

Book reviews

Two fine additions to the futures literature

Book Details: *The Future: A Very Short Introduction*,

Jennifer M. Gidley

2017

164 pp.

Oxford University Press

Book Details: *What is the Future?*,

John Urry

2016

226 pp.

Polity Press

Cambridge

Review DOI

10.1108/FS-08-2018-098

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a brief period when new modes of futures engagement emerged within several mainly Western societies. They helped to support various initiatives, projects and a rich literature that opened out alternative views of social trajectories, of dreams and goals that could be explored. Within a very few years, however, many of these were extinguished, set aside and forgotten. Of the many reasons for this the most central is arguably the way that the rich and powerful were able to ensure that their own very particular vision of the future took precedence above all others. The rise of neoliberalism, as it came to be called, launched new world-spanning organisations, installed a powerful new code of behaviour, imposed a range of widely accepted economic prescriptions and insisted on a rigorously exclusive set of values that quickly became dominant. Many promising initiatives disappeared.

Half a century later, however, it is evident that the neoliberal future is not merely unsustainable and it now represents a classic “failed future”. In other words, the key trends that define neoliberalism – growing inequality, conflict, resource depletion, a sixth extinction, emerging waves of high-tech devoted to ambiguous or openly dangerous ends and finally, the slow

but steady increase of global temperatures – show that neoliberalism became its very own nemesis. Moving from the global to a societal scale what other evidence is there for such a view? We only need to recall what happened to various future-oriented organisations such as the Congressional Clearinghouse on the Future, the Office of Technology Assessment in the USA and the Commission for the Future in Australia, each of which was undermined by right-wing politicians committed to “smaller government”. Nor should we forget the continuing uphill battle to establish futures in education as a core component within school and university systems. Anyone who has been involved in such efforts will have seen the same process repeated again and again. In each case, the results clearly demonstrate highly positive outcomes. Yet even now, as global upheavals creep ever closer, such programmes remain vulnerable and rare.

During these decades, academia has been a passive and largely unwilling partner. Yet organisations like the World Future Society, the World Futures Studies Federation and, more recently, the Association of Professional Futurists, along with a broad and very diverse field of practitioners continued to work and evolve their field of enquiry and practice. At all times, a small, but widely distributed, number of scholars and practitioners have moved things forward regardless of obstructions. The two authors whose books are reviewed here are both members of that select group who have worked for the further development and application of futures studies. It is not an easy path and, thus far, the rewards have been few and far between.

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It should also be noted that books about “the future” clearly present writers with major challenges, as the subject appears intangible, existing only as subtle traces within human minds. The future, by definition, cannot be experienced directly, but only through images, thoughts, feelings and the multiple ways these are subsequently expressed in the outer world. It begins, therefore, as an essentially interior phenomenon. Hence, studying “the future” cannot be divorced from how human beings think, perceive and act. Viewed in these terms, it is regrettable that in our time forward thinking is most commonly associated with entertainment and high-tech innovation.

Thankfully Gidley avoids all such traps with ease. In fact, one of the strengths of her deceptively small-scale book is how it begins with Jean Gebser’s account of “structures of consciousness” over centuries and ends with a concise account of the “grand global challenges” facing our species. As such, it is neither a demanding review of esoteric concepts nor an idle stroll through popular territory. It is something else entirely – a thoroughly researched and beautifully expressed invitation to look deeper at this fascinating field of enquiry. The first words of the introduction give some hint of what is to follow: “the future we face today is one that threatens our very existence as a species”. In a novel such an opening would qualify as an effective “narrative hook”. But the reader does not have long to wait before a hint of resolution appears. Turning the page reveals the view that “as a species we have never been more conscious, more globally connected, more capable of radical positive change than we are today”. So there it is – at the very least the future can be seen as a domain of threat and of promise. What anyone makes of it depends on how humans operate, how they choose to care (or

not) and what, exactly, they are motivated to do about a world spinning out of control.

The theme of chapter one is “three thousand years of futures” which is an inspired choice, as it grounds the book in lived historical experience. So one could hardly argue that the work lacked context. It also provides the beginning of a language for making futures accessible in part through the varying structures of consciousness noted above. The following chapter – futures multiplied – draws on a variety of sources to show how during the 1960s futures enquiry moved steadily away from empirical and extrapolative concerns towards more pluralistic approaches consistent with developments in the social sciences. This provides far greater meaning and explanatory power to notions of alternatives in general and alternative futures in particular. Futures enquiry became more democratic and global.

