



WFS Learning Section
Bulletin
Spring-Summer 2009

FUTUREtakes publishes the *WFS Learning Section Bulletin* by special arrangement with the World Future Society (WFS) Learning Section Steering Team. Issues of the *WFS Learning Section Bulletin* typically include foresight education exercises, an educator spotlight column, and synopses of the annual WFS Education Summit.

A Letter to My Nephew

by Stephen Aguilar-Millan
Director of Research
European Futures Observatory (www.eufo.org)
United Kingdom



Dear Peter,

Thank you for your note. I am pleased that your studies have gone well and I am both surprised and flattered that you see your calling as a Futurist and that you have asked me for advice in entering the profession. I guess that the best single piece of advice that I can give you is to beware Hume's Law.

David Hume was a Scottish philosopher of the Enlightenment in the Eighteenth Century. He is remembered for many things, but, to me, he is best remembered for Hume's Law. In this, Hume established that it is logically impossible to reach an objective conclusion from a subjective premise. If you use a subjective premise, then this will only result in a subjective conclusion. In the study of the future, this is a fundamental point.

The future, by definition, has not yet happened. It sounds obvious, but there can be no objective facts about the future because the future has not passed from the realm of possibility into the world of actuality. We cannot be empirical about the future because there is nothing to measure. As you start to study the future and the construction of futures works, you will start to see that many futurists talk about the future in objective terms.

This is a pitfall that you must avoid if your work is to be of high quality. If you talk of the future as an objective reality, then you are making a mistake on two levels. First, you are actually laying down a forecast that could well be wrong. A good example of this might be the plight of weather forecasters. Michael Fish, famously, stated in 1987 that the UK would not experience a hurricane. Within 24 hours the country was devastated by the worst hurricane since 1703. If you make too many wrong forecasts, then your reputation will suffer greatly. This is not a way to build a career.

The second possible pitfall is that if you rely exclusively upon one objective future, then you will naturally exclude other possible futures which you ought to have considered. For example, British military policy in Singapore in the 1930s was based upon the single premise that all military threats would come from the sea. This led to all of the defences being orientated towards that threat. In the event, the Japanese invasion came from the landward side, making the capture of Singapore that much easier for the Japanese army. As the future has not yet unfolded, you need to keep open as many possible futures as you can, if you are to excel at the craft.

Please don't think that these historical examples have no relevance today. I tend to use historical examples of things going wrong because time has tempered the edge of the events. A more recent example of future blindness might be recent US military policy. For most of the 1990s, the US prepared for a peer-to-peer engagement – tanks rolling across the North German Plain, amphibious landings across the Straits of Taiwan, and so forth. When the primary military threat of the twenty-first century showed itself – what we now call the 'War On Terror' – the US military was almost completely unprepared to deal with that threat. It is as if nothing had been learned from the British mistakes in Singapore in the 1930s and billions of US tax-dollars have been quite simply wasted.

When discussing the future, you need to remember that you are presenting an opinion. Of course, one futurist technique to get around this is to present a piece of backcasting – a technique where you place yourself in the future looking backwards, and then describe events as facts. However, unless you perfect the art of time travel, you will be unable to actually reach into the future, which means that your work, even when backcast, will still be an opinion. This opinion will be coloured by your beliefs and prejudices which will enter your work through the assumptions that hide within it.

Don't get me wrong. Beliefs and prejudices are not bad things. They are vital if you are to make sense of the world and if you are to live a full and moral life. However, they could be wrongly held, and you need to be aware of them and evaluate them from time to time. You may even have to change your beliefs, and identify hidden assumptions that you are making, because they no longer adequately describe the world in which you live. Let me give you an example.

You will often hear that free market capitalism is the only effective way to organise an economy and that a future without free market capitalism is one of poverty and misery. This is an opinion, not an objective statement. Once you start to study these things, you will find that there are many variants of free market capitalism, so exactly which one is the most effective? What do we mean by effective? If we mean the system that gives us the greater material wealth, then the US model is better than the French model. If we mean the system that gives us a better lifestyle, then the French model has distinct advantages over that of the US.

Would the absence of free market capitalism lead to poverty? One factor forgotten by many commentators is that China is, actually, a communist state. One could argue that China is the nation in recent times that has most improved the material wealth of its citizens. And yet China operates a state communist system and not a free market capitalist system. Would the absence of free market capitalism lead to misery? Many studies indicate that there is a link between wealth and happiness; this is a complicated link because increased wealth does not necessarily lead to increased happiness, and that decreased wealth does not necessarily lead to increased misery. Life isn't that simple.

Free market capitalism has been a useful means of organising our affairs in certain situations in the past. However, this does not necessarily mean that it is optimal for all economies and to all future situations. To suggest otherwise is to state a subjective belief rather than to outline an objective fact. And yet, many commercial futures presume 'business as usual' in the way in which our affairs are organised. Our present economic difficulties have exposed a struggle between the forces that wish to re-impose 'business as usual' and those that accept the transition towards a new paradigm. In policy terms, for example, one could ask why we are bailing out car manufacturers when this is a technology of the past, given the likely onset of 'Peak Oil.'

Of course, this is of little practical help to you. Here are a few rules to help you identify the hidden assumptions in futures work:

1. You must learn to distinguish between opinion and fact. Look at the tense in which the statement is made. If it is in the future tense, then it can only be opinion because there are no facts in the future. If it is in the present or past tense, then the statement could be fact or it could be opinion. A factual statement will have an empirical base, so look for the numbers. An opinion will struggle to find an empirical base.
2. You must learn to identify the counter-argument. With all statements about the future, try to find the conditions under which the statement will be untrue. For example, if you are presented with the view that the sun will rise in the east tomorrow, try to think of the cloudy day (the sun doesn't rise) or the asteroid strike (in which case the earth may stop revolving or its rotational axis may change). The counter-argument will expose the assumptions behind the statement about the future.
3. You must learn to source widely. It is unlikely that any single person, or any single source, will have the breadth of knowledge to provide you with enough material to work with. You need to travel as widely as possible, to meet as many people as possible, to respect as many world views as possible, and to discuss your ideas as widely as possible. You also need to travel back in time through the works of others to find clues that may help you.

If you follow these rules, until you develop your own, then you are likely to produce penetrative and well balanced insights into the future.

If I can be of any help to you in your personal future, please feel free to ask me.

Uncle Stephen