

# A Selective History of Futures Thinking

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## 2.1 A Selective History of Futures Thinking

In this chapter, I present a history of the futures and utopian discourse. First, I locate my theoretical position within the long and diverse history of inquiry about the future. Next, I suggest that what is considered utopian and what are considered real futures probabilities or possibilities are in fact social, cultural and historical constructions. This notion is developed through a genealogical gloss of current utopian discourses wherein I trace the movement from a singular notion of ‘utopia’ to dystopia as well as heterotopias and eutopias. Finally, I explore the connections between futures and utopian thinking and/in educational discourses.

David B. Barrett (1996, p. 1021) locates the origins of ‘futurism’ at around 47,000 BC. For him, futurism began with the emergence of divination by mediums, oracles or augurs. These were consulted in order to learn about future events (Barrett, 1996). More recent futurism dates back to the origins of astrology, around 3300 BCE in Mesopotamia (ibid.). Astrology attempts to predict destinies of individuals, groups, or nations through interpreting the influence of planets and stars on earthly affairs (ibid.). Throughout history, various methods for predicting the future have been used: haruspication, bibliomancy, alectryomancy, cartomancy, clairvoyance, oneiromancy, ichthyomancy, palmistry, and so on.<sup>1</sup> Some of our ancestors left behind material artifacts that testify to such efforts: for

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<sup>1</sup> Haruspication: examining reflections in the entrails of sacrificial animals in ancient Rome; bibliomancy: opening a book at random and reading a chapter in search of insight into the future; alectryomancy: using a chicken to pick up seeds scattered in front of letters arranged in a circle; cartomancy: e.g., Tarot; clairvoyance: ‘second sight’; oneiromancy: dream messages; ichthyomancy: studying fish movements; palmistry: studying unique feature of each individual’s palms to tell about the person and her/his future. Many other methods were developed, for example, sortilege or ‘casting of lots’, geomancy (interpreting marks on the earth), pyromancy (looking into fire) and use of omens and oracles of various kinds (Parker, 1988).

example, the Babylonian *Enuma Any Enlil*, devoted to celestial omens; the Chinese *I Ching*, or ‘Book of Changes’; the pyramids of Egypt; the Indian theory of *Mahayugas*; the Delphic and Sybylline oracles; and the Mayan and Aztec temples. Others did not attempt to predict the future. Rather, they did not separate the category—the future—from ‘the eternal now’. What they left behind are not material artifacts from which we can learn about their own views about the future. Rather, they left local environments in almost original condition. This testifies about their own views on time and the future, as well as about their own efforts in this regard. Current futures studies, however, did not rise from this tradition. It is firmly based within the western intellectual tradition and has emerged from within the western epistemological framework.

The conception of time and the future exists in every known society (W. Bell, 1994). The practice of divination, rites of passage (transitions to future social roles), agricultural planning, seasonal migrations, development of calendars, all testify that “conceptions of time and future exist—and have existed—in human consciousness everywhere” (ibid., p. 3). The future is “an integral aspect of the human condition”, because “by assuming a future, man makes his present enduring and his past meaningful” (McHale, 1969, p. 3).

Although the conception of time and the future exist universally, they are understood in different ways in different societies. Eleonora Masini (1996, p. 76) argues that there are three main representations of time. The first representation is:

A variation of cyclical motion, as in the enclosed circle of life and death in living organisms, or of night and day in cosmic time. This representation is well reflected in the Hindu and Buddhist ‘cosmic eras’ (*kalpa*) which are delimited by mythological events in time periods through which all beings continue ad infinitum. The cycle is represented by a snake. In this conception we see the future as part of an unending continuum. The future is part of life and death. Naturally this influences one’s perspective of the future: there is little reason to despair or to strive to achieve. (ibid.)

The second representation is based on the Graeco–Roman and the Judaeo–Christian conception of time:

Founded on the idea that all people are the same in relation to God. Time is perceived to be a trajectory towards something more, towards accomplishment. In this representation time is symbolized by an arrow; the future is better than the present and the past and may be in contradiction to the historical present, as in utopia. The possibility of the future being worse than

the past or present is out of the question. This is the conceptual base of “progress” . . . the time of scientific and technological development, where every success has to be bigger and better than anything in the past or present . . . (but) this concept of time and the future is being challenged by environmental barriers and barriers emerging from its own frame of reference. (ibid.)

