Why Futures Research?

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There has been a considerable and varied interest in long-term trends in the last couple of decades. Why? Why should people take such an interest in the future as to set up university departments and journals, form national and international organizations, hold futures festivals and, in some cases, commit their lives to the study of the long term? Answers to this question will define the direction of the effort, and the choice of what is thought relevant and acceptable. It will determine the success or failure of any scholar who chooses to work in the interdisciplinary field of futures research.

I wish to comment on some reasons why futures research should be considered important, on what happened to me when I took up that career, on what I learned along the way, on why my ideas are marginalised in 1990s New Zealand, and on what I expect in the future. My experiences are germane to the debate, for the course of my career has been governed by the social forces which will determine the future.

I decided to move into futures research in 1975. When I was a scientist in the Applied Mathematics Division of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR) in Wellington, New Zealand. I put my career on the line by taking up the challenge of this new interdisciplinary subject because scientific evidence pointed to a deep malaise in the developing global system. The environment

was threatened by resource limitations, growth in the numbers of people and their economic activities. That was shown by a considerable body of research, including some early global models whose forecasts were repeated by a later generation of more complex computer models.

As a scientist I knew that models often did work. I had experienced at first hand the success of theoretical models in predicting or forecasting observed events. Every scientist has that experience. In my field of fluid mechanics I had predicted unexpected behaviors which were confirmed in experiments. I understood that if a model contains the basic features of a system, it can be used to predict outcomes and to expand our understanding of the world.

My studies convinced me that these global models were based on an accurate understanding of the physical world. The model indicated collapse around 2020. Destructive levels of pollution would appear while many resources, including food for burgeoning populations, would become in short supply.

Surely someone should do something about it; as a society it was madness to keep on the path of economic growth until doom overtook us on a global scale. While there was time for change and for action to prevent or reduce the impending disaster, it was evident that the proactive process of research and planning should commence immediately.

Such concerns were widespread, and I was able to develop this new career over the following decade. I was employed in many national and international organizations, including the DSIR and Commission for the Future in New Zealand, OECD Interfutures, UNESCO, UNEP and UNU in France. I gradually expanded my knowledge base in a journey through many disciplines.

I was searching for the keys to the future - what factors would dominate? One such key is the phenomenon of long-term economic waves, with typically growth and depression periods of around 20 years duration each, known as Kondratief cycles.

Once the existence of such cycles is recognized, the next step is to try to explain what is going on. There are a number of theories

which provide possible explanations. Some, such as the idea of new technology acting as a stimulation to growth, can be easily dismissed. After all, modern economies have experienced depression and high unemployment just as computers and other technological advances have become widespread.

The theory which offers the best fit is based on the physical world of production and consumption. When increased production is required (as after the destruction of the Second World War when so much improvement in material well-being was possible), the economy can grow. Eventually a suitable infrastructure (roads, buildings, etc.) is in place and production is sufficient to satisfy existing demand. However, since decisions for expansion have already been made, and growth is still demanded by powerful interests, production continues to increase, leading to the existence of over-productive capacity coupled with job losses.

I learned of Kondratief cycles while at OECD Interfutures. The idea that Western capitalism suffered such recurring crises, and was within a long-term depression at the time, was hardly acceptable to conservative OECD thinking. Yet the Interfutures background papers described a pattern which conformed with theoretical expectations. There was indeed serious over-production in many sectors.

It soon became clear to me that the depression would last until at least 1990. By 1984 I had come to appreciate that this particular depression would be of far greater duration than those in the past, since the global economy would not suffer the total collapse required for a new growth phase; the depression would continue into the next century. The forecasts have proved robust; more than a decade later unemployment remains high. The disappearance of unemployment so often forecast by official organizations such as the New Zealand Planning Council has failed to materialize.

My knowledge of the social sciences expanded throughout a learning period. An understanding of political forces and the wielding of power was particularly direct. Thus, for example, Interfutures stuck to the standard growth model. No matter that the limits to growth - ecologic, social and economic - were evident, or that the

increasing globalisation of economies was creating a potentially unstable over-large system which was harming the less powerful. Any report from the clubs of the powerful, including the OECD, will reflect their desires and perceptions.

The reaction to "The Limits to Growth" has been particularly forceful. Despite the many photographs from space showing a clearly finite planet earth, there has been a powerful effort to deny the message that continuing growth in human numbers and activities is threatening global systems. International business interests claim that there are connections between freedom and private enterprise, and insist that private enterprise can only be based on growth capitalism which demands ongoing profit from investment. By that argument a decent human existence can only occur if the wealthy continue to increase their wealth, for ever, by investment in a growing economy.

History teaches the opposite. Growth periods are often characterized by enormous social inequality, and political action is required if wealth is to be shared for the benefit of the general populace.

