

Futures Studies raise challenging questions about our present world

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The world we are living in is an illusion. Or, to put it more precisely, it is, in many respects, based on illusions. That is, much that is conventional and taken for granted does not stand up to close examination.

For example, the affluent Western world has become entranced by its wealth, its success and its ever more compelling technological prowess. But it pays little more than superficial attention to the consequences of its spiralling demands, to the ways it constantly defers the costs into the ever-receding future. Short-term thinking has become the norm in Western cultures and it protects us from ever taking seriously our collective attempts to consume the future. This is, as Tim Flannery correctly suggested, a culture of 'future eaters'.

We need to see these phenomena much more clearly because, at present, they are leading us to a world no sane person would choose for themselves, let alone hand on to their children. It is, in my considered view, a world that will be stripped, mined out, polluted, denuded of non-human life and compromised beyond all hope of repair. It is also a world overrun by machines we can neither see nor control. In other words, the most likely futures before us are irredeemably dystopian in nature.



One of the reasons for the commercial success of the movie *The Matrix* was the fact that it powerfully depicted a fictionalised version of our real world predicament. The everyday world appears to proceed pretty much as usual, but underneath it lies a much more ugly reality that challenges everything human beings stand for and aspire to. *The Matrix*, therefore, has become a compelling metaphor for the condition of humanity in the early twenty-first century.

It is not normally a simple matter to bring such 'subversive' notions to full awareness. The social sanctions against so doing can be severe. In fiction, however, we can allow ourselves a glimpse of the truth without, necessarily, challenging the prevailing social order. We can experience our anxiety and fear in the safe confines of a movie theatre or TV screen, where they can also be safely resolved, at least for now.

Back in the 'real' (unreal?) world, downbeat views of the future are not popular. They are deemed negative and unhelpful. The truth, however, is different – and much more interesting. Consider: one of the main tasks of Futures Studies is the careful and disciplined exploration of near-future 'landscapes'. The information, knowledge and insights so gained are used in a thousand ways by people and organisations to decide, strategise and, overall, 'steer' more carefully into the future. In constructing these detailed forward views, areas of danger or difficulty become clear. Ships at sea use charts to avoid dangers.

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Aircraft pilots use weather profiles to avoid storms. Walkers use terrestrial maps to avoid a variety of physical dangers. In other words, our species has had long practice of futures scanning in order to avoid danger. This is reflected in traditional sayings such as 'Look before you leap', 'Forewarned is forearmed' and 'A stitch in time saves nine'.

Why would we now set that capacity aside when we need it most?

There are two basic motivations for looking ahead. The first, just mentioned, is to avoid dangers. The second is to set goals, dream dreams, create visions, make designs; in short, to project upon the future a wide range of purposes and intentions. Both are as old as our species and can be seen operating from the earliest times.

Prolonged immersion in the work of serious Futures Studies suggests that the current late industrial world, with its particular blind spots and preoccupations, does not, by any means, represent the peak of human experience and capability. Beyond this lie other civilisations that are as different from the so-called information era as it is from the Stone Age. Do we want our descendants to explore those new horizons? Or are we prepared to simply let things slide?

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