The third representation has been developed by “Vico and others and was more recently extended by Ervin Laszlo” (ibid., p. 77). According to this representation:

Time is a spiral, an evolutionary process of world civilization giving a structure to spatial and temporal events ranging from the natural to the social, that develops over time. (ibid.)

These three basic metaphors for time—circle, arrow and spiral—influence the type of futures thinking and the very understanding of the future across cultures. Sohail Inayatullah writes:

Different visions of time lead to alternative types of society. Classical Hindu thought, for example, is focused on million– year cycles. Within this model, society degenerates from a golden era to an iron age. During the worst of the materialistic iron age, a spiritual leader or *avatar*, rises and revitalizes society. In contrast, classical Chinese time is focused on the degeneration of the Tao and its regeneration through the sage– king seen as the wise societal parent. (Inayatullah, 1996a, pp. 200–201)

What is missing from Masini’s discussion on the three main representations of time is an understanding of time as ‘non– flowing’, as part of ‘eternal now’, or as ‘Dreaming’. Such understanding of time has been present among some indigenous societies, for example, among North American and Australian Indigenous peoples. I come back to the issue of various understanding of time among diverse civilisations in Chapter Three, where I discuss historical futures discourses in education.

Having western and some eastern societies in mind, Masini further argues that while some cultures have focused on development and progress of the society, others have focused on the development of the self—an “accomplishment of the ideal person” (Masini 1996, p. 77). Views of time and the future have practical implications for individual and social lives. For example, different views of time and the future have contributed to some societies (for example, those based on the Judeo– Christian tradition) developing in accordance to the expansion principle, and some (for example, many indigenous societies) in accordance to the

conservation principle. Thinking about time and the future is an integral part of cultural and civilisational worldviews, which in many ways determines particular directions, decisions and choices that are made.

During the last 500 years, with the help of the expansion principle that was intrinsic to capitalism, colonialism, and the way 'progress', 'development' and 'time' were seen and defined, the 'victory' of western models of civilization has occurred. This hegemony of western civilisation has also meant the implementation and imposition of western concepts of time (time being linear) and the future globally (for example, the idea of 'millennium'), and, as we will see in Chapter Three, western models of education. Futures thinking thus became linear, concerned with progress and with ways for controlling the future. 'Science', including 'social sciences', developed within this context.

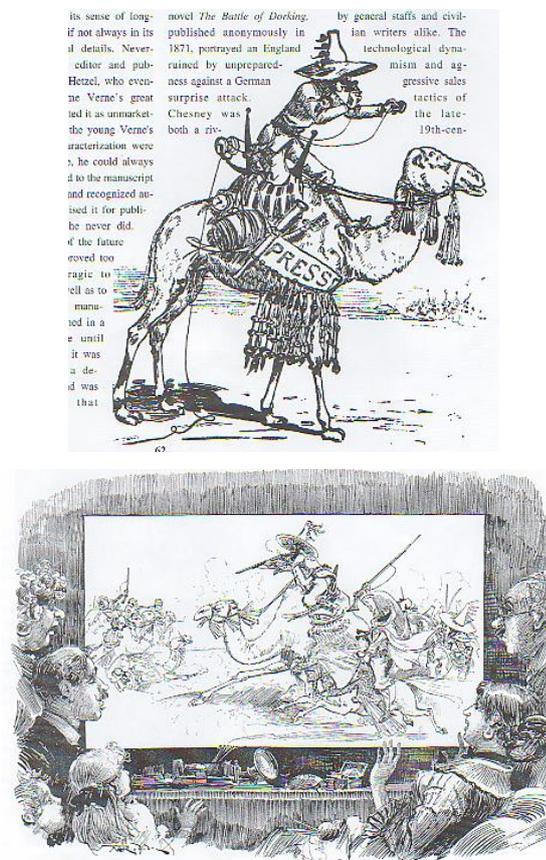
The emergence of 'modern futures studies' in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century occurred in the context of global divisions into the 'First', 'Second' and 'Third' Worlds, and within a 5,000 year long cycle of patriarchal domination within western civilisation (Gimbutas, 1991; Eisler, 1987). As I stated earlier, the history of modern 'futures studies' is firmly based on this western intellectual tradition. Edward Cornish claims that it was not the Delphic oracle but "ancient Greece's *logographoi*, the first men who could be called historians, [that are] the very distant ancestors of the modern futurists" (Cornish, 1999, Chapter 4, para. 2). Edward Tenner argues that futurism in the present sense was born "in the ferment of the Enlightenment in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries" (Tenner, 1998, p. 59).