It is very much to the credit of the author that Chapter 3 on the “evolving scholarship of futures studies” covers a lot of ground without sacrificing a certain necessary degree of depth. The main device used is to show the evolution of the field from “critical -” to “cultural -” to “participatory -” and then finally to “integral futures”. This is entirely appropriate, as it both reflects more recent developments to futures *per se* as well as some of the “layers” or approaches within futures work. That accomplished the book turns to what is ironically termed “crystal balls, flying cars and robots”. Such “pop futures” icons are firmly put in their place and a refreshingly brief but effective critique advanced of the “transhumanist” fallacy – i.e. that humans could one day merge with their machines. To this reviewer, the author is on firm ground when insisting that the lethal combination of arrogance and hubris is nothing if

not dehumanising. Similarly, she adds that “from the perspective of psychology of intelligence the term artificial intelligence is an oxymoron”. A quote from McLuhan that must have passed me unnoticed some years ago had real impact – namely, that “every media extension of man is an amputation”. Play that as you will, but it is one of those rare insights worth reflecting on, as it challenges the narrow and vastly overconfident views of those high-tech innovators who unthinkingly saturate human life and culture with devices that do exactly that.

The next theme is the conflict or tension between “technotopian” and “human-centred futures”, and here, you can sense that the author is on the home straight, so to speak. It is a brief chapter, but it clearly draws on the author’s own philosophical commitments and her impressive body of work. It touches on one of the great “secrets” or truths of advanced futures enquiry – when performed well, it leads decisively away from ego and despair towards genuinely positive and empowering outlooks. For example: “when all of this research is taken together it indicates that we humans are already becoming capable of far greater powers of mind, emotion, body and spirit than previously imagined”. This liberating view sets the scene for the final chapter which summarises both the great global challenges of our time and the equally broad range of global future alternatives that represent a collective “tool kit” of possible responses. It was also heartening to see in the conclusion a clear recognition that some of the most recent developments in futures enquiry are, in the author’s view, up to the task of dealing with climate change, as the latter qualifies as among the most critically challenging and urgent issues facing us. It is well researched, concise and lucidly written. This

excellent book also contains a useful guide to further reading and websites as well as a handy index.

It follows from the above that futures studies has long been a paradoxical enterprise that has often made it vulnerable to misunderstanding and misuse. From time to time, however, a work appears that freshly reinterprets the current “state of play” for wider audiences, thereby helping promoting wider understanding and greater traction. H.G. Wells, Alvin Toffler and Bertrand de Jouvenel all achieved something like this in their own time and place. Now John Urry has provided us with a further welcome example. It is to some extent a consequence of, and development from, his earlier work on *Societies beyond oil* with its compelling subtitle – *Oil dregs and social futures* (Urry, 2013). It is worth quoting from the blurb of this earlier book in which he is said to show:

[...] how the twentieth century created a mirage of unlimited future growth that masked its limits. He considers the nature of an oil-dependent world facing energy descent and what lessons can be learnt from past energy-constrained societies. With no large-scale plan B to energise and mobilise societies, Urry assesses the likelihood of some very different futures for this century. (Urry, 2013, back cover)

In the subsequent book, he articulates a key concern that many others, including myself, have also expressed, namely, that “futures are incredibly contested, saturated with conflicting social interests”. His focus, therefore, is to “mainstream” and “democratise” futures. He is interested in where the power to influence futures originates and therefore rejects any notion that the future is “empty”. Viewing it as such “makes it ready for exploitation since those in the future cannot get their own back for the future world they will inherit”. So it almost goes without

saying that this book does not hesitate to challenge key aspects of the status quo. For example, “social futures problematise both autonomous markets and the march of technology”.

The first section deals with a fairly conventional “brief history of the future” showing how it has been interpreted and used over centuries, as well as a familiar range of futures-related literature from the past couple of hundred years. Then, after paying close attention to several Dystopian works, he proceeds directly to summarise the sources of what he calls the “new catastrophism”. He sees this partly as a consequence of impossible commitments to unending economic growth, the consequences post-2001 military and political upheavals and new waves of Dystopian products in literature, film and related sources. Perspectives and theories regarding social collapse are also discussed along with a fascinating section on what he calls “catastrophic cascades”. These relate to the series of “well-known systemic risks that various texts show catastrophically reverberating against each other in this century”. Taken together, these generate “much systemic instability”. To his credit, however, Urry completes this section with a warning about the dangers of catastrophism.

