



The history of Western futures studies: An exploration of the intellectual traditions and three-phase periodization



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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this paper is to present a three-phase periodization of modern Western futures studies to construct historical classification. In order to reach this goal, the following intellectual traditions are introduced to review the philosophical and historical contexts that affect the very foundations of futures studies: (a) religions, (b) utopias, (c) historicism, (d) science fiction, and (e) systems thinking. The first phase (beginning in 1945 to the 1960s) was the era of scientific inquiry and rationalization of the futures characterized by the prevalence of technological forecasting, the rise of alternative futures in systematic ways, and the growth of professionalization of futures studies. In the first phase, futures had become objects of rationalization removed from the traditional approaches such as utopia, grandiose evolutionary ideas, naive prophecies, science fiction, religious attitudes, and mystical orientation. The second phase (the 1970s and the 1980s) saw the creation the global institution and industrialization of the futures. This era was marked by the rise of worldwide discourse on global futures, the development of normative futures, and the deep involvement of the business community in futures thinking. In the second phase, futures studies-industry ties were growing and the future-oriented thoughts extensively permeated the business decision-making process. The third phase (the 1990s – the present) reflects the current era of the neoliberal view and fragmentation of the futures. This phase is taking place in the time of neoliberal globalization and risk society discourses and is characterized by the dominance of foresight, the advance of critical futures studies, and the intensification of fragmentation. In the third phase, futures practice tends to be confined to the support of strategic planning, and hence is experiencing an identity crisis and loss of its earlier status of humanity-oriented futures.

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the intellectual traditions of Western futures studies and its development through a three-phase periodization from 1945 to the present. Modern futures studies, as “a full-scale futures movement” (Bundy, 1976), developed after the end of World War II, and many of its core assumptions, concepts, methods, and names were generated and contested during the post-war period. To date, the field of futures studies is almost 70 years old. The traditional history of futures studies has been mostly concerned with the intellectual products of futurists in future-oriented thoughts, whereas

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several developments in futures studies have drawn on historical and social backgrounds, schools of thought, paradigms, important figures, regions, methods, specific events, and social demands; thus historical accounts appear in a variety of ways but most are related by chronological order. As such, the periodization as a classification of the field's history is an important means for historical explanation.

Periodization can be defined as “an analytical prism through which times past are organized into meaningful clusters in order to better understand the reasons for the occurrence of events or trends” (Butler, 2011). According to Jessop (2008), there are three main differences between chronology and periodization: (a) “a single unilinear time scale” vs. “several time scales,” (b) “simple temporal coincidence or succession” vs. “more complex conjectures,” (c) “a simple narrative explanation for what occurs by identifying a single temporal series of actions and events” vs. “an explanatory framework oriented to the contingent, overdetermined interaction of more than one such series.” In this context, periodization provides the conceptualization of the historical process and “sufficient scholarly veracity for historical research, pedagogy, and scholarship” (Hérubel, 2008). Furthermore, it can be “a rather effective method of data ordering and analysis” (Grinin, 2007). However, there is a lack of vigorous discussions about periodization in the history of futures studies, whereas other disciplines continue to challenge and redefine their historical periods and characters: marketing (Hollander, Rassuli, Brian Jones, & Dix, 2005), world history (Bentley, 1996), and economic thought (Popescu, 1965). In futures studies, only a few examples periodize its history or explain periodization-related issues (Schultz, 2012; Toffler, 1970a; Wheelwright, 2010).

As noted above, the key interest of this paper is to suggest a three-phase periodization of modern Western futures studies to construct historical classification. The paper is structured as follows: as a literature review, Section 2 discusses the diversity of the history in futures studies; Section 3 analyzes the intellectual tradition of futures studies and examines its impact on current futures scholarship; Section 4 offers a three-phase periodization: the scientific inquiry and rationalization of the futures (1945 – the 1960s), the global institution and industrialization of the futures (the 1970s – the 1980s), and the neoliberal view and fragmentation of the futures (the 1990s – the present). This paper also employs the historical individuality periodization approach.¹ Section 5 summarizes the findings and presents the final remarks.

2. Diverse histories of futures studies

Early historical accounts of the study of the futures are attributed to social scientists. For example, Winthrop (1968), an American sociologist, in “the Sociologist and the Study of the Future,” presents a chronological review and evaluation of Western futures scholarship of natural and social scientists in the 1950s and 1960s. He maintains that the main purposes of futures studies are “predicting the future” and “proposing and describing utopias” and considers futures studies as “a new and main subdivision of sociology” (Winthrop, 1968). He credits the natural scientists, engineers, and technologists more than social scientists for the development of futures studies. Huber and Bell (1971), American sociologists, relate the rise of futures studies to the sociology of the future. They examine the social background leading the emergence of futures studies, review the literature of future-oriented works in the 1960s, and suggest “the Museum of the Future” to stimulate interest in futures. In *Futurology: Promise, Performance, Prospects*, Ferkiss (1977), a political scientist, examines the ideological and philosophical background, futurist methodologies and their impact on society. He views futurist activities as movements and an ideology to influence political bodies, and focuses on overcoming the limits of Western perspectives in futures studies.

Cornish (1977), along with members and staff of the World Future Society's *The Study of the Future*, a detailed multifarious account of the history of futures studies, covers the topics, methods, individual futurists, case studies, and organizations beginning with its pre-history to the 1970s (Cornish, 1977). Some of the well known and founding futurists such as Margaret Mead, Bertrand de Jouvenel, Glenn T. Seaborg, Robert Junk, Arthur C. Clark, Willis Harman, Daniel Bell, Issac Asimov, John McHale, Herman Kahn, and Alvin Toffler are cited as their work reflects the futurists' perspectives and explains the historical development of the study of the futures. Taking an idealist approach, Cornish and his associates stress the importance of ideas to shape the futures, as well as the institutional approach that pays attention to institutional settings, such as programs and organizations, for the development of futures studies. As one of the classic texts on futures studies, Bell (1997a)'s *Foundations of Futures Studies (Vol. 1)* is another comprehensive and well-researched analysis of futures history and not only includes a discussion of various sources of futures studies, including its history, main purposes, theoretical assumptions, and methods, but also debates topics, especially futurist ethics, art/science debate, and the fragmentation of the futures field. The major feature of his text follows the Enlightenment tradition by demystifying futures studies and promoting its scientific ways. Thus, he considers Condorcet as the father of futures studies and takes a critical realism approach to understand futures. He also proposes that science and art have different purposes that strongly contribute to the field. Art provides subjective experiences, such as intuition, creativity, imagination, etc., whereas science furnishes the objective categories of knowledge, such as the technical and rigorous, rational and dehumanizing, and codified aspects.

¹ According to Dietrich Gerhard (1973), historical periodization can be divided into three main types: (a) chronological periodization, which is “the enumeration of centuries and years,” (b) evolution periodization, which “regards a period as a phase in a larger development,” and (c) historical individuality periodization, which “bears the characteristic feature of the other fundamental concepts of historical thought.”

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