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GBN AUSTRALIA BOOKCLUB

INTELLECTUAL TOOLS FOR THE YEARS AHEAD

It's almost that time again. Only this time it's different. I speak of the new year, and of the moment that presents us with each year — an opportunity to resolve to do things differently over the upcoming 12 months. This is the moment when we make resolutions that will represent improvements over the year just past. The difference this time, of course, is that on this occasion and in but a few day's time already, we will have a veritable trinity of such opportunities available, with the new century and the new millennium to add to our new year. This will allow us the luxury of making resolutions for the medium and long terms as well as the short, and the challenge will be for us to engage our imaginations and foresighting talents, and set visions for ourselves of the futures we would really love to see. That done, the next challenge will be to resolve to do what it is that we need to do, to act in the way we need to act, to change both ourselves and our world, for the better.

Of course we face a problem right away: Who is it that decides what constitutes 'better'? Who is it that determines what constitutes an improvement? And what will be the criteria that will be used in such a judgement?

These are not simple matters. Yet they are vitally important ones.

As we enter the new year/century/millennium, we are caught in a profoundly difficult dilemma: how can we continue to be innovative and create new ways forward into the future, and at the same time recover from the unintended consequences of innovations past? In many ways the biggest problems that we face today are outcomes of the solutions that we 'found' to the problems of yesterday. And many of these are occurring on a global scale. Globalisation refers not merely to the transnational movement of 'goods' and of the methods of and resources for their production, but also of the 'bads': those 'pollutants' that have severely degraded both the bio-physical and socio-cultural environments of the planet. The greenhouse warming of the planet and the changing climatic patterns that this seems increasingly to be occasioning, is as much a global phenomenon as the flow of trade, and finance, and means of production. The burning of the fossil fuel that has been the very key to industrial modernisation, stands accused as a 'bad' in this regard. Other 'bads' that were once 'goods' include the chemical fertilisers and biocides and the nuclear energy plants and thermonuclear armaments, that have also been key aspects of our technical progress. Meanwhile some of the 'new' solutions to these problems, such as the use of biologically modified organisms, are regarded by many already as problematic. And there are very many more examples that could be cited in this regard.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of all of the current problematique however, is the very way we think and act in terms of the 'problems' that we define and the 'solutions' that we pursue. Perhaps if we learned to think and act in different ways, the outcomes of these activities would be better. Perhaps if we changed our focus of development from personal (and national) gain to an inclusive well-being, we would approach our relationships with the world and all of the other creatures within it, from a more creative and responsible position.

What if we learned to unshackle our resolve to do better from the current perspective that frames it? What if we learned to see the key issue of change for better futures in the world about us as the issue of the way we 'see' that world in the first place? What if we were to think as much about the way we think about the type of upcoming century and even millennium that we would prefer, with the same energy as we will think about the coming (olympic) year, we would make true progress towards a better world?

Imagine that!

And it is both imagination and future worlds that are the common denominators of our two book club selections this month. ●

Futures for the Third Millennium: enabling the forward view

Richard A Slaughter, Prospect Media 1999, 381 pages

It is always a pleasure to review anything written by Richard Slaughter, as he is one of but few voices in this country to write both clearly and critically about the futures that we face. Over the years his message has been both persistent and consistent, with a logic and in a genre that it is ultimately appealing. He is the master of the bad news/good news approach to life. The bad news is that things in the world are bad, and in grave danger, and I choose that phrase advisedly, of getting worse. The good news is that there is a lot we can do to improve that situation.

Slaughter is certainly not alone in pointing out and elaborating on the dimensions of the serious problematique that we face as a civilisation at the dawn of a new millennium. Nor is he alone in arguing that 'the dominant trends that are well established throughout the global system do not lead to a world of peace, prosperity and plenty ... (but rather to) ... a world that is devastated and diminished in nearly every respect'. And finally, his is not a lone voice in calling 'not merely for a change in direction but a fundamental and systemic re-conceptualisation of humanity's place on this shrinking and imperilled planet'. Indeed, it is measure of his scholarship that he is generous in the extent to which he cites the words, the evidence, and the wisdom of others in support of his contentions.

The refreshing novelty that Slaughter brings to the discourse lies in the criticality and innate optimism of his responses to the worrisome pictures that he paints. If we first recognise the 'true state of affairs' and their implications for our future, and the thinking styles that have led us to them, then we can both change those thinking styles and their outcomes for the better through studying the future. The essence of this far-reaching book, with the pun intended, is a call for what the author refers to as 'critical futures studies' and for the institutions of foresight necessary to support such endeavours. Critical future studies lead to the creation of 'futures relevant knowledge' 'that can help individuals, organisations, and indeed humankind as a whole, to navigate within this complex and ever-changing environment.' The author not only continues to build his convincing argument in support of the need for knowledge about the future, but creates persuasive propositions regarding the nature of 'advanced futures discourse' through which wise and responsible people can develop 'viable future views'. This is not an easy task, as he is quick to concede, while suggesting that there is a systematic series of levels of futures work with which the serious futures student needs to engage, and through which he or she should aim to pass. The first of this progression is what Slaughter refers to as 'pop futurism' which, as it takes existing social relations as a given thus unconsciously providing support for the status quo, should be regarded as ideologically naive. The next level is represented by problem-focussed futures study which identifies problems and then seeks to explore solutions from a perspective which also tends to remain uncritically superficial. At the third level, so-called critical futures study, the influence of different cultural assumptions and styles of enquiry are actively considered, while at the final level, epistemological futures study, the sources of problems are located within worldviews and ways of knowing. With the logic and characteristics of these levels as his foundation Slaughter critically establishes the case for futures in education, and for his 'institutes of foresight', all the while emphasising the need for much more fruitful, informed, and critical discourse, as the focus for critical future studies. He exemplifies such criticality with his review of a number of other futures initiatives, including the Commission for the Future established in this country by Barry Jones back in the early 1980s.

