

## WHAT FUTURES STUDIES IS, AND IS NOT

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Futures Studies is generally misunderstood from two perspectives. On the one hand, there are those who believe it is, or pretends to be, a *predictive science* which, if properly applied, strives to foretell with reasonable accuracy what THE future WILL BE.

There is no such futures studies worthy of your attention. Nothing in society beyond the most trivial can be precisely predicted. Whatever might have been thought to be the case in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, we should all know by now that society is not some gigantic machine, the future states of which, if its inner workings are properly understood and its operations carefully calculated, can be precisely pre-determined.

On the other hand, it is not the case that it is hopeless to try to anticipate things to come, or that anyone's guess is as good as anyone else's. Even though the future cannot be predicted (and certainly no prediction of the future, no matter how eminent the source, should be uncritically "believed"), there are theories and methods that futurists have developed, tested, and applied in recent years which have proven useful, and exciting.

Understanding and applying the theories and methods of futures studies will enable individuals and groups to anticipate the futures more usefully, and to shape it appreciably more to their own preferences.

Over the forty years that I have been teaching futures studies and doing futures research, I have come to understand that there are two basic things to understand about the future, and hence about futures studies. I have, somewhat jokingly, framed them as "Dator's Laws of the Future." They, and a few of their corollaries, are stated here in capsule form:

### ***I. "The future" cannot be "predicted" because "the future" does not exist.***

Futures studies does not--or should not--pretend to predict "the future." It *studies ideas about the future*--what I usually call "**images of the future**"--which each individual (and group) has (often holding several conflicting images at one time). These images often serve as the basis for actions in the present. Individual and group images of the futures are often highly volatile, changing according to changing events or perceptions. They often change over one's life. Different groups often have very differing images of the future. Men's images may differ from women's. Western images may differ from nonwestern images, and so on.

#### ***IA. "The future" cannot be "predicted," but "alternative futures" can, and should be "forecast."***

Thus, one of the main tasks of futures studies is to identify and examine the major alternative futures that exist at any given time and place.

#### ***IB. "The future" cannot be "predicted," but "preferred futures" can and should be envisioned, invented, implemented, continuously evaluated, revised, and re-envisioned.***

Thus the major task of futures studies is to facilitate individuals and groups in formulating, implementing, and re-envisioning their preferred futures.

#### ***IC. To be useful, futures studies needs to precede, and then be linked to strategic planning, and thence to administration.***

The identification of the major alternative futures and the envisioning and creation of preferred futures then guides subsequent strategic planning activities, which in turn determine day-to-day decision-making by an organization's administrators.

However, *the process of alternative futures forecasting and preferred futures envisioning is continuously ongoing and changing.* The purpose of any futures exercise is to create a guiding vision, not a "final solution" or a limiting blueprint. It is proper, especially in an environment of rapid

technological, and hence social and environmental, change for visions of the futures change as new opportunities and problems present themselves.

**II. Any useful idea about the futures should appear to be ridiculous.**

IIA. Because *new technologies permit new behaviors and values, challenging old beliefs and values which are based on prior technologies*, much that will be characteristic of the futures is initially novel and challenging. It typically seems at first obscene, impossible, stupid, "science fiction", ridiculous. And then it becomes familiar and eventually "normal."

IIB. Thus, what is popularly, or even professionally, considered to be "*the most likely future*" is often one of the least likely futures.

IIC. *If futurists expect to be useful, they should expect to be ridiculed* and for their ideas initially to be rejected. Some of their ideas may deserve ridicule and rejection, but even their useful ideas about the futures may also be ridiculed.

IID. Thus, decision-makers, and the general public, if they wish useful information about the future, should expect it to be unconventional and often shocking, offensive, and seemingly ridiculous. Futurists, however, have the additional burden of *making the initially-ridiculous idea plausible* and actionable by marshaling appropriate evidence and weaving alternative scenarios of its possible developments.

**III. "We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us."**

Understanding this statement by the Canadian futurist and philosopher of media, Marshall McLuhan provides the starting point of a useful theory of social change. Technological change is the basis of social and environmental change. Understanding how this works, in specific social contexts, is the key to understanding what can be understood of the varieties of alternative futures before us, and our options and limitations for our preferred futures.

Though technology is the basis, once certain values, processes, and institutions have been enabled by technologies, they begin to have a life of their own. Population size and distribution, environmental modifications, economic theories and behaviors, cultural beliefs and practices, political structures and decisions, and individual choices and actions all play significant roles in creating futures. However, our option in relation to these factors is best captured by the metaphor, "surfing the tsunamis of change."

In addition, (1) the identification and analysis of *long wave, cyclical forces* and (2) the movement of "generations" through their life cycles (*age-cohort analysis*) are two other theories and methods useful in forecasting, envisioning, and creating the futures.

**Basic Sources:**

Wendell Bell, *Foundations of Futures Studies*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997. Two Volumes

Jim Dator, *Advancing Futures: Futures Studies in Higher Education*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002

World Futures Studies Federation <[www.wfsf.org/](http://www.wfsf.org/)>

World Future Society <[www.wfs.org/](http://www.wfs.org/)>

Institute for Alternative Futures <[www.altfutures.com/](http://www.altfutures.com/)>

Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies <[www.futures.hawaii.edu](http://www.futures.hawaii.edu/)>