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**Fifty Years of Futures Fragmentation:
From WFS/CAFS to WAAS/CACOR and SDGs/S&S Guide**

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Abstract

Have futures-thinking and futures studies made any difference over the past decades? My answer is “generally no,” perhaps with a few exceptions for a few individuals, organizations, and/or nations. The reason is three-fold:

- 1) Futures-thinking is not a discipline or a field: a futurist is simply anyone who says that he or she is a futurist or is seen as such.
- 2) The great majority of futures-thinking is by non-futurists, without using the “f-word” (e.g., IPCC).
- 3) There are many ways and words to describe futures-thinking. The result is many people writing and thinking about trends and futures in different ways, for better and worse, increasingly in a variety of media.

Considerable fragmentation was apparent in the World Future Society/CAFS era (1966-1980), and, arguably, even more today. However, now, in a time of multiple crises and great uncertainty, there is a clear transition from descriptive futures (what is probable and possible) to prescriptive futures (what is preferable). To illustrate, a selective autobiography follows:

- 1) The Great Futures Vogue (1965-1980).
- 2) The Slow Decline of Descriptive Futures (1980-2012).
- 3) The Age of Uncertain Sustainability (2012 to Present).

Part One: The Great Futures Vogue (1965-1980)

1965 I left Berkeley to learn about “What’s Happening” through an interdisciplinary social science PhD at the Syracuse University Maxwell

School. Luckily, I got to study under Bertram Gross, a leader in social indicators and systems thinking (e.g., president of Society for General Systems Research in 1970), and best-known for his popularized book, *Friendly Fascism: The New Face of Power in America* (1980).

1968 As I started my dissertation (a macro-system view of education, assembling a wide variety of indicators), I moved to the newly-established Education Policy Research Center (EPRC) at Syracuse (companion to another EPRC at Stanford led by widely-acknowledged futurist Willis Harman) “to think about the future and its implications for education.” Soon after, I received a note from Ed Cornish inviting me to join the fledgling World Future Society that he was leading.

1969 Prompted by an Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) request to EPRC, I published my first bibliography of futures literature, thus becoming the leading bibliographer of futures (no competition) and a “futures-watcher.” Collaboration followed with Hugh Stevenson in London, first president of Canadian Association for Futures Studies (CAFS).

1970 I published *The Basic Long-Term Multifold Trend in Education* in *The Futurist*, inspired by Herman Kahn’s BLTMT for society at large in his well-known 1967 book *The Year 2000* (which had no mention of climate change or the environment.) CACOR started.

1971 I published a fanciful scenario in a special issue of *Futures* journal on *Discovery and Decline of the Ignorant Society*, where learning needs outdistance attainments. This simple concept is more important now than ever. More on this later.

1972-1974 EPRC funding was reduced and there was a redirection of purpose away from “Great Society”/futures openness. I received support from the World Institute in NYC, publisher of *Fields Within Fields*.

1976 I self-published *Societal Directions and Alternatives: A Critical Guide to the Literature*, with critical abstracts of nearly 1,000 items, mostly books. My primary motivation for preparation was fascination with the abundance of societal labels, arranged in three indexes:

- 81 titles for our Present Society, such as *The Knowledge Society* (Peter Drucker), *The Affluent Society* (Galbraith), *The Unprepared Society* (Don Michael), *Spaceship Earth* (Barbara Ward, Bucky Fuller, K. Boulding), *The Entropy State* (Hazel Henderson), *A Dinosaur Society* (Stafford Beer), and *One-Dimensional Society* (Marcuse). All are still relevant!
- 63 theories of stage transition: *Industrialism to Super-Industrialism* (Toffler), *Industrial to Post-Industrial* (D. Bell), *Mechanical Age to Electric Age* (McLuhan, 1964), *Industrial Era to Communications Era* (Theobald, 1972), *Rational Age to Spiritual Age* (Sri Aurobindo, 1949), *Childhood of Humanity to Manhood of Humanity* (Korsybski, 1921). All are largely not relevant and forgotten!
- 206 titles on alternative societies: *Post-Service Society* (Gross), *Mature Society* (Gabor), *Steady-State Economy* (Daly), *Ecotopia* (E. Callenbach), *Planetary Society* (McHale), *Global Homeostasis* (Laszlo), *Convivial Society* (Illich), *Humanistic Capitalism* (Harman), *Learning Society* (Hutchins), *Self-Renewing Society* (John Gardner), and *Classical Liberalism* (Friedrich Hayek). “Sustainability” was not yet used!