Perhaps the most useful part of this book is where the author devotes an entire section to methods for critical futures inquiry. A central message here is that 'knowledge of the future is not primarily drawn from the empirical domain, nor from that of the "hard" sciences. It is not a matter of predictions; rather it is generated within a critical/interpretative milieu'. It is perhaps in this section that Slaughter is at his most insightful as he carefully constructs the case for what he terms 'strategic foresight', while elaborating on processes, methods and methodologies, for its generation. He not only identifies four categories of such methods — input, analytic, paradigmatic, and iterative/explorative — but describes both their uses and their limitations.

Continuing in the genre of the author — if the bad news is that we have much to do in Australia to change the way we approach the world about us if we want to enjoy better futures, then the good news is that the Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne has had the foresight to appoint Dr Slaughter as its Foundation Professor of Foresight.

May we all long enjoy the fruits of that appointment. ●

Satan, CEO

Stanley Schaetzel, Prospect Media 1998, 202 pages

The last six months of 1999 have been a fertile time for pseudo historians (and I guess the real thing), as they seek different ways to make sense of the departing century or, in some cases, the millennium. Television mega stars like Australia's Ray Martin have appeared regularly on peak hour evening television to present yet another worldview of the past.

A most novel, even insightful and perhaps disturbing, approach to reviewing the last hundred years of human endeavour comes in a well researched and crafted book by Stanley Schaetzel. Titled *Satan, CEO* this intriguing story of the 20th century is presented from the perspective of the 'forces for evil'.

While the short opening explanation of how the author found himself with the minutes of the 156th Centennial General Meeting of Lucifer & Co U/Ltd will stretch the reader's credibility, the rest of the text is compelling reading. As one of the truisms of management goes 'if you always see the way you've always seen, you'll always do what you've always done', hence goes the argument, we need to challenge everything by applying alternative ways of seeing if we are to get the full value out of any situation. Schaetzel's ingenuity in presenting for us what is the downside of the 20th century, as if it is the upside for this company, is a stark reminder of the extent of human tragedies endured by humankind this century.

While the reports from the various department managers are chilling, the real strength of Schaetzel's presentation is the way he has collected everyday events and crafted them into answers by the managers to shareholders seeking to advance the performance of their company's bottom line — more chaos and misery. If you're looking for an example of how to write a report to justify a pre-determined outcome, go no further, *Satan, CEO* is the reference you need.

Every now and then a book comes along which is the catalyst for thousands of after dinner conversations, *Satan, CEO* has the potential to be such a book with the ensuing conversations varying from the deeply philosophic to the humourously absurd.

Satan, CEO is the summer holiday read most business people are looking for — lightweight, amusing, poignant and with an explanation for the 'sand in your face' or 'wet weather spoiling the picnic' on every page. It's that Christmas present for a colleague who thinks they have everything. ●

Bruce McKenzie is Managing Director of the Systemic Development Institute, Canberra.

RRP \$24.95

GBN Australia BookClub Price \$21.95

Alternative Futures: Scenarios for Business in Australia to the year 2015

Enclosed is a copy of the summary booklet, 'Alternative Futures: Scenarios for Business in Australia to the year 2015', the major GBN Australia project for 1999, commissioned by the Australian Business Foundation.

The key challenge of this project was to develop scenarios with a distinctly Australian perspective. To this end, GBN Australia provided the framework around which Australian business stakeholders brainstormed the issues for Australian business in a global world. Input came from a diverse assemblage, from business leaders to school children and future politicians, and we stirred the pot with additions from GBN's own local and international network. Through a year of research, story telling and workshops, we sketched four futures on the horizon for Australian business.

In First Global Nation, Australia participates successfully in the burgeoning online, global, knowledge economy; in Brave Old World, we fail to realise the urgency required to participate in this world and miss the boat; in Sound the Retreat, social backlash crushes the utopian global experiment, sparked ominously by a hopeless WTO Seattle round; and environmental imperatives play out in Green is Gold.

The series was presented as the kernel of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry's National Industry Policy Conference in September 1999. The task now is to prompt decision-makers to define the areas that need attention in order to invent beneficial futures for individual organisations. We have moved to initiate this practical take for Aussie institutions through a strategy afternoon with Richard Bawden at the Australian Business Foundation. The results of this session will be included in the comprehensive version of this work due to be published January 2000. These scenarios are a tool to incite provocative conversation within your organisation, but consider further how well you are covered in the instance of each future.

This is a timely piece of work, as the revolutionary forces of information technology, unprecedented globalisation and the intangible imperatives of the knowledge age challenge all of our businesses and institutions. GBN Australia is moulding the key imperatives from this work into constructive and exciting projects for 2000. ENJOY!

Andrew Campion, Project Manager, GBN Australia

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