

You only had to listen to George W Bush's Inaugural Address... (invoking “freedom” and “liberty” 49 times) to appreciate just how deeply Americans still believe in this founding myth. For many in the world, the president's rhetoric confirmed their worst fears of an imperial America relentlessly pursuing its narrow national interests. But, the greater danger may be a delusional America, one that still believes, despite all evidence to the contrary, that the American Dream lives on, that America remains a model for the world . . .

He added:

the truth is that Americans are living in a dream world. Not only do others not share America's self-regard, they no longer aspire to emulate the country's social and economic achievements (Moravcsik, 2005).

This is not news. But the extent to which America is actively sponsoring a new form of totalitarianism may be. While most remain passive in the face of the marketing onslaught, routinely shrugging off thousands of facile and unwanted “commercial messages” daily, deep anxieties and unresolved fears gather at deeper levels. In a piece on the rise of what he calls “surplus culture” Guy Rundle writes:

surplus culture represents the push of the market towards establishing itself as a total system. At some point it hits limits dictated to it by the deepest reserves of social value, though its capacity to overturn these is greater than many suspect . . . In a surplus culture, the level of consumption begins to push against deep-seated cultural and natural limits of possibility (Rundle, 2005, p. 46).

Clearly the contradictions within such a culture cannot easily be solved by those living inside it unless they are willing to ask some difficult questions that go to the heart of American reality. What, then, happens when the contradictions do finally collide with social and environmental limits? One source of our deepest fears may well be that we already know the answer because we know what has happened in previous times when an existing social order collapses. But this knowledge is perceived as “too challenging” and we turn away (Diamond, 2005; Dator, 1992). Yet such knowledge cannot ever be fully disregarded – it percolates through by other means. One prolific and long-standing source is the dystopian branch of SF. But it also emerges in more recent works of mainstream fiction situated within a variety of breakdown contexts (McCarthy, 2006; Crace, 2007). These can be seen as “messages from the unconscious”, hints of other ways of knowing that have been widely suppressed during several hundred years of rational development and growth.

This is precisely where well-qualified futurists have a vitally significant cultural role. If they have done their homework; if they have achieved sufficient clarity about the current world order; if they are fearlessly unattached to current centres of power and privilege, then they can speak out and recommend a series of responses and strategies. One such is Wendell Bell whose opus, “The Foundations of Futures Studies”, along with many related papers are of inestimable value in this context (Bell, 2003, 2004). Another is Hazel Henderson with her exemplary record of publications, activism and social innovations (Henderson, 2006). Such work provides a basis for an alternative tradition of advanced and progressive futures enquiry that openly supports universal human values.

## Responses and strategies

While the earlier American tradition of futures work and its most progressive members have a great deal to commend them, they have been unable to challenge the destructive and unsustainable nature of twenty-first century America or moderate its interventions in the wider world. With the darkening global outlook it is surely time for the profession to use the remaining openness and freedoms still available in the US and elsewhere to re-direct government, policies, practices, modes of business, models of development etc. away from world-dominating fantasies to the task of thorough-going cultural renewal.

The following are indicative responses only. Others will naturally follow from more focused and dedicated efforts. We need to:

- *understand* that the pathways futures followed and assumed by mainstream US interests are untenable (and also that those of us living in rest of the rich West are complicit);
- *recognise* in some depth what kind of problem this is, how it is “layered” at various levels (in myths, ways of thinking, national policies, habits, practices, institutions etc) and where responsibility for each of these actually lies;
- *work* toward some basic agreements between different futures interest groups and organisations on how to address these problems effectively, especially when they originate metaphorically in our own back yard (i.e. our own culture and psyche);
- *decide* on effective courses of action that we ourselves can take – rather than displacing the responsibility to others; and
- *demonstrate* humility in seeking out and employing suitable reality checks for the viability of such strategies, being prepared to modify them as necessary.

Futurists, on the whole, tend to believe that they are working to help create a better world. As noted in the previous list, those of who live in rich Western environments need to acknowledge that we are all “part of the problem” as well as, hopefully, “part of the solution.” The issues raised here are not unique to the USA; they are shared, to a greater or lesser extent, by everyone whose current way of life stands at, or near, the top of existing “pyramids of sacrifice.” Thus it is necessary to acknowledge our own complicity in creating and re-creating exploitive and unsustainable organisations, cultures and outlooks.

