

Critical futures research

Sohail Inayatullah,
The Communication Centre, Queensland University of Technology, 1999

Among other mapping schemes,¹ we can divide futures studies into three overlapping research dimensions: empirical, interpretive and critical.² Each dimension has different assumptions about the real, about truth, about the role of the subject, about the nature of the universe, and about the nature of the future.³

My own preference has been approaches that use all three - that contextualize data (the predictive) with the meanings (interpretive) we give them, and then locate these in various historical structures of power/knowledge - class, gender, *varna* and episteme (the critical).

The critical tradition is less concerned with disinterest, as in the empirical, or with creating mutual understanding, as in the interpretive, but with creating distance from current categories. This distance allows us to see current social practices as fragile, as particular, and not as universal categories of thought - they are seen as discourse, a term similar to paradigm but inclusive of epistemological assumptions.

In the critical approach, drawing from poststructuralism, the task is not prediction or comparison (as in the interpretive) but one of making units of analysis problematic. The task is not so much to better define the future but rather, at some level, to "undefine" the future. For example, of importance are not population forecasts but how the category of "population" has become historical valorised in discourse; for example, why population instead of community or people, we might ask?

Taking a broader political view, we can also query why population is being predicted anyway? Why are growth rates more important than levels of consumption? The role of the state and other forms of power such as religious institutions in creating authoritative discourses - in naturalizing certain questions and leaving unproblematic others - is central to understanding how a particular future has become hegemonic. But more than forms of power, are epistemes or structures of knowledge which frame what is knowable and what is not, which define and bind intelligibility. Thus, while structures and institutions such as the modern state are useful tools for analysis, they are seen not as universal but as particular to history, civilization and episteme (the knowledge boundaries that frame our knowing). They too are situated.

The poststructural critical approach attempts to make problematic trend or events or events given to us in the futures literature and not only to discern their class basis as in conventional neo-Marxian critical research. The issue is not only what are other events/trends that could have been put forth, but how an issue has been constructed as an event or trend in the first place as well as the "cost" of that particular social construction - what paradigm is privileged by the nomination of a trend or event as such.

Using other ways of knowing, particularly categories of knowledge from other civilizations, is one of the most useful ways to create a distance from the present. For example, in our population example, we can query "civilization", asking how do Confucian, Islamic, Pacific or Indic civilizations constitute the population discourse? Scenarios about the future of population become far more problematic since the underlying category of the scenario, in this case population, is contested. At issue is how enumeration - the counting of people - has affected people's conception of time and relations with self, other and state.⁴

The goal of critical research is thus to disturb present power relations through making

problematic our categories and evoking other places or scenarios of the future. Through this historical, future and civilizational distance, the present becomes less rigid, indeed, it becomes remarkable. This allows the spaces of reality to loosen and the new possibilities, ideas and structures, to emerge. The issue is less what is the truth but how truth functions in particular policy settings, how truth is evoked, who evokes it, how it circulates, and who gains and loses by particular nominations of what is true, real and significant.

In this approach, language is not symbolic but constitutive of reality. This is quite different from the empirical domain wherein language is seen as transparent, merely in a neutral way describing reality, or as in the interpretive, where language is opaque, coloring reality in particular ways.

Central to interpretive and critical approach is the notion of civilizational futures research. Civilizational research makes problematic current categories since they are often based on the dominant civilization (the West in this case). It informs us that behind the level of empirical reality is cultural reality and behind that is worldview.

While the postmodern/poststructural turn in the social sciences has been discussed exhaustively in many places,⁵ the following effort is to simplify these complex social theories and see if poststructuralism can be used as a method, even if it is considered anti-method by strict "non-practitioners".⁶

The poststructural futures toolbox

The first term in a poststructural futures toolbox is deconstruction. In this we take a text (here meaning anything that can be critiqued - a movie, a book, a worldview, a person - something or someone that can be read) and break apart its components, asking what is visible and what is invisible? Research questions that emerge from this perspective include:

DECONSTRUCTION

Who is privileged at the level of knowledge? Who gains at economic, social and other levels? Who is silenced? What is the politics of truth?

In terms of futures studies, we ask: which future is privileged? Which assumptions of the future are made preferable?

The second concept is genealogy. This is history; not a continuous history of events and trends, but more a history of paradigms, if you will, of discerning which discourses have been hegemonic and how the term under study has travelled through these various discourses. Thus for Nietzsche, it was not so much an issue of what is the moral, but a genealogy of the moral: how and when the moral becomes contentious and through which discourses.

GENEALOGY

Which discourses have been victorious in constituting the present? How have they travelled through history?

What have been the points in which the issue has become present, important or contentious?

What might be the genealogies of the future?