Others argue that 'futurologists' had to wait for the disappearance of the worldview that created eschatologists (people concerned with the end of the world, the last judgment) (Lothian, 1995). This required that the European medieval 'obsession' with Heaven and the after-life had to be replaced with a focus on improving earthly conditions and an understanding that the social order is not 'fixed' or already preordained in Scripture (Lothian, 1995; Tenner, 1998). In addition, the concern with individual futures that dominated divination and fortune telling had to be replaced with a focus on social futures.

According to Richard Slaughter, it was the "combination of science, technology and war [that] fuelled the popular imagination in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe" (Slaughter, 1996a, p. xxv). Until WWII, futures thinking existed in the West as literary expression (speculative fiction, e.g., that of Jules Verne), and political advocacy (e.g., social prophets Charles Fourier, Henri de Saint-Simone, Robert Owen, Edward Belamy) (Tenner, 1998). Most authors link the genesis of modern futurism to works of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century European and American authors such as H. G. Wells, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Oswald Spengler and Arnold J. Toynbee,

and more recent works by authors such as Alvin Toffler, Donella H. Meadows and associates, Daniel Bell, Herman Kahn, E. F. Schumacher, Frederik Polak, and Bertrand De Jouvenel (Masini, 1993a; W. Bell, 1994, Slaughter, 1996a; Wagar, 1996).

