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Creativity, skepticism, and visioning the future

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Abstract

Members of the World Futures Studies Federation share not only the usual professional goals of advancing and developing their field, but also an extraordinary commitment to envisioning and creating a future world of increasing human freedom and well-being. Both aims, obviously, would be moved forward if futurists could establish more futures studies courses, departments, and research centers than now exist at colleges and universities. To do so requires vigor, creativity, and élan, which futurists seem to have in abundance, but it also demands more logical and empirical rigor, skepticism, and critical capacity in futures work.

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In May 1986, I attended my first World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF) conference in Honolulu, Hawaii. Although I had been exploring the sociology of the future for some years, I was still getting my bearings among futurists, did not know a lot of the other participants (although I did know many of their names from my reading), and was not sure that this was where I belonged.

One evening during the conference, a cruise was scheduled. We collected at the dock, finally boarded, and sailed off into the afterglow of the setting sun, clutching drinks and food and locked in intense conversation.

Then the music started. Wham! Every person, as if a single being, stopped talking, jumped up, and started moving to the rhythm. At that moment I knew I belonged with this group. Members of only one other academic group I know react in that way when the music begins, the Caribbean Studies Association (of which I had recently been President and had become a fast-on-the-draw up-jumper). Somehow, embracing the moment by moving to music in a group inspires camaraderie, joy, hope, unity, and even the celebration of life itself.

Since then, I've attended other conferences or co-sponsored activities of the WFSF, for example in Finland, Iceland, Hungary, Taiwan, and Yugoslavia. Always, I have been

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enriched by the experience, not only by the intellectual content of the sessions, but also by the decency of the people, their personal warmth and friendship, their support for others' intellectual efforts, their multi-national and multicultural egalitarian mix, their empathy and global reach toward all humanity, and their life-affirming attitudes.

Certainly, many—if not most—of us want to build and advance futures studies, both as an academic discipline and as a practical profession, just as members of many other groups work to promote their fields. But underlying such mundane goals among members of the WFSF is a truly extraordinary commitment to creating a better world in the future, a world of peace and hope, opportunity and choice, justice and forgiveness, caring and generosity, and freedom and well-being for all peoples.

Describing the founding of the WFSF, for example, Masini [7] says, it was an effort “to build a humanistic-oriented future,” one centered “on the human being and based on the decisions and social constructions of that being.” Futures studies, she says, “is a liberating and hope-provoking activity.”

And it remains so today. For, as Slaughter [8] recently wrote, unlike “the dominant forms of motivation now operating on planet Earth,” futures studies embodies “prudence, foresight, and compassionate awareness” and futurists aim to create “designs of every kind that give expression to the highest human motives that we are capable of: caring, compassion, loving kindness and long-term stewardship.”

Thumbing through my WFSF directories, I note that nearly half of the people listed have contributed in some direct way to my education as a futurist, either through their writings, their papers at conferences, personal communications, or activities they organized. Obviously, I cannot list them all here, but I would like to mention a few of my “guiding lights” among futurists by way of saying thanks: Kuo-Hua Chen, Jim Dator, Howard F. Didsbury, Jr., Mahdi Elmandjra, Johan Galtung, F. Bernd Hamm, Hazel Henderson, Sohail Inayatullah, John McHale, Pentti Malaska, Mika T. Mannermaa, Michael Marien, Eleonora B. Masini, Peter Mettler, Erzsébet Nováky, Reed D. Riner, Josep Rodriguez, Ziauddin Sardar, Richard Slaughter, Tony Stevenson, Robert Textor, Allen Tough, Bart van Steenbergen, and others.

I confess to having experienced an epiphany in July 1980 while attending the First Global Conference on the Future in Toronto (co-sponsored by the World Future Society and the Canadian Association for Futures Studies). Partly, it was because my own education as a futurist had reached a point where I was ready to absorb the avalanche of ideas that the conference turned out to be. Mostly, it was because the conference itself was spectacular.

More than 5000 people from 30 or so countries were there and the crowd was so large that some plenary sessions had to be videotaped and shown by closed-circuit television in hotel rooms. It was an awesome kaleidoscope of futurists and innovative ideas, from the absolutely brilliant to the absurdly ridiculous—and sometimes both at once. It was filled with ‘walking footnotes,’ people whose writings I had been reading and citing for more than a decade, including Roy Amara, Arthur C. Clarke, Theodore J. Gordon, Bertrand de Jouvenel, Robert Jungk, Herman Kahn, Timothy Leary (who had an unforgettable debate with Kahn), Eleonora B. Masini, Magda Cordell McHale, Marshall McLuhan, Dennis L. Meadows, Aurelio Peccei, Peter Schwartz, and Robert Theobald.

