



Global Seminary of Prospective Training (*Seminario Global de Formación Prospectiva*) **Futures Studies: A Critical View**

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Futures Studies: A Vital Role

- FS is vital to the future of the world. The perspective of FS is essential to be able to create a world that is **sustainable, just, peaceful and culturally diverse**.
- FS provides us with the perspective, tools and knowledge to do so.
- However, in this presentation I will focus on a critique of FS as it is practiced. **Although this is a critical view, it is not meant to belittle the importance of FS in creating a desirable future world.**

Nine Propositions on FS

I present my critique of FS as it has been practiced globally in the last few decades through nine propositions. These nine propositions look at the nature, relevance, use and misuse of Futures Studies / Foresight / Prospective.

Proposition One: paraphrasing Karl Marx

Futurists

- have only
- interpreted the world

The point

- however
- is to change it

In other words...

- FS has to be an action-oriented discipline.
- It provides us with insights about trends and the future, but if we cannot act on those insights, then the relevance and usefulness of FS comes into question.
- **Example: Climate Change.** Hundreds of millions are going to be affected by excessive heat, sea-level rise and disasters within fifty years. But global action on dealing with this catastrophic future is highly inadequate.

Proposition Two

P2: Future Studies is over-burdened, paradoxically, with a modernizing past associated with the western technological civilization.

- Control over nature, not living in harmony with nature

It is, consequently, dominated by instrumental rationality, while neglecting other worldviews and cultural perspectives.

- The transhumanists want to 'abolish' human beings and look forward to a post-human history!

It has thus largely revolved around western, technology-oriented, materialistic concerns, and has made insufficient attempts to understand the world and the future from other perspectives.

Proposition Three

- P3: FS has been dominated by **pop futurism**, which, in turn, is dominated by `techno-futures' - grandiose visions of the future built upon the foundations of wonderful and miraculous technology.
- Richard Slaughter: four levels at which futures work is done:
 - Pop futurism
 - Problem-focussed study
 - Critical study
 - Epistemological study

Understanding the fascination with technology!

The historian David F Noble argues that the true inspiration of much of advanced modern technology lies not in rationality but in the other-worldly quest for transcendence and salvation:

Religious preoccupations pervade the space program at every level, and constitute a major motivation behind extraterrestrial travel and exploration. Artificial intelligence advocates wax eloquent about the possibilities of machine-based immortality and resurrection, and their disciples, the architects of virtual reality and cyberspace, exult in their expectation of God-like omnipresence and disembodied perfection. Genetic engineers imagine themselves divinely inspired participants in a new creation. All of these technological pioneers harbor deep-seated beliefs which are variations upon familiar religious themes.

The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention, New York, Penguin, 1999

Noble argues that the 'religion of technology' is dangerous, for it continues to drive our enchantment with unregulated technological advance, while making us forget our earthly and social existence, here and now.

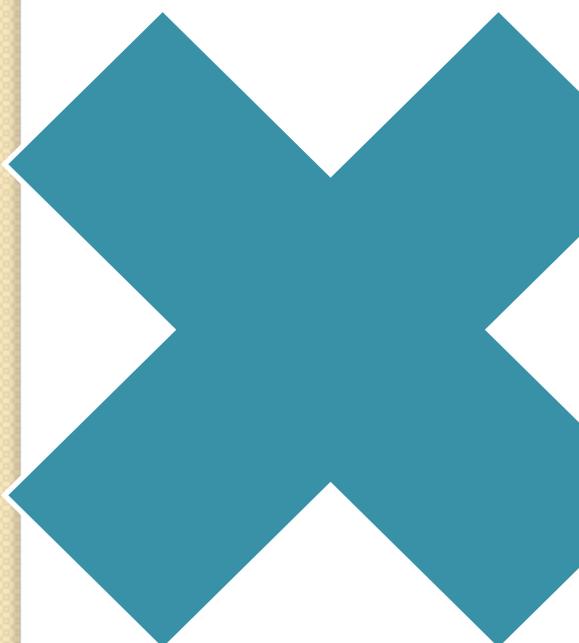
Technology as escapism

There is another reason for the widespread fascination with techno-utopia. **The belief in technology as solution is the easiest escape route from the problems facing us in the present.** Instead of trying to locate our problems in the context of our own irresponsible actions, and to make an effort for self-regulation, the solutions are externalized in the form of technology. (**Examples:** Fossil fuel consumption; The Aviation Industry; Eugenics)