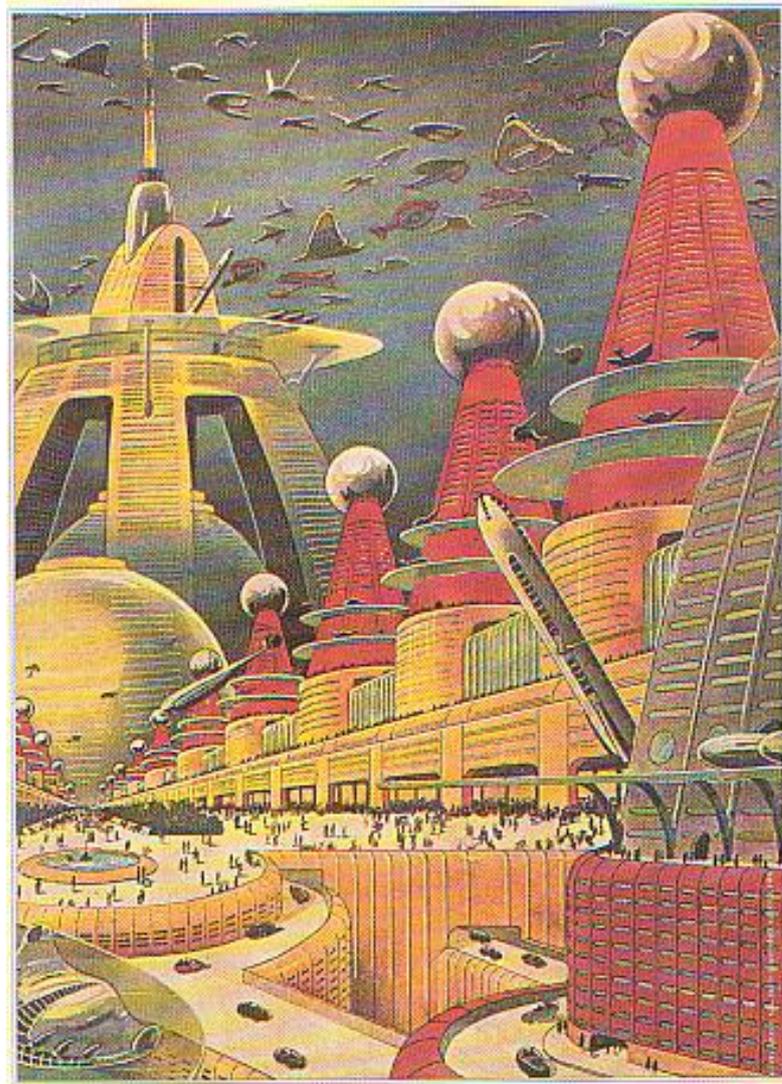
Illustration 2.1



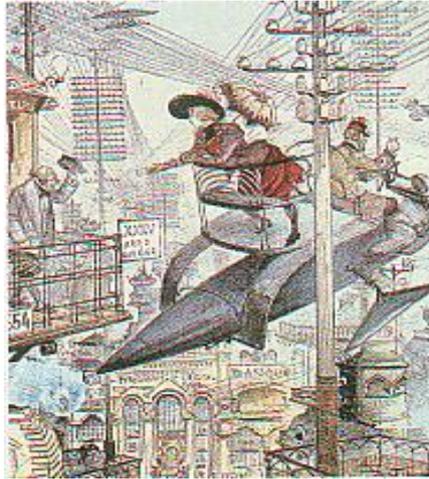
Albert Robida vision of the 1950's in *Le Vingtieme Siecle* (1883): “videophones link the continents, a family watches on large-format, wall mounted flat-screen television while correspondents on camelback report guerilla wars from North Africa” (Tenner 1998:63). “Robida in 1880's anticipated the portable electronic camera, the flat-screen, home-theater TV, and live video news coverage” (Tenner 1998:63).

From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, futures thinking in the west has moved from a focus on utopianism to one of ‘scientific’ prediction (see Illustrations 2.1 and 2.2). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, future studies “developed rapidly under the pressure of war and anticipated war, the need for military and commercial strategies, and the growing perception of what the Club of Rome aptly called ‘the global problematique’” (Slaughter, 1996a, p. x). North American future studies originated from “the techniques and interests of strategic planning” and European future studies followed a more “cultural” orientation. (Moll, 1996, p. 15–27). But in both regions, futures studies have recently “taken on new roles such as networking and encouraging public participation in social decision– making” (ibid.).

Illustration 2.2



The future rarely turns out it is imagined to be. Predictions are almost always wrong, as these two images of the year 2000 show us. The above “City of the Future”, is an illustration from the 1930s, showing what was believed then to be the city of the year 2000 (Lorie, 1995, back cover page). On the next page is a picture of a woman taking an aerotaxi from her apartment’s balcony through the cluttered skies of Paris in the year 2000—as seen in a 1890 drawing by cartoonist Albert Robida, who this time ‘got it wrong’ (from *The Focus*, January 1995).