It remains a high point of my enthusiasm for futures studies, even though it lacked, at least for me, the intimacy of the smaller conferences of the WFSF.

Years ago, when I first began saying “I’m a futurist” in answer to queries from nonfuturists about what I did, I used to try to impress my listeners with forecasts and views of the world that they would consider astounding, usually descriptions of coming technologies of one kind or another. That did get people’s attention. Then, I would move on to more nuanced explanations of the purposes, theories, methods, and results of futures studies. Yet the initial shock of the think-the-unthinkable way I began left most people wondering whether this guy Bell was a creative thinker or some kind of a kook, and, of course, this led them to have similar views about futures studies itself.

I seldom use that strategy any more, because I want to portray futures studies, more accurately, as an understandable, reliable, and valid field of inquiry that has tools to help make good individual and collective decisions.

Thus, I now elaborate by saying, “Well, actually, you are a futurist too. In fact, we are all futurists.” Then, I try to explain by illustrating the way people use futures thinking in their own everyday lives—in making decisions, in assessing possibilities, probabilities, and preferences for their own futures and those of groups and organizations to which they belong, and in planning courses of action to achieve their best possible futures.

In other words, I start with the mundane aspects of their own lives—the futures thinking they do to prepare a meal, select their daughter’s college, decide for whom to vote, choose a house to buy, and so forth—and, then, point out that futurists, partly, simply demystify the future by making explicit what most people do implicitly, but that futurists have developed systematic and objective ways of thinking about the future that allow people to act more effectively than they usually do. After that, I give some examples of the innovative thinking that futurists have done in describing alternative futures, for example, of the environment, education, energy sources, information technology, social justice, women’s roles in society, world governance and peace, and so forth. And I try to be prepared to demonstrate that many positive, idealistic images of future worlds, no matter how different they are from what exists today, are not only desirable but also feasible.

Recently, Marien [5,6] and I [1,2] had an exchange of views about the state of the futures field, so I won’t repeat here what I said there, except to point out that, despite our differences, Marien and I agree on many things, including the importance of establishing futures studies as departments or programs in colleges and universities throughout the world.

The issues involved in such a task, obviously, are many and well beyond the scope of this paper. But one strikes me as essential. We community of futurists, I think, must continue our work on epistemology, on continuing to critically examine the theory—or theories—of knowledge on which our assertions about possible, probable, and preferable futures rest. For without transparent, reproducible, rigorous, and naturalistic ways of knowing as part of our explanations of how we know what we claim to know, our academic colleagues—at least in the College of Letters and Science, if not in the Divinity School—will rightly look upon our efforts as a pack of nonsense.

As some of you know, I am fond of quoting Henshel’s [4] observation, “A contemporary futures conference attracts more frauds and phonies than any other form of meeting, but it also generates more genuinely important ideas.” He then adds, “The question is how to have the one without the other.”

My short answer is to apply a healthy dose of skepticism. My long answer [3] is to use a theory of knowledge known as critical realism, which includes serious efforts to falsify,

logically and empirically, futurist assertions, so as to minimize the chances of accepting and spreading false beliefs. Falsifiable assertions that survive such efforts may be provisionally accepted as true.

Critical realism in no way discourages creativity, innovation, or the construction of positive visions. But it does remind us that for an action science—that is for us futurists who hope our visions of the future will be taken seriously and acted on by others out there in the real world—there is a special obligation not to lead people astray and not to encourage them to act in a way that would be futile or harmful to themselves and others. The world is already overfilled with such false prophets from among the ranks of politicians, corporate executives, advertising pitchmen, media pundits, and religious leaders, to name a few.

Futurists and futures studies have enormous contributions to make to the well-being and freedom of humankind, if we can keep our feet firmly planted on solid foundations of knowledge.

But, please, fellow futurists, as we think about and study the ‘not yet’ of the future, let us always savor the now of the present. Let us embrace *la joie de vivre*, and, when the music starts, let’s stop talking and start dancing.

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