

Philosophy, Aims and Objectives of the MA Foresight and Futures Studies offered by Leeds Metropolitan University between 1996 and 2002
(10 May 1999)

It has become increasingly clear that human decisions and actions play an important part in determining the future of both humanity and the world in which we live. At the close of the 20th century we are faced with a range of questions in economic, social, political and technological fields which could have major significance for the future. Many of these questions raise important ethical issues but they are also frequently surrounded by uncertainty as to the impact of alternative courses of action that could be taken. To make effective decisions we would need knowledge about the future that we cannot possess, yet we are often forced to make decisions which have long term implications in conditions of considerable uncertainty. Foresight and Futures Studies, a developing international discipline, aims to critically examine the difficulties associated with making decisions with long term future consequences in conditions of uncertainty and to provide methods through which these difficulties can be minimised.

Among the questions facing humanity is the growing awareness of the impact of human activity over the last 200 years and our dependence on the fragile earth. We are faced with the possibility that our species could be working towards its own destruction. We cannot be certain, until it is too late, but the awareness of the possibility creates a novel circumstance. If, for example, as Orheim claims, "We are the first generation that influences global climate, and the last generation to escape the consequences," (1) we have moved into a new era in which we are more than ever before responsible for what happens in the future.

To an extent, we have had this responsibility since humanity first planted crops, started making tools and began to use fire, but ours is the first generation to become aware of our impact and, consequently, to understand our responsibility. Previous generations have been able to live without this knowledge, to act in their present assuming that the future would look after itself. We do not have that privilege. Our technology, which if anything, is the cause of the problem, has also given us the ability to perceive it. Human technology has grown so powerful and human numbers have increased so remarkably that as the poet Paul Valery wrote, "The future is not what it used to be." (2) In such circumstances we need to develop our capability to critically assess our potential impact on the future.

Technology, which is itself a product of human ingenuity, is having increasing implications for society. Information Technology, for example, has been called a meta-technology because it has potential implications across a wide range of situations including employment, transport, and the home. The nature of the impact, whether it will be beneficial or harmful and to whom, is subject to wide ranging debate. The ethical issues raised by bio-technology particularly genetic engineering, are likely to increase as the possibilities of human intervention in natural processes grow. The potential of molecular manufacturing and other emerging technologies and the issues they raise have yet to be explored.

Social changes, particularly demographic changes in the size and location of world population and the ageing of western populations pose major ethical and political issues. In the west projections anticipate a smaller working age population supporting a growing number of pensioners who will require increasing expenditure on health care and social welfare. At the same time some commentators foresee major changes in employment which will raise important social concerns, (3) and question the ability of society to support large numbers of dependents.

The future, as we approach the third millennium, seems ever more uncertain and even threatening. The mechanistic model of reality, on which Industrial Society was built, is increasingly challenged by advances in scientific knowledge. The developing ideas of, for example, Chaos Theory suggest that established methods of understanding reality and assumptions about influencing the future are more limited than once envisaged and that new approaches are required. The problems that confront us are frequently ill structured, "We do not know what information is needed; we have few comprehensive models and no prescription for how to process the information we have. Even worse, there is no end to the problem." (4) Such situations require an approach that accepts complexity and uncertainty and provides the means to deal effectively with them. Foresight and Futures Studies offers such an approach accepting responsibility for the future and of the importance of human action in influencing it .

This is no easy task and raises many philosophical and practical difficulties. The inherent uncertainty of the future means that we cannot know in advance what the impact of some of our actions will be, or how others will react to them. While we can anticipate some of the future discoveries which will be made, we know little about the impact they will have on our lives.

Foresight and Futures Studies offer concepts and methods to work with the difficulties of an uncertain future and to help us deal constructively with a rapidly changing present. They can assist the development of the ability to influence the future rather than merely predict it. To make the future happen for us rather than happen to us. By focusing attention on the future Foresight and Futures Studies is concerned with the direction that society is taking, rather than where it has come from. In doing so it offers a unique perspective and affords opportunities for the development of the understanding and skills necessary for dealing effectively with the future. As David Hunt wrote in the preface to the Report of the Technology Foresight Steering Group(5), "Foresight is clearly an initiative whose time has come."

(1) Orheim O (1992) 'The Norwegian Glacier Centre Publicity Pamphlet

(2) quoted by Jupp R and O'Neill G in Ireland 2000: Reflections on Ireland in the year 2000, Lansdowne Market Research and Henley Centre Ireland, 1994, Dublin

(3) Rifkin J (1995) 'The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labour Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era' Tarcher/Putnam

(4) 'The Practice of Intuition' Jay S Mendell, pages 141-148 in 'Handbook of Futures Research' J B Fowles, Greenwood 1978

(5) 'Progress Through Partnership,' The Report of the Steering Group of the Technology Foresight Programme (1995)