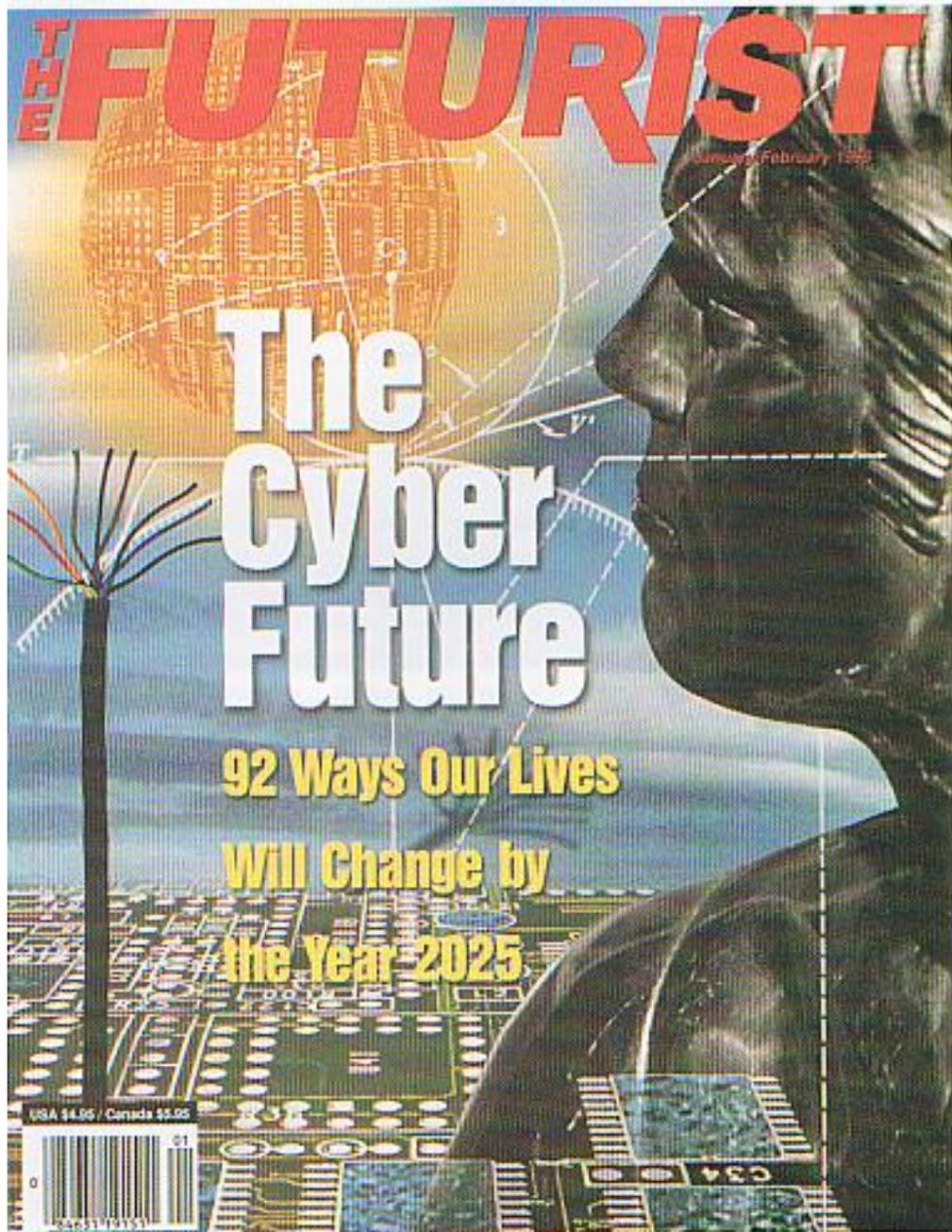


The 1960s and 70s were “a golden age for futures studies” (Dahle, 1996, p. 127; Moll, 1996, p. 19). By the 1970s, “organized futurism grew rapidly” and “the institutional side of futures research had taken what remains its present shape” (e.g., World Future Society, World Futures Studies Federation) (Tenner, 1998, p. 66). The new social movements, especially environmental movements, have broadened the futures field, which had previously been dominated by “a few big North American think– tanks serving military and related industrial goals” (Dahle, 1996, p. 127). Although the most famous futurists still dealt mainly with trends (e.g., Daniel Bell’s ‘post-industrial society’, Alvin Toffler’s ‘future shock’, John Naisbitt’s ‘megatrends’), the focus in futures studies started to shift towards the choices between alternative futures, ‘world problematique’, processes of change, desirable futures, and cultural issues.

In the 1980s and 90s many futurists moved from global thinking to institutional development. The limits of materialistic culture and the rationality of the Enlightenment, as explored in the human consciousness movement, also led to discussions on the futures of values, and the parameters of post-industrial society.

