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## Book Review

***Foundations of Futures Studies: Human Sciences for a New Era***

Vol 1: History, Purposes, and Knowledge, (Wendell Bell) Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ, 1996, 365

**T**he preface to *The Foundations of Futures Studies* by Wendell Bell is dated 31 August 1995, the last day of the last academic year of his 43-year career. That date speaks to the significance of the book in his career and in the field of futures studies. The book is his legacy, a gift really, to his friends and colleagues in futures studies and to those who want to learn about the field.

A sociologist by training, Wendell Bell chose to practice his trade as a futurist, a social scientist of future phenomena, if you will. Wendell's real interest was the development of the field as an example of the sociology of knowledge. What can we know about the future? How can we use that knowledge for good?

The first of this two-volume work addresses the first question. Its scope is from Bertrand de Jouvenel's *The Art of Conjecture* [1], and it has the same solid feel of common sense and clear reasoning. It could be "The Art of Conjecture II: What We Have Learned Since 1967." Bell, the careful and reasonable observer, describes it all, including an outstanding 37-page bibliography. The book is like reading through Bell's orderly and thorough file cabinets, a summary of 30 years of an intellectual movement.

The purpose is primarily summation, first recounting the history of the field (as well as anyone has done) and addressing its perennial issues: The issues include the name of the field (an old war horse, to be sure), its purposes, assumptions, and methods, each getting a chapter of its own. This is familiar ground to professional futurists, but no one has collected it all in as complete or as useful a form until now. This book is a milestone in the development of the futures field.

Amidst the summary material, Bell also stakes out his own position on a few of the old chestnuts. What shall the field be called? He believes that "futurist" has already won the day, but the name of the field is still open. He opts for "futures studies, futures field or futures research" over its rivals (p. 70).

What shall we call statements about the future? He bucks the mainstream on this one and argues strongly that prediction is "a statement or assertion about how the future might turn out to be." (p. 98, italics added) He admits that a long list of futurists, including Marien, Masini, Jantsch, Slaughter, D. Bell and others, argue for making a distinction between predictions of certainty (what the future *will be*) versus forecasts of plausibility (what the future *might be*). Though Bell can define his terms however he wishes, his position is highly unusual, and it does little to put this question to rest.

His argument is that we rely on prediction everyday. Science uses prediction as the way to falsify hypotheses and control natural processes. Why not join the crowd and call our work what it is—predicting? He readily admits that "predictions may be multiple, conditional, contingent, corrigible, uncertain ..."—everything that forecasts are supposed to be (p. 107). What he really wants to do is to redefine "prediction" generally and get the other forecasters to think of their assertions the way futurists do.

That is a noble goal, but one that I believe is ultimately futile. The cost of pursuing that goal is to do away with the distinction between prediction and forecast. Futurists distinguish themselves from other forecasters, such as demographers, economists, and market researchers, by emphasizing the contingent nature of their forecasts and the relatively absolute nature of the others. Accepting Bell's definition would prevent futurists from making that all important distinction. So the debate goes on, but I do not see Bell's position prevailing.

Bell comes down on another perennial worry bead—Is Futures Studies an Art or a Science? (Chapter 4). His argument comes from his convincing 1987 article of the same name [2]. He argues that futures studies is very much a science because it looks outward on the world rather than inward on subjective experience. He admits that the practice of any

profession can be called an "art form" as a metaphor because all practitioners make use of subjective experience in forming judgments. Nevertheless scientists strive to depict the world as it is; artists as they see it. Artists may even distort their representations to communicate their experience more fully. Futures is about the world more than about how our experience of it.

This book does an even greater service by introducing people to the epistemology of critical realism as the framework for knowledge of the future. Critical realism hews a nice middle course between positivism, the philosophy of science that prevailed in the first half of the century, and postpositivism (or postmodernism), the reaction to positivism's deficiencies. Critical realism sides with positivism in agreeing that truthful knowledge of an objective world is possible. It sides with postmodernism in agreeing that the knowledge is fallible and, therefore, we can never know when our knowledge is true and certain [3]:

"The difference is between one of certain knowledge versus reasonable beliefs. Critical realists do not demand that the truth of the proposition be justified, only that a person is justified in believing the proposition is true. This, of course, allows for the possibility that conjectural knowledge is false. When that happens, however, critical realists say that what they believed was wrong, not that they were wrong to believe it. (paraphrased from p. 210).

