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Getting Past Cassandra: 21 C Slaughter

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### Highlights

- Planetary carrying capacity, critical boundaries, and limits to growth have been exceeded and overshoot and collapse futures appear inevitable
- The Western worldview based on materialism and endless economic growth is unsustainable and needs to balance inner and outer development
- Futures studies and applied foresight are essential to overcome short-term thinking and to apply a new set of values for inner growth
- The failure of universities to support and nurture foresight education demands that independent institutions of foresight fill the gap
- Alternative futures are attenuated and descent futures are preferred over doom and gloom collapse imagery

### Abstract

This is a review of 10 articles of Richard Slaughter over a 25 year that address themes related to overshoot and collapse futures. The articles are principally from the 21st century and primarily deal with the responses, or the lack thereof, to the acceleration of global warming and the peak oil crisis. The articles reflect a growing despair that too little is being done too late to avoid catastrophe. Subthemes include the MIT Limits to Growth modeling, integral thinking and design, institutions of foresight, critical futures, complexity and uncertainty, and the importance of long-term thinking, alternatives to the growth economic paradigm, and foresight education are emphasized. Slaughter's influences on the reviewer are also discussed.

Keywords: futures studies, applied foresight, overshoot and collapse, integral futures, four quadrant model, critical futures

These selections of Slaughter's work are his *overshoot and collapse* body of literature. The first article (Slaughter 1996) chronologically was a brief introduction to his reasons for becoming a futurist, a reminder to me that we are "all about our stories," that this discourse is personal and how his view from a quarter century ago foreshadowed his writing in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We have known each other for over 30 years and worked closely during the first five years of the new century. We spent the day in together in Brasov, Romania on September 10, 2001—the day before the 9/11 attacks when we were flying home. That was the beginning of our terms (2001-2005) as President and Secretary-General of the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF). Re-reading Slaughter (1996), I was reminded that we had parallel experiences becoming acquainted with the founders of the field, he in 1980 in Toronto, I in Stockholm in 1981, and of the powerful impact of living in Bermuda for him, Puerto Rico and the Pacific Islands for

me. Of all the themes in this virtual special issue, this theme aligns most closely with and parallels my own journey in futures studies (FS), applied foresight (AF), institutions of foresight (IOFs), and higher education.

Slaughter (1996) was aspirational, advocating for a re-enchanted world (following Berman) and futures, but the theme selections culminate in a darker 2020, as will be obvious to readers of these selections; Slaughter sees the prospects for our futures diminished. He had optimism and hope for the field, the emerging insights “giving us new choices,” and some measure of steering capacity across the “future landscape” (p. 676). Many of the subthemes of 21C Slaughter were there: Ken Wilber, layered analysis, overshoot and collapse, the challenge of materialism, need to transcend the industrial worldview, and his preference for futures that are more equitable, inclusive, and healthy. Slaughter’s writings over the subsequent years have added nuance and complexity to these essential elements of his discourse about humans and their impacts on planet Earth and our civilizational futures.

Whereas Slaughter (1996) provided background to understand his futures and foresight journey, his “personal agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Slaughter 2000) set a tone for the remaining articles in this series. “Everything is at stake:” normalcy, hopes for improvement in the human condition, and “the reassuring surface of everyday life” (p. 43). He described what Sardar (2010) and others would later call *postnormal times*. In the year 2000, we were just beginning a great transition before the human conditions could be improved. His observations about the troubles to come have clearly been realized in 2020 as we navigate a global pandemic (peaking in the USA at the time of this writing) and growing climate change disasters. Widespread starvation likely to be realized in 2021-2022 in the wake of COVID-19 underscores his pessimism in 2000 if the international community fails to respond in time.

He asserted that the Western worldview is defective and that it will not be sustainable in the long term, a recurrent subtheme. His desire was/is to see the celebration of being, of spiritual growth, and the ability to experience transcendence—currently undervalued or ignored in the mainstream worldview. He noted the prospect of immense suffering ahead. He tempered that bleak outlook by envisioning more balanced inner as well as outer development. Here we see the roots of Slaughter’s growing interest in Wilber (and Buddhism) in *integral thinking’s* application to the future, as a macrohistorical object. “Humanity is partway through a very long sequence of revolutionary development (both inner and outer)” (p. 48). But it is that gap in foresight work – the lack of attention to inner personal growth and development, spirituality, emotional healing and growth that Slaughter clearly hopes to fill.

His article also introduced another subtheme, IOFs, a familiar topic over the course of his writing. As he acknowledged earlier, higher education has been a blessing and a curse—administrators in particular—to the emerging field, and he has continued to see IOFs as another gap to fill the void and the absence of university interest in FS and AF. The growth of the Association of Professional Futurists and proliferation of new IOFs in the past two decades indicate that these organizations and networks are beginning to fill the gap that universities have neglected. A small handful of universities around the planet continue to support FS programs, and the number of certificate

programs, training, and webinars offered independently of universities is now expanding visibly, in large measure driven by the pandemic and Zoom teleconferencing technology. It is worth calling out the conclusion to this piece where he calls for more voices, more diversity and inclusion, of previously marginalized and excluded communities from conversations about human futures.