Part 2 takes up the issue of “complex systems and the future”. In some ways, it can be viewed as the core of the book, as it mediates productively between Urry’s long-standing commitments to understanding social phenomena with an equally deep appreciation of the core concerns of futures studies. Time, complexity, systems and networks all receive careful attention *en route* to discussions about what innovation and progress may mean in this new and unstable context. A section on methods starts by admitting that some of them have

themselves “been turned into commodities that are bought, sold and circulated”. It is significant in this context that the only “mainstream” methods considered here are “scenarios” and “extrapolation”. Clearly for this writer, techniques *per se* come second to questions of value and meaning. These are explored by way of “learning from past visions of the future”, “studying failed futures”, “developing dystopic thought” (not Dystopian) and the uses of Utopias. All, he rightly argues, are “performative”. That is, affect what subsequently emerges into practice. Part 3 then uses simple but effective scenario methods to explore alternative futures for fabrication (formerly manufacturing) transport within high-density cities and, finally, climate change. In each case, four futures are briefly, but effectively, portrayed both in terms of key features and cameos of what life would be like under various circumstances. These all showed that the author was well versed in practising and workshopping this key futures method. By applying some of the insights from earlier sections in this very effective way, this section of the book takes on a certain human, lived quality.

The conclusion summarises key points and, in particular, how what the author calls “powerful futures” are “almost literally owned by private interests, rather than shared across members of society”. It follows that “power should be viewed as significantly a matter of uneven future-making”. One can only hope that other social theorists will pick up and respond to this idea as valuable work in progress. In common with other futures writers, the author seeks to “reclaim” and “mainstream” the terrain of futures studies. As Wendell Bell and others pointed out some years ago, the latter do need to be fully integrated within the social sciences. In the final paragraphs,

the author brings it all together in a very effective closing statement. He writes:

Given long-term processes in much of social life, anticipating futures is absolutely essential. And once one is undertaking futures thinking, then public bodies are central to that process. Indeed, they are often the key coordinator of the future-making process. So I suggest that futures thinking is a major way of bringing the

state and civil society back in from the cold, especially if the focus is upon social and not just technological futures. (Urry, 2013, p. 191)

Taken together, these two works provide a first-rate introduction to, and overview of, futures studies as a vital and evolving domain of enquiry and action. As such, they will be of significant value not only to help equip newcomers but also to inspire seasoned scholars and

practitioners. All will appreciate the freshness and relevance of these fine additions to the literature.

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Reference

Urry, J. (2013), *Societies beyond Oil: Oil Dregs and Social Futures*, Zed Books, London.

Supply chain finance and blockchain technology – the case of reverse securitisation

By Hofmann Erik, Strewe, Urs Magnus, Bosia and Nicola
Review DOI
10.1108/FS-08-2018-099

The blockchain technology (BCT) promises to change the way individuals and corporations exchange value and information over the internet, and hence is perfectly positioned to enable new levels of collaboration among actors along international supply chains. The book thematises how the BCT can facilitate supply chain finance (SCF) programmes, as the authors identify SCF as the next frontier of financial services to improve the supply chain cycle. Most services are offered mainly by financial institutions, and blockchain might hold the key for cheaper forms of financing, liquidity generation and improving working capital. Optimising cash flows throughout the supply chain is a key topic for corporate decision makers, as many key performance indicators actually target working capital. BCT can take the role of a facilitator to accelerate the cash flow throughout the supply chain.

The book comes at the right time. In recent times, fintech companies have turned into hotspots of disruptive innovation. Technology firms partner with logistic service providers, such as IBM and Maersk to digitise the global, cross-border supply chain. A blockchain platform for SCF might

soon emerge, providing access to more efficient finance solutions.

To introduce the reader to the subject, the book provides a brief literature review on the topics of BCT and SCF. As these topics are still fairly new, the available research that combines SCF and BCT is still limited. The book provides a good introduction to the SCF, different financial solutions and contracts, such as reverse securitisation, buyer-led SCF, dynamic discounting, reverse factoring, as well as approved payables financing. These concepts are then analysed through the liquidity they provide, key drivers including firms of different sizes and the risks involved. Subsequently, the book gives an overview of how the BCT works and provides insights into technical aspects. Many of the activities around SCF are traditionally done manually and are hence very costly. Such tasks include compliance checks by comparing different paper-based trade finance documents. After having introduced the reader to the financial solutions, barriers for technologies are discussed and possible blockchain-driven supply chain models to achieve lower overall costs of financing are presented. After the analysis, the authors discuss the practical implication of previously analysed