"Critical realists ... believe that, even if a proposition cannot be justified as being true, the belief in the truth of a proposition can be justified as being reasonable. From this perspective there is little philosophical difference in justifying beliefs in assertions about past and present realities on the one hand and beliefs in assertions about the future on the other" (p. 221).

The notion of critical realism has many implications for the practice of futures studies, many of which Bell recounts. Work in the field proceeds in a "culture of critical discourse" [4] in which futurists continually attempt to falsify assertions about the future. In an evolutionary fashion, those assertions that survive become the truths of that era. De Jouvenel called it an "ecology of ideas," and modern evolutionists speak about the survival of memes (units of ideas) just like the survival of genes. In this conception, futures studies is no different from any scientific field or other community of discourse.

Unlike these points, however, most of the book is uncontroversial. Some of the sections tend to be "listy"—nine purposes, nine assumptions, 13 methods. He describes each one adequately in itself but does not discuss its relation to the others. On the purposes, for instance, Bell could distinguish between the knowledge (forecasting) and the action (planning) sides of the field. On the methods, those that are more qualitative from those more quantitative. Revealing the internal structure of

these lists would make the exposition more meaningful and memorable.

In sum, the book is an ambitious attempt to capture what we know about the study of the future Bell's version of Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum*. It will appeal to futurists as a benchmark in the development of their field although they will not find much new or controversial here. It will appeal to new students of the field as a careful delineation of its basic framework although it may go too deeply into epistemological matters for novices. One book serving both audiences cannot satisfy them all, but this book comes very close.

Wendell Bell has watched the futures field grow from its infancy to a credible, though not yet completely accepted, intellectual practice. He carefully assembled what it did and what it learned over that period. Now he shares that with us as his gift of a lifetime. Thank you, Wendell, for your care and your thoughtfulness. In typical selffulfilling fashion, its richness will nurture the field you so proudly describe.

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## References

1. Bell, Wendell. 1987. "Is the futures field an art form or can it become a science?" *Futures Research Quarterly* 3, No. 1 (Spring): 2744.
2. Gouldner, Alvin. 1985. *Against Fragmentation: The Origins of Marxism and the Sociology of Intellectuals*. New York: Oxford University Press.
3. de Jouvenel, Bertrand. 1967. *The Art of Conjecture*. New York: Basic Books.
4. Musgrave, Alan. 1993. *Common Sense, Science and Scepticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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## FUTURIST QUIZ ANSWERS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 1. Can we know the future? — a. Yes

About 50% usually answer Yes; about 50% No. Your answer, of course, depends on how you define "know." If by "know" you mean that you can predict what will happen, then the answer is obviously No. Efforts to predict the exact future of human systems are so prone to error that they are futile. However, if by "know" you mean what *might* or *could* happen, then the answer is a qualified Yes. Futurists hold that we can know the majority of plausible futures, if we relax our assumptions and preconceptions of what is possible.

### 2. Are there one or many futures? — b. Many

Despite half of the respondents answering No to #1, most people say there are many futures. The future is plural, not singular—hence the term "futures." The multiplicity of the future is a blessing. While we can know many if not most of the plausible futures, we cannot tell exactly what will happen until it does (and even then we are often not sure what *is* happening). On the other hand, the multiplicity of futures gives us freedom to influence what the future will be. If the future were one, it would be completely determined and our influence would be either negligible or preordained (like being a character in Isaac Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy*).

### 3. What is the longest that we can usefully forecast? — All are correct

The answer depends on the subject of the forecast. Actuaries and futurists prefer the longterm (more than 10 years); politicians and investors must be prepared for radical change in the shortterm (next week!). Contrary to what most business people think, the future beyond five years (the standard business planning horizon) can be useful, particularly when longterm investments or decisions are involved. Individuals, and even companies, also have more influence in the longterm. Shortterm outcomes are already determined for the most part. Consistent effort toward a goal over long periods, however, can produce amazing results, even when one's power or influence at any one time is small. Rock holds water in the shortrun, but water erodes rock in the long.

### 4. Which is better for understanding the longterm future? — b. Multiple possible futures

Would that we could have single, clear predictions that are useful! The problem is that predictions give a false sense of certainty and precision. Multiple possible futures are the best we can do and are therefore better for understanding the future. Unfortunately, some if not most clients prefer single, clear predictions. Futurists

(continued on page 14, column 1)