For remaining fans of the Club of Rome’s 1972 book on *Limits to Growth*, there were many other books in the same period warning of environmental issues, e.g., *The Condition of Man* (Lewis Mumford, 1944), *Road to Survival* (William Vogt, 1948), *Resources and the American Dream: A Theory of the Limit of Growth* (Samuel H. Ordway, 1953), *The Limits of the Earth* (Fairfield Osborn, 1953), *Only One Earth* (Barbara Ward and Rene Dubos, 1972), *Who Speaks for Earth* (Maurice Strong, ed., 1973), *A Blueprint for Survival* (Edward Goldsmith et al., 1972). The success of *Limits to Growth*, in my view, was due to using a computer model and sponsorship by a mysterious Club of Rome. The weakness, in retrospect, was focus on exponential population growth (a concave population curve) instead of the reality of

convex growth (currently expected by the UN to be 9.7 B people in 2050, 22% up from 8.0 B in 2022, and peaking at 10.4b in the 2080s).

1977 and 1979 Successful CAFS meetings in Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

1979 *Future Survey* begun, published monthly by WFS for 30 years, with > 20,000 abstracts. It has never been digitized. Peak WFS membership was just short of 60,000 people.

1980 Successful WFS and CAFS meeting in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, but both organizations lost money.

In sum, no book or even an article has yet to be written about this exuberant period of futures thinking—and fragmentation!

Part Two: The Slow Decline of Descriptive Futures (1980-2012)

c.1985 End of CAFS.

c.1990 Founding of HOLIS: The Society for a Sustainable Future by myself, Lester Milbrath, Keith Wilde, and Nicole Morgan. Meetings in Alexandria (VA, USA), San Francisco Bay area (CA, USA), Ottawa (ON, Canada), and the Adirondacks (USA). Ended c.1997.

1994 Publication of *Why Future Generations Now?* by the Institute for the Integrated Study of Future Generations. Inspired by the 1992 Earth Summit and by a small meeting in Toronto (c. 1993) financed by Kim Tae-Chang (sp?). Essays by Wendell Bell, Rick Slaughter, and Allen Tough of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). “Future Generations” finally got on to the UN Secretary General’s 2021 Agenda, 27 years later! [Also see 2022.]

1996 Publication of *Encyclopedia of the Future* (1996). I served as Advisory Editor. Example of non-futurist contribution: Mal Ring on Dentistry.

2002 Publication of my paper *Futures Studies in the 21st Century: A Reality-Based View* in *Futures* 34:3/4, April-May 2002, 261-281). Guest editor Rick Slaughter called it “downbeat” in his intro; Wendell Bell called it “unwarranted negativity.” I made a rejoinder to Bell (*Futures* 34, 449-456).

In this long critique, I described “Seven Disabling Myths”:

1. Future Studies (FS) is a field or a discipline. It is still used—(see Wikipedia entry by APF). My view in 2002: “All I can see is disconnected bits-and-pieces, of widely varying quality” and “a very fuzzy multi-field” (p. 263).
2. Futurists are generalists (see entries in 1996 *Encyclopedia of the Future*).
3. Futurists are Primary Futurists (70% at WFS Assembly are Secondary Futurists).
4. FS does what no one else does.
5. FS is understood and appreciated by outsiders (still seen by many as “prediction”).
6. FS is static (changes with technology, politics, and culture),
7. FS is a community (it is one of many shifting and overlapping communities).