A firm decision is needed to take a measure of responsibility for what I have termed the “civilisational challenge”. Instead of dismissing concerns about US work as being “anti-American”, they should be seen as providing essential insights into the self-deceptions that appear to operate so effectively there. A decision to be less defensive and more open to well-grounded critique is a step toward personal and disciplinary maturity. In point of fact, integrally informed, layered futures methodologies come to the fore and become indispensable in this process (Slaughter *et al.*, 2008). It is vital to gain more experience of using the very tools that have been developed to address just such concerns (Wilber, 2005).

We then need to move from decision to action. What should futurists actually *do* to uncover the shaping realities underlying their work? One answer is to take an honest look at the work that has been addressing this problem for some time. This not only includes taking global diagnoses much more seriously, it also means paying real and close attention to dissenting scholars and those, often located at the putative “margins” who, for reasons of culture, distance or paradigm exclusion, have been ignored (Berman, 2006).

Reality testing is vital. How does a growing awareness of civilisational myths, cultural and professional blind spots, the deep dysfunctions of American life and affluent cultures generally actually affect the ways that futurists go about their work? If there are some who are no longer uncritically buying into the “American Dream” are they ready to assume some measure of responsibility for the “Global Nightmare” that, actively or passively, they have helped to create? These are tough questions. Yet the answers could alter the direction, the fundamental purposes, of American work away from the concealment and extension of hegemony and toward the kind of grounded solutions that the world really needs.

The last step continues the task of reality testing and looks for tangible results of a profound shift of energy and awareness. It looks for the practical working out of this anticipated “sea change” in focus and capability. How would we know when the strategy outlined here was working? Here are some possible “early signals”. US futurists would:

- *recognise* that terms like the “World Future Society” reflect impossible aspirations that are now beyond their “use by” date;
- *be prominent* in exploring alternatives to American hegemony and corporate power;
- *take time* to learn another language and to immerse themselves in the reality of one or more cultures distant from their own;
- *listen carefully* to other people, especially cultural myths and stories;
- *update and adopt* Wendell Bell’s proposals for a professional code of ethics (Bell, 1993);
- *carry out work* for large corporations only under carefully defined circumstances, e.g. to help them learn, evolve, become less psychotic and more intelligent; overall, to transform into very different entities; and
- *seek alliances* with socially progressive entities and actively work to de-legitimise those that work against the well-being of our world.

### **America is not the future . . .**

It follows from the above that the US cannot be the future. It could have provided a better model with more credibility if it had followed a different and more benign path through the tangle of modernity. If it had:

- banned weapons of mass destruction at the end of World War Two;
- not undermined the Bretton Woods world trading system;
- used the opportunity of the fall of the USSR to sponsor a truly multi-lateral world order;
- made a genuine and lasting commitment to addressing fundamental human needs and protecting the environment;
- been prepared to invest in the “economics of permanence” instead of those of rapacious and short-lived growth;
- avoided the traps of materialism and commercial greed; and
- taken seriously the idea that human beings are stewards of the planet with real responsibilities to future generations, not careless lords and masters who can destroy human, cultural and natural wealth with impunity.

But these are all “paths not taken” and time is no longer on our side.

Within FS what I have called the “American empirical tradition” focused for many years on the external world as its main realm of interest and expertise. Here forecasts, trends and especially what became known as “scenario planning” offered insight into “the world of the future”. In some cases this expertise reached a very high order such that some of those deploying it were invited to work with some of the highest councils in the land. Many, but not all, have been caught up in the “story of America”, seldom questioning its dominant myths or asking themselves what would be the ultimate results of the efforts of their political and corporate leaders to project upon the whole world untenable fantasies of privilege and power. Now it is clear. To be a futurist in America poses a fundamental choice: to either be complicit in America’s world-dominating role and the deceptions, both intended and unconscious, that flow from it, the foreclosing of viable futures, or to join with others in “speaking truth to power” and moving beyond the impasse.

### **. . . but may be part of it**

In this context there is a temptation to “construct” America as the source of all ills, although that is not the purpose of this paper. In fact there is a deeper issue. Humanity as a whole is only part way through a very long process of developing greater awareness and integration.

