The History of Foresight: The Short Version

This is an extract from my PhD thesis that provides a summary overview of the history of foresight. Warning: it’s a long read, and links to books (if any) will earn me some money if you buy the book.

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Humans have used many ways to call on the future such as oracles, divination, prophesy, and palmistry (Milojević 2002; Godhe & Goode 2018). As Bell (2009, p. 2) writes: “Thinking about the future … is not new … In every known society, people have conceptions of time and the future, even though some of their conceptions appear diverse”. Andersson’s timeline of futures studies (2007) demonstrates how early oral and mystic approaches evolved over time to the point where thinking about the future was formalised as the field of Futures Studies in the post-World War II period. Histories of Western futures studies are numerous and include Moll (1996); Bell (2009); Masini (2006); Jemala (2010); Kuosa (2009, 2011); Seefried (2014); Son (2015); and Andersson (2018). Milojević (2002) notes that the modern iteration of thinking about the future is “firmly based within the Western intellectual tradition and has emerged from within the Western epistemological framework”, a constraint that did not break down until the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries (Sardar 1999). Common across these histories is viewing Futures Studies and Foresight (FSF) as evolving in stages, and Schultz (2016, p. 5–7) provides a succinct summary of the major ‘waves of futures thinking’ since ancient times:

1. Oral tradition – the “oral wave of shamans and mystics”;
2. Early written age – early macrohistorians outside Europe and early European writings about the future;
3. Extraction and enlightenment – a wave “deeply embedded in the idea of progress through science, technology and rationalism”;

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4. Systems and cybernetics – post World War II, when “grand scale planning and forecasting” saw the rise of systems science and futures studies, the first formal futures organisations and conferences and teaching futures in Europe and the USA; and

5. Complexity and emergence – the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries where “a sea change from the more technocratic and deterministic theories and approaches” of the last wave was marked by new approaches that saw the “melding of futures theory with integral philosophy” and models to “dig into the social and cultural substructures of changing human systems”.

In the fifth wave too, Schultz (2016, p. 7) identifies the rise of chaos and complexity theory as providing “enhanced understanding of the dynamics of intertwined human and planetary systems [providing] a paradigm of change as an emergent property of complex, adaptive, living systems, emergent but rarely predictable.” Engaging with complexity is now a primary FSF focus.

Andersson’s book *The Future of the World: Futurology, Futurists, and the Struggle for the Post-Cold War Imagination* (2018) provides a recent in-depth analysis of the emergence of the modern futures field, and it would be difficult to improve on her detailed analysis, which moves from the need for historians to remember the future, the future as a moral imperative, a very detailed discussion of the emergence of modern futures across the world, and an exploration of the works of futurists – all based in a frame of shifting ideologies and approaches as the world recovered from and splintered after World War II, when, as Magda McHale (1993, p. 55) indicated, “old problems needed urgent attention in this changed global environment.” What follows should then be viewed as a “potted history”, one shaped by my interpretation of what is a sizeable literature.

Many writers and thinkers have made significant contributions to the evolution of the modern futures field, particularly in the last two waves defined by Schultz. Bell (2001, p. 140), for example, devotes half a page to simply listing who he calls “exemplars of the futures field.” H.G. Wells (1932) and his call for professors of foresight is usually cited in any history, as is Flectheim’s (1945) coining of the word ‘futurology’ to define thinking about the future. The early work around ‘prospective’ of Bertrand de Jouvenel (2012), Hughes de Jouvenel (2004) and Berger (Courmand & Levy 1973) in France in the 1950s and 1960s introduced the concept of ‘building the future’, a philosophy based on seeing the future as “a realm of
freedom, power and will” (de Jouvenel 2004, p. 10). This is a period Bell (2009, p. 20) describes as “clearly an incubator for the modern futurist movement.” In the 1970s Polak’s defining of the importance of ‘the image of the future’ for societies in The Image of the Future (1973) made images and imaginations valid topics of investigation. McHale (1969, 1973), John McHale and Magda McHale (1976); Helmer (1972, 1975), Boucher (1977), Linstone (1977) and Elise Boulding (1979) among others, developed and reviewed futures approaches, methods and research for use in governments and organisations in this decade. Boulding’s (1979) concept of the 200-year present makes it clear that both what exists in the present has not always existed and so is not fixed, and the consequent critical importance of exploring different images of the future. Two seminal publications often cited from these times are Silent Spring (Carson 1962) and Limits to Growth (Meadows et al. 1972), both of which challenged existing beliefs and assumptions about how humans use the physical world, and invoke a futures perspective to make the case for change in the present; both are also considered to underpin the subsequent emergence of the environmental movement.