The existence of long-term economic cycles is based on historical evidence over the past couple of centuries - and historian Fernand Braudel has traced similar cycles even further back in time. Thus a deep knowledge of history is required of any interdisciplinary futures scholar. I have then moved on from science - mathematics, physics, ecology, demography - to a reading of history. A surprising amount of today's supposedly new experiences are found there. It is important to set futures research in that historical framework and to refute any over-imaginative chatter of the "future shock" variety which insists that everything is new and that the future can have no resemblance to the past.

One misconception that needs correcting is that the world is only newly connected. Certainly it is only in the past few centuries that the entire globe has been united by colonial and trading ties, but there have long been linkages across Eurasia from Western Europe to Japan. Migrations of peoples have brought down empires from

one end of this extensive land mass to the other. And events have followed similar paths over time; consider this comment on fifth century "Romania", the waning Roman Empire.

"Increasingly, the art of government became an aptitude for deploying force. The kings already rich in productive lands and in such things as coins, arms and jewels, which they augmented from time to time by the spoils of war, used their influence to consolidate their position and secure the loyalty of their subjects by making generous donations to church and nobility. Matters developed in roughly similar fashion in all the barbarian states. In time, however, a victorious king would find himself hoist with his own petard; the very aristocracy which, by his largesse, he had helped to greater power, grew ambitious, broke up into warring factions, and finally quarreled over the succession to the throne itself." (Wiet et al 1975, pages 78, 79)

Prosperity allowed secondary powers to grow until they were able to challenge the state itself. So it has been in our day. The social democratic governments of the west have built up infrastructures and assisted the growth of business. That business has now become trans-national and more powerful than the states themselves, and is seizing control of ever more of the economy as well as actively generating government policy.

There is always a struggle for power and class war. The 1970s and 1980s saw a struggle between the deep concerns of many scholars and the perceived needs of international finance. The outcome was never in doubt. One casualty in New Zealand has been the New Zealand Commission for the Future, which is no more.

When the New Right seized power in 1984 I found myself out in the cold. I had cut my ties with my previous scientific career and not only was I committed to futures research, but my studies had taken my thinking far from the new right ideology which then defined the conventional wisdom of the time.

While I have worked at a variety of jobs since then, futures research has become a spare-time activity. In order to express my concerns, I have had to publish myself the three books which I have written. They form a trilogy of analysis, hope and despair.

"Excess capital" (1989) describes how the gains of human progress have been misused. Instead of prosperous and sustainable steady developed economies the profit motive is forcing an ever-increasing spiral of human activity, which can only end in a general collapse.

A second book, "Rebuilding New Zealand" (1994), describes a path towards a sustainable society, with a set of policies which could lead to the rebuilding of a decent, prosperous and caring society.

Those policies are unfashionable and the collective action called for is no longer credible. I therefore took up the task of describing the probable future. As the work proceeded the scenario became increasingly grim. It is hard to "think the unthinkable" or to write of the future as the world continues down the path of international control and growth gone mad. Yet there is no effective challenger to the capture of power by a small rich elite which hides its collective enterprise behind the ideology of the free market. "Destroying New Zealand" tells why New Zealand will become a fascist dictatorship in the coming decades.

Such realism, and the inevitable pessimism, is also unfashionable in this era of "bread and circuses". The failure of any community of scholars to join forces and develop linkages between the physical and social sciences is seen in the form of modern "futures" efforts, certainly here in New Zealand. Professional analysis has been replaced by public relations exercises such as "futures festivals", with no clear aim other than a "celebration" of the direction that society is currently following. I must admit to being bewildered at the intent of these festivals and rather convinced that we should be joining in a wake for society rather than a frolic.

I have been caught up in the long-term developments which I have studied. That ideological shift which is now defining the future by its failure to recognize the impending crisis has also destroyed those few agencies which might have offered me employment.

It has so often been said that the world needs more general scholars. Any person in authority who feels like making any such claim should first pause and reflect on the future of any listener who might choose to take that advice. It is very difficult to follow an

interdisciplinary career, particularly for an independent-minded individual whose analysis might be challenging. Most jobs are controlled by people whose interest is in protecting the status quo and destroying criticism of their policies.

My mistake was to put all my eggs in the one basket. Potential futures scholars should be warned of the dangers of working in a field where the inevitable outcome of honest research will offend the powerful. They must first make a career in some accepted field, and then develop their interest and expertise from an established base.

Some of us took up the challenge of futures research because the world was in danger. Decades later it is clear that events are trending in exactly the wrong direction and disaster is inevitable; but no-one is listening. The last few centuries of "progress" and expansion resemble the similar period around 1100 to 1300 in Europe when the use of water power increased, agriculture thrived, cities and populations grew. The 21st century will in turn parallel the terrible 14th century (the "Distant Mirror" of Barbara Tuchman) when around one-third of Europe died of plague. I took up the challenge of futures research as a small contribution towards the spread of knowledge and development of an alternative. The effort had failed and the future is indeed bleak.

References

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