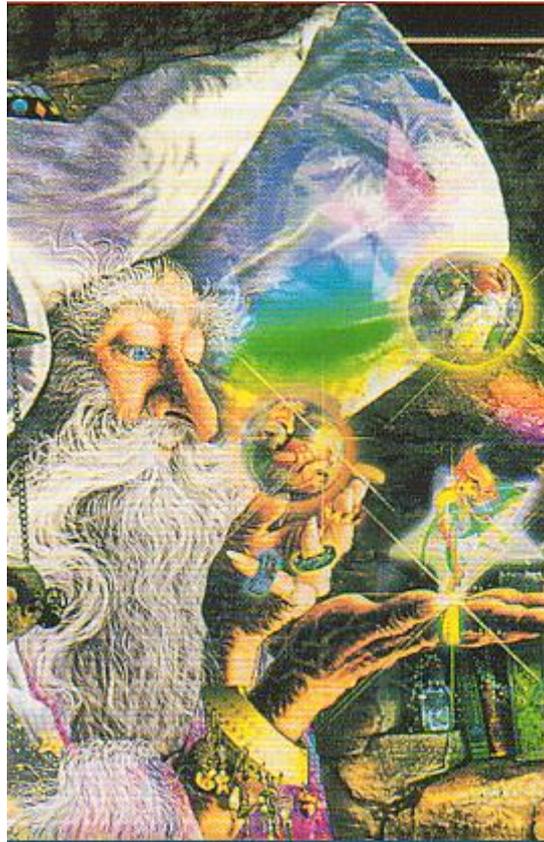
In the past ten years, futures studies has taken a more critical perspective, focused less on what the future will be like, or even the range of alternative futures, than on what is missing in particular visions of the future. While Edward Tenner (1998, p. 58) argues that the base of current futurism still remains pragmatic (consulting and popular writing), among academics, and following the social sciences in general, the quest is for a more balanced study of the future. This ‘quest’ is driven by futurists who are far less committed to corporatist and scientific interests and far more sympathetic to multicultural concerns, such as what groups are likely to be excluded if certain futures come about.

Illustration 2.3



'Prediction' is still one of the main methods used within futures studies: the front page of *The Futurist*, January–February 1996.

Illustration 2.4



Still gazing at the crystal ball: “A Magical Mix” by Tom Cross, in *Executive Excellence: The Magazine of Leadership Development, Managerial Effectiveness, and Organizational Productivity, Australian Edition*, 17(8), August 2000.

Still, future studies is generally dominated by forecasting and scenario planning, especially in the corporate world (see Illustration 2.3 and 2.4). Current governments also engage in futures thinking, mostly in the arena of public policy or studies that set national goals (for example, the Malaysia 2020 Vision). At the same time, however, there is a slow but significant shift from futures studies as a business tool to strategically manage the future, to futures studies as a framework for social emancipation. This particular approach is shared by critical, feminist and non-western futurists. The last group is particularly concerned with ‘decolonising’ western time and future images, and with developing “dissenting” (Nandy, 1999, p. 227) futures alternatives. These perspectives are also partly based on non-western traditions of futures thinking which were, until recently, absent from ‘modern futures studies’.

Richard Slaughter divides the current futures field into: (1) futures research commissioned by corporations and governments, which is generally “analytical and quantitative” and involves sophisticated, time consuming and costly methods; (2) futures studies, which are more academic and combine consulting with teaching and popularization; and (3) futures movements that promote social innovation (Slaughter, 1996a, pp. 94–95). Sohail Inayatullah divides the discourse of the future into three separate but interrelated dimensions: (1) predictive/empirical; (2) cultural/interpretative; and (3) critical/post-structural (Inayatullah, 1990). He argues that the first approach simply reinscribes the present even while it claims to ‘predict’ the future. The second approach, while “significant in expanding the discourse of the future across cultures, relativises the future at the expense of politics” (ibid., p. 115). The third approach, “by historicizing and deconstructing the future, creates new epistemological spaces that enable the formation of alternative futures” (ibid.). More recently, Inayatullah has argued for a fourth approach, that of anticipatory action learning, in which the future is re-created by stakeholders through a shared and deep process of questioning. (Inayatullah, 2002). Peter Moll also classifies the methods and orientation of European and American futures studies into: (1) extrapolative (prognosis, planning, technological, and economic forecasting); (2) normative (utopian and imaginative thinking, visioning, considering social and cultural dynamics); and (3) pragmatic (considering economic, social and political realization, means of participation and empowerment) (Moll, 1996). According to Moll, the extrapolative approach sees the future as “quantifiable”, while in the normative approach “futures are mainly qualitatively different”, and in the pragmatic “the future can largely be shaped by human activity” (ibid., p. 18). Michael Marien’s classification (2002, pp. 269–271) includes six main categories of futures– thinking: (1) probable futures; (2) possible futures; (3) preferable futures; (4) present changes; (5) panoramic views; and (6) questioning all of the above. In addition, he has recently argued that futures studies should not be seen as either a “multi– field”, or even a “very fuzzy multi– field” (ibid., p. 263). Rather, he perceives it in terms of “disconnected bits– and– pieces, of widely varying quality” (ibid.). This corresponds to the current state of the social sciences within ‘the postmodern condition’. Others, however, disagree with Marien’s position, asserting that futures studies indeed is a single field, but one that is constantly changing and growing (see Slaughter, 2002b).