Also in 2002, I described six categories of futures-thinking (“5 P’s and a Q,” pp. 269-271) and a total of 115 terms:

1. Probable Futures (17 terms, including forecasting, foresight, likely, projecting, prophesying).
2. Possible Futures (12 terms, including alternatives, hopes/fears, scenarios, risk analysis, wild cards).
3. Preferable Futures (33 terms, including agendas, blueprints, goals, inventing, planning, policy-making, visioning, utopias, wishful thinking).
4. Present Changes (14 terms, including indicators, trend analysis, vital signs, indexes, progress reports).

5. Panoramic Views (25 terms, including holistic, systems, big picture, boundary spanning, environmental scanning, overviews, trans-disciplinarity, multi-disciplinarity, integrative thinking).
6. Questioning (14 terms, including critiquing, debating, dissenting, embracing error, rethinking, unlearning).

2008 This was the last year of Future Survey, due to declining circulation. Publication of Future Survey Mini-Guide *Many Methods and Mentors: Thinking about Change and Shaping Futures* (Aug 2008, 40 pp.; abstracts of 98 books arranged in the “Five P’s and a Q” categories).

2012 Last WFS meeting in Toronto, ON, Canada, with several hundred attendees.

2015 Last WFS meeting in San Francisco, CA, USA, with a few hundred attendees.

2018 Remnants of WFS moved to Chicago, with major downsizing and popularizing. The organization was then essentially defunct.

Part Three: The Age of Uncertain Sustainability (2012-Present)

2012 George Kurian, a self-described “professional encyclopedist,” and instigator and co-editor of the *Encyclopedia of the Future* in 1996, proposed a new edition. Instead, I proposed an *Encyclopedia of Security & Sustainability*. George agreed, David Harries came on board as security advisor, and World Academy of Art and Science (WAAS) agreed to sponsor it at the meeting in Ottawa, ON, Canada in 2013. A successful CACOR meeting followed.

2013 Kurian slips on ice in driveway and breaks his leg! The encyclopedia is abandoned, but Harries and I agree on a guide to security & sustainability (*S&S Guide*) organizations—part of the larger encyclopedia outline—

assuming only several hundred organizations. That was a bad assumption: we have now identified and abstracted >2500 organizations (www.securesustain.org), with several hundred more waiting to be added, and 400-500 new or newly discovered organizations added each year.

To appreciate the diversity within the subject index, some of the current counts include:

- 322 largely international organizations on climate change.
- 195 organizations on energy.
- 280 organizations on sustainability.
- 149 organizations on sustainable development (overlaps sustainability).
- 152 organizations on transformation and change.
- 129 organizations on peace.
- 117 organizations on conservation.
- 105 organizations on health.
- 108 organizations on finance.
- 79 organizations on investment (overlaps finance).
- 74 organizations on oceans.
- 79 organizations on business.

Most of these organizations operate in silos, with considerable duplication of effort to do global good. Even the 130 UN agencies and programs that we have identified appear to ignore each other, although otherwise united in pursuing the sustainable development goals (SDGs). For example, both the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) have published a Sustainable Development Report in 2022, without citing each other.

However, there is some degree of collaboration. The *S&S Guide* has identified 295 alliances, associations, coalitions, collaborations, councils, forums, networks, and partnerships (presumably overlapping terms, ranging from networks as mere mailing lists to more formal partnerships). The S&S

Guide also has a dashboard of six generic categories and 22 sub-categories, an organization index, an index by geographic area, and one by the SDGs.

2015 The UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were formally announced. The 17 goals are quite a mouthful—not to mention the 169 targets—and thus difficult to grasp as a whole. Most of the organizations in the *S&S Guide* are consciously or unconsciously concerned with only one of the SDGs. Few of the above organizations mention the SDGs at all.