The 1970s and 1980s marked the origins and increasing use of scenario planning, an approach usually attributed to the work of Pierre Wack and his Shell colleagues in the 1970s, but General Electric also used scenario planning for future consumer markets in that decade (Millett 2017). Scenario planning as a strategic approach spread across organisations from that time and has been variously considered to be a theory (Chermack 2004, 2005; Derbyshire 2019), a methodology (Markley 2011; Kahane 2012; Millett 2017) and a method (Bishop, Hines & Collins 2007; Bowman et al. 2013). It is also an approach used beyond futures studies in organisational strategy development in general (Tibbs 1999; Godet 2000; Conway 2003; Lindgren & Bandhold 2009), and it has been adapted and revised to suit the practitioner and the context (Johansson, Lassbo & Nehls 2013; Cairns et al. 2017). Like FSF, scenario planning comes in two varieties, one that is quantitative in nature that uses modelling and forecasting, and the other that uses more interpretive and social constructionist approaches that is sometimes termed ‘scenario thinking’ and ‘scenario learning’ to disassociate the process from more formulaic strategic planning (Lüdeke 2013; Amer, Daim & Jetter 2013). The value of developing scenarios has been questioned (Slaughter 2002; Molitor 2009), and its dominance as a method is probably why claims are made that methods dominate the futures studies field at the expense of theory and methodology (Yeoman & Curry 2019; Curry 2020a). One critical contribution of this method, however, is that it
brought imagination into organisations as a legitimate activity, albeit disguised in a planning process.


The evolution of futures studies since World War II has followed a well-defined pattern: at each phase of its development, future studies has used the dominant relationship between Western and non-Western cultures to define itself and delineate its scope and areas of research … future studies is increasingly becoming an instrument for the marginalization of non-Western cultures from the future.

During the following years, FSF did move beyond its initial Western boundaries. Son (2015, p. 120) notes “the rise of worldwide discourse on global futures”, and Gidley (2016, p. 25) describes FSF now as “a transdisciplinary, transnational, and multisectoral field that includes thousands of academics and practitioners, many of whom operate globally.” The **first decades of the twenty-first century** saw what Schultz (2012, p. 7) calls “a sea change from the more technocratic and deterministic theories and approaches which had served it since the 1950s”. This was a major shift towards a more integral and inclusive stance in futures studies, with the rise of Integral Futures (Hayward 2008; Slaughter 1999a, 2008b, 2016; Voros 2008), participatory futures (van der Helm 2007; Rhisiart 2013; Nikolova 2014; Oteros-Rozas et al. 2015; Kelliher & Byrne 2015), anticipatory action learning (Stevenson 2002; Inayatullah 2006), experiential futures (Candy & Dunagan 2007; Candy et al. 2016; Cuhls & Daheim 2017), ‘gaming the future’ (McGonigal 2011; Candy 2015; Stein, Watson & Candy 2015), and a strengthening connection between futures studies and design thinking (Selin et al. 2015; Hines & Zindato 2016; Buehring & Liedtka 2018) – all of which have expanded access to futures work beyond professionals. As Schultz (2016, p. 7) writes: “The futures [sic] are now for everyone to envision.”
While FSF today may have conflicting terminology and is claimed by many to be a field in search of a theory, it is considered here to be an established field which Bell (2002, p. 237) suggested is less fragmented compared to other academic disciplines. There are professional associations (notably the World Futures Studies Federations and the Association of Professional Futurists), journals and conferences – all of which Abbott (1991) defines as indicators of professionalisation. There are many people working full-time who count themselves as ‘futurists’, irrespective of whether they are trained as professional futurists, academic futurists, or practitioners. There are numerous foresight methods (Slaughter 2002; Keenan 2007; Markley 2011; Farrington, Henson & Crews 2012; Popper 2013; Voros 2017a) that can be applied to multiple contexts, and the theoretical base of the field, including its underlying assumptions, continues to be articulated (Voros 2007; Karlsen, Øverland & Karlsen 2010; Öner 2010; Inayatullah 2012). Its knowledge claim is, broadly, how we use the future in the present to inform thinking, action and decision making (Slaughter 2001; Inayatullah 2002a; Dufva 2015; Kuosa 2017).

Governments at all levels seek to have ‘futures thinking’ included in their research and policy development (Conway & Stewart 2005; Draeger 2018) often in the guise of ‘evidence-based decision making’ required in funding proposals (Schultz 2006b; Habegger 2010), and corporate foresight facilitates the use of foresight approaches in organisations globally (Rohrbeck, Battistella & Huizingh 2015; ARUP 2017; Reed 2017). FSF is taught in universities as full award courses, short courses and individuals subjects (Slaughter 2008a; Hayward, Voros & Morrow 2012; Bengston 2018) – also one of the first steps in the professionalisation of a field. Academic disciplines claim an interest in the future too – for example, a body of sociological literature that is concerned with how people think about the future exists (Selin 2008; Bas 2010; Masini 2010; Adam 2014; Hammershoj 2017; Mandich 2019; Tutton 2019), but it more focused on claiming futures studies as a sociological activity (Bell & Mau 1973; Urry 2016) than exploring possible futures. That said, Bell and Mau’s The Sociology of the Future (1973) is notable for their coverage of images of the future, time, utopias, values, design and methodology – all common FSF topics – from a sociological perspective.