With all their differences, modern futurists movements are, however, forming a coherent philosophy and epistemology. Although there are many different terms for future studies (e.g., ‘futures studies’, ‘the futures field’, ‘futures research’, ‘futuristics’,

‘futurology’, ‘prospective’, ‘prognostics’, ‘forecasting’, ‘futuribles’) that reflect different philosophical, theoretical and methodological orientations, there are several main assumptions that most futurists share.<sup>2</sup> The key philosophical assumptions behind modern futures studies—*the multidisciplinary and systematic field of inquiry of probable, possible and preferable futures*—are:

- The future is not predetermined and cannot be ‘known’ or ‘predicted’.
- The future is determined partly by history, social structures and reality, and partly by chance, innovations and human choice.
- There is a range of alternative futures which can be ‘forecasted’.
- Future outcomes can be influenced by human choices.
- Early intervention enables planning and design, while in ‘crises response’ people can only try to adapt and/or react.
- Ideas and images of the future shape our actions and decisions in the present.
- Our visions of preferred futures are shaped by our values.
- Humanity does not make choices as a whole, nor are we motivated by the same values, aspirations and projects. (De Jouvenel, 1996a; W. Bell, 1997; Cornish, 1999; Masini, 1993; Slaughter, 1996a; Fletcher, 1979; Amara, 1981).

Given that the future is not predetermined, and that we cannot really study something which has not yet happened, every study of the future is “strictly speaking, the study of ideas about the future” (Cornish cited in Wagar, 1996, p. 366). It is an inquiry, or “the study of possibilities that are plausible in terms of present– day knowledge and theory” (Wagar, 1996, p. 366).

This thesis is located within the tradition of critical futures studies which does not attempt to ‘predict’ the future, but asks how current predictions, images and ideas about the future influence decision and policy making today. My approach is both “cultural/ interpretative” and “critical/post– structural” (Inayatullah, 1990), as well as “normative” and

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<sup>2</sup> For example, ‘futurology’ is more oriented towards trend analysis and extrapolation, and many of its practitioners still believe in the ‘neutral’ role of the scientist who “merely stands aside and describes and predicts our near or distant future” (Milojević, 1996, p. 22). On the other hand, ‘futuribles’ and ‘futures studies’ focus on the range of alternative futures. The term ‘futuribles’ indicates “the complex of possible alternative futures” and is widely used in Europe (de Jouvenel 1967, cited in Masini 1993a, p. 56). Similarly, ‘futures studies’ indicates that there is more than one future to be studied. It is mostly used by futurists influenced by critical theory and poststructuralism, who understand futures studies to be critical, value driven, emancipatory, and able to contribute to the creation of preferable futures. Futures studies in this sense is as much an “academic field as it is a social movement”, and is more concerned with creating instead of predicting the future (ibid.). For discussion of the futures of futures studies, see the recent special issue of *Futures*, 34(3-4), 2002, edited by Richard Slaughter.

“pragmatic” (Moll, 1996). In terms of the categories proposed by Marian (2002), my approach is based on analysis of ‘possible’ and ‘preferable’ futures, as well as on ‘questioning’. In addition, I will also argue for ‘the recovery of the utopianism’: not in terms of offering a blueprint for the ‘perfect’ society, but in terms of its potential to offer alternatives to the present order and promote social innovation (Slaughter, 1996a). Discussion of such social and educational alternatives is crucial, not so much for formulation of ‘right’ answers, but rather for the destabilisation of undebated and imposed projects for the future.

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