

3. WHOSE FUTURES?

➤ LECTURE NOTES

A western endeavour

- The social construction of futures studies
- A rich world view of the future

Non-western perspectives

- A history of unequal power relationships
- A critique of western preoccupations

Feminist perspectives

- A history of male dominance of the field
- Feminist perspectives on futures studies

➤ KEY READING

- Milojevic, I. (2008) Women and alternative futures ~ www.metafuture.org/articlesbyivana.htm
- Inayatullah, S. (2007) Futures Studies in Asia ~ <http://www.metafuture.org/Articles/futures-studies-asia.htm>

➤ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Is futures studies largely western in its outlook?
- Is futures studies largely a masculinist endeavour?

➤ LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Understanding of the importance of 'voice'
- Ability to critically explore a range of 'voices'

LECTURE NOTES

1. A WESTERN ENDEAVOUR

Socially constructed

Suppose this exploration of futures studies was to end at this point. If that were the case whose picture would one have of the field? In the 1990s attention was drawn to the fact that much of the writing and research in futures studies tended to come from the richer areas of the world, from Europe, North America, Australia, Japan (Sardar,1999).

What it is vital to recall is that futures studies, like any other area of human endeavour, is a social and cultural construct, i.e. what it claims to be cannot be separated from the values of those who make the claim. Knowledge is thus never neutral and 'facts' are always questionable. Everything that humans have ever done and do is underpinned by conscious and unconscious value assumptions about what is good/bad, right/wrong, true/untrue, best/worst, real/unreal.

The picture we have of futures studies so far is of a vital field of endeavour, but it is would be a partial view of the world if one only considered the views of white, male, middle class futurists or western academics.

2. NON-WESTERN PERSPECTIVES

The problem

Why would it be a problem if futures studies was largely a western endeavour? To answer this question we need to briefly recall the unequal relationship between the west (Europe and North America) and the rest of the world over the last 500 years. Columbus did not 'discover' America in 1493 - it was a continent with a long and often cultured history of its own. What Spain and Portugal did to the 'New World' turned out to be an act of genocide against indigenous people later taken up by other European settlers and continued in different ways into the 20th century. European countries, especially Britain, exploited Africa through the slave trade and subjugated the populations of countries such as India and Australia, which became subsumed into the British Empire. This was achieved largely as a result of 19th century military superiority and was based on the belief then that all non-Europeans were inherently inferior to Europeans.

Non-western colonised countries became underdeveloped due to the unequal economic exchange that dominated their relationships with imperial powers. In 1750 per capita GNP was approximately the same in both developed and underdeveloped countries. By 1930 the ratio was 4:1 in favour of developed countries and is now 8:1. Western materialism and consumerism have become for many the yardstick by which to measure development and, as a result, people in the west often find it difficult to imagine a world substantially different from their own. The relationship between the west and non-west has not just been one of economic dependence but also one in which the west still has the power to define the meaning of progress and democracy in its own terms. The very expressions west and non-west in themselves suggest both an 'in' and an 'out' group.

Since futures studies originated as a western endeavour there is always the danger that, as with many other fields, it could be used as yet another tool for marginalising non-western cultures and perspectives. Up until the 1990s futures studies was often marked by the exclusion of non-western perspectives on the future and indeed the *Encyclopaedia of the Future*, from the USA, specifically decided to exclude non-western references to the future.

The future as fantasy

Writers such as Sardar (1996, 1999) and Kapoor (2001) have made trenchant critiques of futures studies in the light of the above. In his paper 'Future as fantasy: forgetting the flaws' Rakesh Kapoor looks critically at 'the practice and relevance of futures studies, from the point of view of the large poor and marginalised sections of humanity.' His argument is set out in the form of a number of propositions which include the following.

Futures studies is over-burdened, paradoxically, with a modernising past associated with the western technological civilisation and is, consequently, dominated by instrumental rationality, while neglecting other worldviews and cultural perspectives. It has thus largely revolved around western, technology-orientated, materialistic concerns and has made insufficient attempts to understand the world and the future from other perspectives.

Futures studies 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.

Futures 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.

It is still too easy for westerners to work out of cultural assumptions which they take as the unquestioned norm for the world. NB. In his critique Kapoor uses the term 'futures studies' to also embrace what Slaughter (see Session 3) calls 'futures research' and its uses in business and industry. From a non-western perspective futures studies can thus still seem to have little to offer the 'large mass of humanity'.

3. FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

The problem

Some useful definitions ~ *sexism*: discrimination based on gender, most often against women; *feminism*: advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes; *patriarchy*: male dominance and control of society; *masculinist*: any view or activity which ascribes higher value to male ways of being.

But what does gender have to do with futures studies? Briefly put, it is that since many of the key figures in futures studies are men they often take a typically male view of futures which is then taken as the norm. Western society has been patriarchal for some 5000 years, although there is archaeological evidence to show that prior to this men and women were valued and treated more equally. Patriarchy has existed for so long that it seems normal to most people, but it has increasingly been challenged, as the gains made by the women's from the 1970s onwards have shown.

Futurist Eleonora Masini (1987) writes:

Women are better adapted for the change from the industrial society to a new society, because women are not the carriers of the values of the preceding industrial society. As they were not the builders of the future in the preceding society, they may become the builders of the future in a different society. As they were invisible in the industrial society, women may become visible and constructive in a post-industrial society.

Feminists have thus often been suspicious of futures studies as yet another masculinist project which treats women as invisible or as subsumed under male concerns which, of course, amounts to the same thing.

Differing visions

One of the common features of much feminist fiction has been the questioning of existing gender relationships, i.e. making the everyday 'problematic.' What would society look like if gender relations were more equal? Themes such as these have also been explored by feminist science fiction writers and others interested in feminist utopias.

Over several decades, an increasing number of women have made vital contributions to futures studies. They include Eleonora Masini, one of the founders of futures studies (Stevenson, 2006), Elise Boulding (1994) with her work on imaging the future and Hazel Henderson's (2010) exploration of alternative economic indicators. More recent work by Ivana Milojevic (2008b) and others has also contributed significantly to a deeper understanding of feminist perspectives on the future. In her contribution to the *International Encyclopedia of Women* (2000) Milojevic writes:

The quest for a more balanced study of the future is being driven by futurists who are far less committed to corporatist and scientific interests and far more sympathetic to multicultural concerns as to who is likely to be excluded if a certain future comes about. There is thus a slow but significant shift from futures studies as a management tool to control the future towards futures studies as a framework for social emancipation ... Still, futures studies remains largely male dominated in terms of practitioners and in terms of epistemological assumptions that underlie theory, methodology and content ...

Women's visions of the future are usually somewhat different to those of men. While both genders are concerned with the betterment of humankind in the future, most men tend to concentrate on 'grand' historical analyses and issues, concentrating especially on realist discussions of emerging political powers as well as new technologies ... Most women futurists do not reject new technologies, nor do they refuse to acknowledge the obvious impact of technology on the lives of present and future generations. But the focus is often rather on human relationships and is more inclusive of the perspective of the powerless ...

Many other women as well imagine preferable futures...through feminist fiction and through global grassroots movements. These preferable futures are usually along the lines of decentralized, non-hierarchical, ecologically and economically sustainable societies where communal life, family life, parenting and education are highly valued, institutions are human-scaled and diversity is celebrated.

As should be clear from the above the work of women futurists is vital to any notion of futures studies or futures education. And, as work in schools has shown, children's views of the future are already marked by such gender differences at an early age (see session 7). The purpose of this session has been to raise questions about authority and voice in futures studies. It is all too easy, often unknowingly, to follow the agendas of the most powerful groups in society. In a very real sense it is they – politicians, big business, technocrats, the military - who 'colonise' the future. This session has particularly drawn attention to how this can operate in relation to the historical dominance of a) western and b) patriarchal perspectives.

REFERENCES & KEY READING (*)

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(*) Sardar, Z. (2005) Other futures: non-western cultures in futures studies, *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*, CD-ROM, Vol. 1, Pt 4, Brisbane: Foresight International

Sardar, Z. (1999) *Rescuing All Our Futures: The Future of Futures Studies*, Westport, CT: Praeger

(*) Stevenson, T. (2006) Eleonora Masini: Nurturing visions of the future. Available at: www.tonystevenson.org/masini.pdf

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Whether you are reading this for your own interest, sharing this material with others or using it as an aid to your teaching this session raises questions about the social construction of futures studies. There are two main questions for discussion. After checking 'Discussion skills in groups' jot down your response to the following questions:

1. In what ways do you think futures studies is still largely western in its outlook?
2. In what ways do you think futures studies could still be a masculinist endeavour?

After discussing each question (it is useful to agree in advance how long to spend on each) list on a flipchart the main responses arising in the group. What similarities are there, what differences? What might be the possible origins of these? What further reading might be useful?