The third crucial term is distance. Again, this is to differentiate between the disinterest of empiricism and the mutuality of interpretative research. Distancing provides the theoretical link between poststructural thought and futures studies. Scenarios become not forecasts but images of the possible that critique the present, that make it remarkable, thus allowing other futures to emerge. Distancing can be accomplished by utopias as well - "perfect", "no", or far away places - other spaces.

DISTANCE

Which scenarios make the present remarkable? Make it unfamiliar? Strange? Denaturalize it?

Are these scenarios in historical space (the futures that could have been) or in present or future space?

The fourth term is "alternative pasts and futures". While futures studies has focused only on alternative futures, within the poststructural critical framework, just as the future is problematic, so is the past. The past we see as truth is in fact the particular writing of history, often by the victors of history. The questions that flow from this perspective are as below:

ALTERNATIVE PASTS AND FUTURES

Which interpretation of past is valorized? What histories make the present problematic? Which vision of the future is used to maintain the present? Which explodes the unity of the present?

The last concept - reordering knowledge - brings a different dimension to the future and is similar to much of the work being done in civilizational futures research.⁷ Reordering knowledge is similar to deconstruction and genealogy in that it undoes particular categories, however, it focuses particularly on how certain categories such as "civilization" or "stages in history" order knowledge.

REORDERING KNOWLEDGE

How does the ordering of knowledge differ across civilization, gender and episteme? What or Who is othered? How does it denaturalize current orderings, making them peculiar instead of universal?

These five concepts constitute the critical futures approach to thinking about the future - they investigate deep worldview commitments behind surface phenomena,⁸ even to the point of questioning the idea of "worldview." Critical futures research, writes ... provides a richer account of what is being studied than the more common empiricist or predictive orientation which merely 'skims the surface'. But because mastery of the different layers calls for critical and hermeneutic skills that originate in the humanities, some futures practitioners may find [it] challenging at first.⁹

Unlike empirical or interpretive perspectives, in critical futures research there is not final forecast or ultimate meaning, the challenge is to continuously investigate our assumptions of what we believe the future will or should be like.

1. See, for example, Harold Linstone, "What I have Learned: The Need for Multiple Perspectives," *Futures Research Quarterly*, Spring 1985, 47-61. He divides futures into the technical, organizational and personal. Also see, Eleonora Masini and Karin Gillwald, "On Futures Studies and Their Social Context with Particular Focus on West Germany," *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, Vol. 38, 1990, 187-199. They take Linstone's model and apply it historically to Europe and the US, seeing futures as going through technical, organizational and personal phases. See also, Zia Sardar, "Colonizing the future: the 'other' dimension of futures studies," *Futures*, Vol. 25, No. 2, March 1993, 179-187. Sardar argues for a colonization/decolonization dialectic. The classic map of futures studies remains Roy Amara's division into preferred, possible and probable. See his, Roy Amara, "The Futures Field," *The Futurist*, February, April and June 1981. See also, Clement Bezold and Trevor Hancock, "An Overview of the Health Futures Field". Institute for Alternative Futures, Washington DC, 1993. 29 pages. Bezold adds a the plausible to Amara's three categories.
2. Sohail Inayatullah, "Deconstructing and Reconstructing the Future: Predictive, Cultural and Critical Epistemologies," *Futures*, Vol. 22, No. 2, March 1990, 115-141. This has now been updated to include action learning.
3. Sohail Inayatullah, "From Who am I to When am I?: Framing the Time and Shape of the Future," *Futures*, Vol. 25, No. 3, April 1993, 235-253.
4. See, Manas Ray, "India, Fifty Years On: Revisiting Modernity," research paper, School of Media and Journalism, Queensland University of Technology, Research paper quoting Sudipto Kaviraj, "Religion and Identity in India" *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1997, 331.
5. For the best discussion, See Michael Shapiro, *Reading the Postmodern Polity*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 1992.
6. Postmodernists would reject the idea that deconstruction etc should be seen as a method. It is considered an anti-method, focused on problematizing not on providing recipes for policy. Moreover, there are no practitioners of postmodernity, if at all, the episteme of postmodernity practices on us.
7. See, for example, the works of Ashis Nandy and Zia Sardar. Short essays by these two can be found in *Futures*. Ashis Nandy, "Bearing Witness to the Future," *Futures*, Vol. 28, No. 6/7, 1996, and Zia Sardar, "Natural Born Futurist," *Futures*, Vol. 28, No. 6/7, 1996. Also see the special issue of *Futures* on Futures generations thinking, which takes a Confucian approach to futures studies, *Futures*, Vol. 29, No. 8, October 1997.
8. Rick Slaughter, "Developing and Applying Strategic Foresight," *The ABN Report* Vol. 5, No. 10, December 1997, 7-15.
9. Ibid., 11.