Proposition Four

- P4: Future studies has primarily served the interests of large business corporations and the military-industrial complex in developed countries, who have the resources to fund futures research, but whose vision is very self-centred.
- **Example:** The Global Trends 2030 report, 2012, of the National Intelligence Council, USA does not consider climate change as an important megatrend for the next two decades!

Proposition Five



P5: Future studies has little or no relevance to a majority of the people of the world: the poor and the 'people without future.'

Example: Futurists tell us of the 'smart home' (that will perform a number of routine tasks, such as augmenting supplies, automatically for its habitants) that we can look forward to. But how many inhabitants of this planet will have a home at all? **The fantasy of the smart home is more appealing than the boring reality of simple homes for the homeless!**

Proposition Six

- P6: Future studies is of little consequence to the colossal changes taking place in the real world.
- FS is rarely able to predict the most earth-shaking developments. Some big predictions that FS missed:
 - The economic recession of 2008
 - The break-up of the USSR
 - The 9/11 terror strike on the World Trade Centre in 2001 in New York
- Besides not being able to predict the biggest changes, futurists are rarely part of high-level decision-making structures.
- Together, these characteristics mean that FS has little impact on the real world.

Proposition Seven

- **P7:** Future studies as a discipline has had very little impact on public policy. It has rarely been able to carry out the kind of work that can have a deep impact on public policies and has hardly been able to influence key decision-makers in different societies.
- **Examples:** the Limits to Growth debate, climate change studies, the issue of global terror, the use of renewable sources of energy, the issue of global poverty and development – in hardly any area has the impact of FS on public policy been significant.

Proposition Eight

- P8: There is a huge gap between the insights and consciousness of the futurists, on the one hand, and the consciousness and actions of ordinary human beings as well as the more powerful decision-makers, on the other.
- Knowledge is power, but knowledge of a few without reaching a critical mass is not power.
- The pop futures variety of FS is more common, as Richard Slaughter says. Criticizing Naisbitt's books *Megatrends* and *Megatrends 2000*, he writes:

Their popularity within business environments and elsewhere is due undoubtedly to the way they interpret and simplify the world. In other words, 'megatrends' provide a largely false sense of security, a way of gaining a seriously distorted impression of 'the big picture' without the further effort of critical thinking.

Proposition Nine

- P9: The role that future studies can play in a globalizing world is unclear.
- Globalization is characterized by the free flow of capital, profits, economic goods, as also cultural products. But it restricts the free movement of human beings on the one hand and on the other, through deep-seated barriers, often implicit, the flow of deeper cultural values, worldviews, epistemologies.
- It thus promotes the cultural products of the West everywhere, while traditional knowledge systems are devalued.
- FS should play a role to create a plural, multi-cultural, world democratic world that can facilitate a truly inter-cultural dialog and an 'embrace of civilizations' rather than a clash of civilizations. Can FS and the practicing futurists help us do this?

An Agenda for FS and Futurists

Political engagement

- Engage more directly with the task of creating a democratic future!

Public debate

- Go beyond pop futurism to engage critically with public and various experts to influence public policy!

Focus on Alternative Futures

- Deconstruct the West and discover and promote non-Western visions to create alternative and pluralist futures!

Freedom from technological domination

- Counter the 'religion of technology' and devise democratic forms of control over technology!



Thank you!