2020 The COVID-19 pandemic created huge problems and distractions, with many deaths, much long-COVID disability, and resources devoted to vaccine development, but insufficient vaccine distribution, though the vaccines did save many millions more from dying, especially in developed countries.

2022 Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine in February diverted more resources away from the SDGs, which were idealized from the start. Some progress was being made in some nations on some goals. However, the SDGs are suffering from this major double setback—a pandemic and a war.

2021 The *S&S Guide* began a budding partnership with the UN's SDSN to explore fragmentation, and how to overcome it with new and improved partnerships of some sort.

2021 *Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary General* (84 pp.) was issued just before Putin's ruinous war, and warned of a stark choice between breakdown or breakthrough to a "greener and safer" future. It offered a broad range of proposals, similar to the 1987 Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future* (abstract and contrast of the reports in WAAS/Cadmus, 4:5, Nov 2021, 42-47).

2022 Five proposals in the UN Secretary-General's report were of special interest to futurists, as described in a Delphi study by Jerry Glenn's Millennium Project (Sep. 2022, 36 pp.; see Report on Recent Reports 3.3):

- 1) A Futures Lab to analyze hundreds of reports.

- 2) A Summit on the Future to put foresight at the center of decision-making.
- 3) Strategic Foresight to analyze and summarize foresight and risk reports.
- 4) A Trusteeship Council to negotiate with governments.
- 5) A Special Envoy for Future Generations (possibly influenced by the Future Generations publication of 27 years ago).

2020/22 A by-product of looking at S&S organizations is the discovery that many of them—especially UN orgs such as UNEP, UNDP, and DESA—are publishing excellent interdisciplinary **reports**, well-produced and all free online, and no-one is covering them (other than technical reports from IPCC). In 2020/21, I published two annual roundups of 25 recent reports in *Cadmus*, the WAAS journal. However, waiting several months to provide details on these reports is too long, and 25 at a time is a big mouthful.

2022 I started *Report on Recent Reports (RRR)*, covering just 10 at a time. Three quarterly RRRs have been published on the *S&S Guide* and WAAS websites, and RRR will probably go-to bi-monthly in 2023. The RRR series is a very small example of the potential UN Futures Lab and Strategic Foresight syntheses, which may or may not be realized to overcome fragmentation within the many UN programs and between the UN and other orgs, mostly NGOs. Jerry Glenn estimates 50% chance, with which I agree.

2021 Also in 2021, the *S&S Guide* began publishing **QuickLooks (QLs)** of selected common-interest orgs in certain categories. We now have some 15 QLs on the website (www.securesustain.org). For example, there are QLs on immigration, water security, air pollution, human security, Arctic warming, global risks and challenges, youth groups, environmental peacebuilding, and plastics pollution. We also have a Short Guide (which grew from a QL of 18 orgs to 50 organizations) on organizations advocating education for sustainability and/or the SDGs. This guide accompanies a QL on 41 PhD programs for sustainability—far more than all PhD programs on futures. In 2002, Wendell Bell, author of *Foundations of Futures Studies* (1997), wrote

that “The future of future studies is bright because it is reasonable to hope that futurists will be able to establish the field in most of the world’s colleges and universities (Slaughter, ed., p. 235). Nothing of the sort has happened.