The field as a whole has been analysed at various times – for example, John and Magda McHale’s assessment of futures studies (1976); Homann and Moll’s review of Western futures organisations (Homann & Moll 1993); Helmer’s review of futures research (1999),
Slaughter’s State of Play in the Futures Field (Slaughter 2009), Dator’s review of women in the history of futures studies (1992) and Gidley and Ferguson’s (2015) history of women in Australian futures. The FSF literature that has been generated since World War II is substantial – it is sufficient to note here that the focus of that literature includes methods, theory, philosophy and internal critique, as well as the applications of futures approaches to an increasing number of fields.

This brief, selective historical summary cannot do justice to the people who contribute daily to the continuing evolution of FSF which has seen its increasing acceptance as a necessary approach across a wide range of fields. Sardar (2010a, p. 178), makes the critical point that the people who work in, teach and study FSF do, however, need to better understand its history in order to better contribute to it in the present:

As a subject of inquiry with a body of learned literature, recognisable knowledge base, and definable contour of concepts, methodologies, practices and processes, futures studies is now well over 50 years old ... But there seems to be little awareness of this history ...we do not even know what to call all those who take the study of alternative futures seriously: futurists, futurologist, prospectivists, foresight practitioners, even horizon scanners have common currency. Moreover, lack of appreciation of this history leads, not so infrequently, to reinventing the field.

Sardar’s comment is an indicator that FSF is a ‘broad church’, one that is home to a wide variety of approaches, beliefs, and practices. As Bell (2009, p. 67) writes: “the diversity of backgrounds of futurists may be a strength for a field that attempts to be holistic and integrative, to deal with … reality among things in order to inform human decision and action.” The field should probably not fear reinvention per se, since improving and updating knowledge and practice will keep it current, but it should perhaps pay attention to two other issues that are mentioned consistently in histories of the field – its terminology and its theory base – to inform that reinvention.

**Terminology Challenges**

FSF is a field that still grapples with exactly how to describe itself, with early discussions emerging in the 1970s (Amara 1974; McHale & McHale 1976; Boucher 1977). For example, Öner (2010, p. 1024) provides a list of FSF terms, pointing out a lack of consistency in usage
that leads him to suggest that “the time has come for Futures Studies and Foresight to focus on the definitions of the concepts used in the field”, a task attempted by van der Helm (2013, p. 24) who considered more work needed to be done on “defining the future”. Sardar (2010, p. 7) points out that:

The terms we use to describe the study of alternative futures is important. Disciplines and discourses do not emerge from a vacuum but have a history and a cultural context; and their names can hide as much as they reveal.

Terms such as futurology, futurism, prospective, and prognostics have been used (Andersson 2018). Calling futures studies a ‘field’ has been questioned (Marien 2002, 2010). Foresight is used in a variety of ways – as a cognitive capacity (Hayward 2005a; Ehresmann 2013; Rhisiart, Miller & Brooks 2015), as practice (Giaoutzi & Sapio 2013) and as method (Krawczyk & Slaughter 2010; Popper 2013; Curry 2015a). ‘Futures research’ is also used in opposition to ‘futures studies’, the former taking a more quantitative or ‘rigorous’ position, while the latter is more qualitative in nature (Slaughter 1982). Inayatullah (1993, p. 236) saw this division as “two modes of knowledge – the technical concerned with predicting the future and the humanist concerned with developing a good society [italics in original].” Miller (2018, p. 55) sees the current discourse as defined by forecasting – “futures generated by closed anticipatory assumptions” – and foresight – futures invented by combining open and closed anticipatory assumptions.” Gidley (2016) calls the division a “bifurcation” of the field into the more constructionist/interpretive futures studies approaches and positivist futures research, which neatly reflects the paradigm wars of the social sciences (Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Given 2017). Poli (2013) notes “while both positions have something to offer … they are both unilateral and (in their own way) dogmatic”, suggesting that futures thinking and practice should seek to remain open, rather than conform to any existing disciplinary definitions (Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Adams & Roulston 2006; Given 2017). Slaughter (1993, p. 292) seems to concur with the open stance when he describes ‘futures movements’ as an addition to future studies and futures research: movements generated by people outside the field who collaboratively create movements “such as the women’s movement, the peace movement and the environmental movement, as well as many NGOs [non-governmental organisations] … the most successful of these movements are among the main agents of change.” This stance also aligns with the third Habermas interest: “the human emancipatory
interest; or, simply, the fundamental interest of all persons in freedom, self-constitution and unconstrained conditions of life” (Slaughter 1998, p. 5).

