

Why Future Studies?

Phil Gyford

1999-09-12

[Comment: This paper answers a number of set questions which is why it reads a little strangely. Plus I was being a bit sarcastic at times.]

In coming to write this paper, and thinking about plausible futures for the world, I surprised myself in realizing I have no image of the future sitting ready-formed in my mind. While I like to think I keep up with a broad range of news, trying to map out the most likely future for the world reveals to me how sketchy and UK/USA-centric my view is.

I see politics in the western world continuing along its increasingly muddled and vaguely centrist path. While the apathetic electorate will be offered some socially responsible policies, governments will become increasingly authoritarian, in an effort to combat growing numbers of extremist and grass-roots groups (for example, the worldwide anti-capitalist demonstrations in June 1999 or, further afield, groups of Indian farmers protesting against Monsanto's genetically modified crops). Technology will enable such organizations to recruit and coordinate more easily than ever before. Worldwide, the rocketing populations and increasing standards of living in countries like China and India will prove to be a huge burden on the world's resources. Governments will begin to implement more environmentally friendly policies, too late to prevent all disasters. Technology will provide opportunities to help us meet the pressures of this world, but some, such as genetic modification, will meet with concerted opposition. There will be a growing number of small 'cold wars' around the globe as old rivals increase both offensive and defensive capabilities, watched over by international agencies such as NATO, the World Bank, etc.

There aren't many features I share with a stereotypical Miss World contestant, but I believe the most pleasant future for the planet would be one of peace and happiness. No one would have to work unless they wanted to (all the dull and dangerous jobs being undertaken by robots that never malfunction) and no one would want for anything. There would be jam for tea every day.

When it comes to my most feared but plausible future, it would be like any random dystopian sci-fi world but without the fun bits. Governments find themselves with almost no real power, with larger and larger corporations holding the balance of power. No progress is made on worldwide agreements of ecological issues, with the result that pollution and famine shoot out of control. The split between rich and poor widens at an increasing rate, leaving a small percentage of phenomenally wealthy individuals isolated from the increasingly harsh world in which more and more people are suffering.

Asking if futures studies is useful is like asking if it's useful to open your eyes while walking. You could probably reach your destination with your eyes closed, but you're going to hit a lot of unexpected obstacles along the way. Working out what might be ahead allows us to prepare for different eventualities. A company could muddle along until it hits a crisis but it would be better to know what crises could potentially manifest themselves in advance, so preparations can be made.

The only way I can see futures studies being dangerous is if people take its scenarios as definite predictions. We can never be sure what the future will bring, so concentrating all resources on meeting one particular outcome could prove disastrous.

Worldwide I see the most critical issue we can study is working out how to cope with the increasing demands of a booming population and rising standards of living.

The most useful data we can collect depends entirely on which future possibilities we are trying to understand. The most interesting thing about the future is that anything could happen.