It remains fragmented, uncertain, its rising capacities still subject to irrational and sometimes violent outbursts. Its energies are unfocused and it still, on the whole, comprehends neither its plight nor its potential.

Those who seek to practice the disciplines of futures studies and applied foresight aspire in one way or another to take part in the “waking up” process and to be active in the process of integration, both individually and socially. In this process they will want to broaden their vision beyond the external world and to re-focus on the personal and social interiors (Wilber, 2000). Some years ago Polish SF writer Stanislaw Lem noted that mainstream SF writers had metaphorically travelled out into deep space without ever having explored the “labyrinth” deep within their own minds. So in looking deeply into “America” we are, to some extent, also looking into ourselves, for those who live in the rich West have much more in common with it than may we realise. Let us not, in fact, forget that few people anywhere have refused the oft-derided gifts of affluence. This paper itself is partly a result of American gifts – it was composed on a US-designed computer using US software and distributed via the US- created internet.

It follows that the so-called “American dream” and nightmare is, to some extent, our dream and also our nightmare. We could say, in fact, that American society has been exploring some of the ways that a complex and cosmopolitan culture deals with the emergent issues and concerns of our time. The experiment may not, at this point look like a great success, but it is also our experiment and our failure because we have gone along with so many aspects of it nearly all the way. Hollywood is often cited as one of the key identifiers of the US. Yet the “dream factory” at both large and smaller scale would not survive if there were not a willing international audience. So we must avoid the trap of casting America as the “bad other” and recognise our own reflections in the issues discussed here.

The way forward for the US and ourselves will not be easy nor without cost. There is a nascent America, and a nascent world, that can choose to align with progressive forces everywhere focussing on just and sustainable global futures. These integrating and sustaining elements can be found in many places – in the women’s, peace, environmental and social justice movements; in the wise words and deeply thoughtful work of futurists and others, some of whom have been noted here; in the rise of certain on-line libertarian groups and in the many initiatives pursued by NGOs with, and without, the support of the United Nations. Perhaps the single greatest priority is to divert the current vast amounts of money wasted on military uses toward funding adaptation strategies that address the multiple transitions facing humanity (Brown, 2007).

Within the US and elsewhere, freedom of speech, critical enquiry, the ability to critique power and its illegitimate uses may yet have sufficient countervailing power to moderate the slide toward dystopia. Yet the times are growing late and I very much doubt if we can avoid it altogether. The earlier master concept of “alternative futures” is now being compressed into one or another variant of the “overshoot and collapse” perspective. (Meadows *et al.*, 2005; Diamond, 2005) One of the burdens of being a futurist is the foreknowledge of species suffering. The fact is that the global ramifications of the culture and dynamic discussed here leave humanity ill prepared for the “tsunamis of change” coming its way. It is time to re-direct that culture and dynamic toward more constructive long term ends before the implacable dynamics of natural systems foreclose many of the options that remain. Instead of a “new American century” based on the blind pursuit of out-dated ideological commitments we need a “new century for humankind and its world” dedicated to a wider civilisational project of a completely different order.

## Notes

1. The term “America” is used throughout with reference to the USA only.
2. Wendell Bell (private communication) provides a helpful corrective to this analysis. For example, he points out that “I’m not convinced that fear had any more to do with America than it does with the rest of the world. Hope for a better life would be more accurate”. Also. Regarding “escape”, “is trying to recreate one’s self in a more desirable, truer, idealised form a bad thing? Is it escape? Isn’t it a fairly widespread human trait?” And finally, on “celebrity”, “there is more to it ... Many American

'celebrities' today are involved in trying to bring education, modern medicine and sanitation, clean water, housing and other amenities to various depressed areas of the world."

3. Davies is here summarising Barry B. Hughes (1985) *World Futures: A Critical Analysis of Alternatives*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD.
4. Alterman's conclusion is that "the US is now less safe, poorer, more hated and more constrained in its ability to fight terrorism than it was before the tragic loss of blood and treasure the war has demanded. And yet the neocons have admitted almost no mistakes and continue to be rewarded with plum posts in the Bush administration".
5. "I am saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: the Iraq war is largely about oil" (Greenspan, 2007, p. 463).

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