Most recently, ‘anticipation’ has entered the language of FSF, not from within the field, but from a wider movement to establish anticipation as a scientific discipline (Poli 2009, 2017; Aaltonen 2010; Miller, Poli & Rossel 2013; Sharpe & Hodgson 2017; Voros 2017a; Miller 2018). A concept researched in many disciplines from biology to psychology to neuroscience, Miller, Poli and Rossel (2013, p. 3) define anticipation as: “All efforts to ‘know the future’ in the sense of thinking about and ‘using the future’ … the future is incorporated into all phenomena, conscious or unconscious, physical or ideational, as anticipation.” Notably, anticipation is positioned as “a combination of capacities that allow human beings to consider and evaluate the present in the light of the way they imagine the future [and is] a key contributor to the human activity of decision making” (p. 53), which is not unlike the language and definitions used to describe FSF. Miller (2018) has developed a framework for developing ‘futures literacy’ that potentially incorporates FSF as a specialised form of anticipation – but, as an emergent discipline, the impact of anticipation on FSF is not yet clear. An initial reaction suggests that the differences between the two approaches may be fewer than their similarities (Curry 2016). Indeed, preferences for different terminology to define what it is futurists do and how they do it may be usefully considered to be a fundamental characteristic of the field – particularly since language use is usually culturally, temporally and context determined (Elder-Vass 2012; Alvares & Faruqi 2014; Putnam & Banghart 2017), especially in government or corporate sectors, where ‘seriousness’ is mandatory.

In Search of Theory

FSF has been criticised for being a practice in search of a theory (Wildman and Inayatullah 2008; Piirainen & Gonzalez 2015; Ahlqvist & Rhisiart 2015; Chermack 2005; Kurki 2019) that lacks attention to its ontological base (Patomäki 2006; Bergman, Karlsson & Axelsson 2010; Poli 2011; Øverland 2013), and that is dominated by the use of methods, particularly what Slaughter (2009, pp 11-12) terms “linear” and “systemic” methods. Bell (2009, p. 87) notes that “futurists have been prolific in constructing, using and criticizing methods of futures research … [but] have accomplished much less in stating the philosophical bases of
their assertions about possible, probable and preferable futures.” Alonso-Concheiro (2015, p. 332) asserts that:

there is a great hole in terms of theory in the middle of our surrounding current practices of futures studies. Our fundamental questions are so problematic that we may even ask ourselves if we are currently in a position to build a truly solid theoretical foundation for the futures field.

Alonso-Concheiro is rightly concerned with the clarity of futures concepts and knowledge development, but his critique of theory development is perhaps extreme since significant work has appeared in the last two decades (Adam & Groves 2007, 2011; Walton 2008; Inayatullah 2010b; Poli 2010, 2015; Miller 2018) that is defining the theoretical base of futures studies – most of which identify a number of common concepts:

- **layers**: reality is viewed as layered, consisting of deeper structures that shape what is consider ‘real’ (Inayatullah 2002a; Voros 2005, 2006);

- **foresight**: the capacity to think about – to *perceive* – the future in a systematic way to imagine and engage with alternative futures *and* to then take action in the present (Voros 2003; Amsteus 2008; Ahvenharju, Minkkinen & Lalot 2018);

- **uncertainty**: lack of knowledge about particular topics that, in a dynamic external environment, generate uncertain outcomes over time, often generating ambiguity and anxiety about the future (Michael 1993; van Dorsser et. al. 2018; Schoemaker 2019); and

- **complexity**: considered in terms of the complexity of social change generated by intersecting shifts across a range of domains that is understood to some degree, and from unforeseeable change and novelty (North 2013; Miller 2018; Dufva & Dufva 2018; Schoemaker 2019; Tuomi 2019).

The search for theory is reflective of the desire for ‘the future’ to be recognised as a valid area of study and work in the present (Voros 2007) and, in the case of current work on anticipation, to gain explicit recognition as a scientific discipline (Miller 2018). The theory base for FSF *is* being constructed, and the imperative to give that base some consistency across FSF research and practice may actually be a *more* urgent concern than simply trying to define a consistent terminology. Indeed, the literature reviewed suggests that this theory base should maintain the field’s generally accepted ‘open’ stance while also delineating clearly.
what it adds to existing research theory and practice beyond futures studies (Masini 1997; Lo Presti 2010).

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