Some Conclusions

- 1) A shift is underway in futures thinking from probable and possible futures to preferable futures, notably sustainability in general and specifically the SDGs. Some examples: *The Good Future Project* by futurist Gerd Leonhard in Zurich, and the first WAAS Working Group meeting on *Existential Risks* on Nov 10 (David Harries, Ruben Nelson (CACOR director), and I are involved, along with five others).
- 2) Fragmentation is more widespread than ever among serious thinkers, and between the ideasphere and the public. The field is complicated by competition from various platforms: Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, LinkedIn, Instagram, and huge numbers of video programs: films, Peak TV (some 500 original programs/year in the US alone). It also faces disinformation enabled by a proliferation of cable TV channels.
- 3) Online Reports seem to be proliferating, but generally ignored by the major media, which is still focused on books (e.g., The NY Times Book Review and the London Times Literary Supplement).
- 4) “The ignorant society” has increasingly arrived, but it is more complex than I imagined in 1971. There is the obvious “know-nothing” and anti-woke” ignorance of many on the political right, who seek simple and inappropriate solutions to complex problems, dismiss science, and favor autocratic rulers looking backward. Two examples are the Make America Great Again (MAGA) Movement and Putin’s Folly in Ukraine. However, the political left also suffers from ignorance of each other—the fragmentation resulting from too many thinkers on too many issues, similar to too many political parties fracturing elections.

5) Some futures organizations endure, though they are small in size and limited in influence. The World Futures Studies Federation (started in 1973) lists 255 members, including students. I attended their meeting in Beijing in 1988, when Jim Dator was elected president. The Association for Professional Futurists (2002) lists some 500 members (mostly, I suspect, from the University of Houston masters program) and seeks to validate the competency of emerging futurists. They published a 2020 edition of *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* (508 pp.) by Richard Slaughter and Andy Hines. In France, *Futuribles*, founded by Bertrand de Jouvenel, is still being published. The influence of these organizations and their members could be assessed by citations, member growth, notable projects, or funds received, but such information is hard to get.

6) The era of widely-known futures books has passed. For example, *The Year 2000* by Herman Kahn and Anthony Wiener (1967, for the Commission on the Year 2000, American Academy of Arts and Sciences), Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* (1970), and John Naisbitt's *Megatrends* (1982). Big-name futurists have also passed on, including Daniel Bell, Buckminster Fuller, Marshall McLuhan, Kenneth Boulding, Hazel Henderson (one of the few women writing on futures). In *The Age of Uncertainty* (Foreign Affairs Centennial Issue, Sep-Oct 2022) venturing into probable and even possible futures is muted. A few futures books still appear, such as *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (2018) by Yuval Noah Harari, and *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World* (2020) by Fareed Zakaria, but Harari and Zakaria are not seen as futurists.

7) Finally, there is much talk about trans-disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity. However, one important discipline seems to be missing from most or all reports: political science. Understanding national and global politics is necessary to deal with climate issues and sustainability in general. The goal is to get good ideas in power and keep them there or improve them as regimes change. For example, deforestation in the Amazon region was decreased under the Lula regime in Brazil, but accelerated under

president Bolsonaro, who, luckily for the planet, was recently defeated by less than a 2% margin of voters. Lula will presumably take office in January 2023, and resume with protections of the vital Amazon region. Another example is the current COP27 conference in Egypt, focussed on climate loss and damage funding for poor countries. Some funding in the millions will be forthcoming, but it will be inadequate. As noted by Al Gore, “let’s be very clear that it is a matter of billions or tens of billions” (New York Times, 9 Nov 2022, A9)—a vast gap between a preferable future and a probable future.

In sum, we are faced with a challenge: how might futurists help to close this gap so as to deter threats of existential catastrophe?

Appendix: The Blind Men and the Elephant

In my 1976 guide to *Societal Directions and Alternatives*, I reprinted as a prologue *The Blind Men and the Elephant: A Hindoo Fable* by the 19th century poet, John Godfrey Saxe. The first verse read as follows:

“It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.”

The following six verses are summarized below.

The first approached the elephant by his “broad and sturdy side” and pronounced that it was like a wall.

The second, feeling the tusk, thought the elephant “very like a spear.”

The third took the trunk in his hands and saw the elephant very like a snake.

The fourth felt about the knee, remarking that the elephant is very like a tree.

The fifth touched the ear and saw the elephant as a fan.
The sixth seized the tail, and saw the elephant as a rope.

The story concludes that “Though each was partly in the right, all were in the wrong...the disputants rail on in utter ignorance of what each other means, and prate about an elephant not one of them has seen.”