Slaughter (2002) positioned FS as a macrohistorical or civilizational artefact—a hyperobject to borrow from Morton (2013). This paper stands out as a thoughtful and insightful prospectus for futures, with an optimistic hope for human agency, the creative human spirit, and better foresight to adapt and adjust to the great transition and confront or embrace the “civilizational challenge” ahead. The challenges to him clearly included not only the outputs of industrialization and material culture, but the inner realities and assumptions about limitless growth and perceptions that nature’s bounty was unlimited. The assumptions are erroneous and according to Slaughter, global elites “party like there is no tomorrow.” The article addressed the connections between FS and the civilizational challenge: limitations of the residual industrial worldview, the “flatland” as Wilber called it; growth ideologies; devastation of the global environment; and, short-term thinking—the most dangerous of all.

His recommendations (2002) included: shared meta-goals, the decolonization of futures knowledge, community access to foresight, design of foresight cultures, and higher standards in FS, quantum jump in the use of FS in educational contexts, furthering evolution of the FS knowledge base, IOF innovations, and the elaboration of futures themes in mass media. Nearly 20 years later, while the field has matured in some ways, it appears increasingly fragmented and insular. The APF is growing and becomes increasingly international; it represents hundreds of individuals and small and medium organizations, most of which do proprietary work. The WFSF is stable but only maintains a small membership of international professional futurists and academics. The World Future Society, once a core IOF, is dormant... the vision of shared meta-goals still appears distant. One glimmer of hope is the extent to which futures materials and research, community action and participatory action research projects, and foresight workshops are available free and online, or through universities. Teach the Future is a prime example of one global initiative seeking to transform futures education and literacy from the ground up. UNESCO continues to support futures literacy and global initiatives on resilience and anticipation studies. There clearly has not been a quantum jump in educational access, and arguably is backsliding. The impact of pandemic education across the board is also adding uncertainty to the foresight education project, on the one hand SARS-Cov2 has encouraged and exacerbated short term thinking, and yet on the other hand, has also raised broader questions about growth and the tensions between economic survival and public health considerations.

The knowledge base does continue to grow and there is a vibrancy in social media space, particularly webcasts, webinars, and podcasts. No surprise, again, that those media and technology has flourished in pandemic times with remote working and social isolation restrictions. IOFs are particularly well-suited and aligned with social media and telecommunications modalities and are also better positioned to adapt to changing circumstances. My network, the Centre for Postnormal Policy and Futures Studies (where I am a

Senior Fellow) was a distributed, international network before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the pandemic and lockdowns have encouraged more effective use virtual space. Over the past year, air travel and meetings have been replaced by Zoom and Miro. Large foresight companies like Shaping Tomorrow are using AI to manage scanning and trend analysis further extending the depth and reach of the knowledge base.

Slaughter (2002) concluded that the essence of the civilizational challenge was very simple: wake up or die, a theme and part of the title of his *Biggest Wake Up Call in History* (2010a). He was still upbeat and optimistic in the 2002 article that captured his take on the field at the time he became president of the WFSF. This was when we began working as executives of the organization and, if anything, he was the optimist to my gentle Cassandra. In Romania we spend considerable time together and one evening dining with Harlan Cleveland, Romanian officials, and board members, Richard shared his vision of the federation, tempered by many of the forces buffeting humanity at the opening of the new century. His sober assessment was matched by his commitment to FSAF and IOFs, reciprocating the faith placed in him by federation members who voted for him. It is no fault of his if futures has not lived up to his vision.

I added a 2010 article that evaluated overshoot and collapse futures. Slaughter's (2010b) level of concern about the global state of affairs is evident in this piece, devoted to the *Limits to Growth* and Gaian perspectives on the futures of civilization of the earth. There are clearly parallels in our own thinking and analysis. He and I completed the first dissertations in the field. By 2010 we had been friends for two decades, wining and dining in far flung places: adventures in Cold War Hungary, hiking, birdwatching, and body surfing in Hawaii, and over the years, conferences in Australia, Taiwan, Romania, and the USA. We organized two international WFSF conferences, one in Japan and Hungary. His own writing in FS and AF was influential, but his leadership, promotion of IOFs, the *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* CD effort, and outspoken critical perspective all had an influence on my professional life. Our term as WFSF executives was the culmination of our professional relationship. My position as Secretary-General coincided with my hiring at the University of Houston Clearlake MS in Studies of the Future program (2000-2003), as a visiting professor, and Richard's friendship and support were critical during turbulent times at the university, particularly when the program closed three years after my arrival. We drifted apart in the latter part of the decade; I wandered in the deserts and mesa lands of western Colorado, figuratively, took a break from futures, took odd academic jobs, and completed Iyengar yoga teacher training. Richard's path was steadier.

The 2010 work is notable for a classic treatment of the MIT study and the controversy surrounding the *Limits to Growth* (LtG) and a look at Lovelock's Gaia theory—a core element of my dissertation, *Gaia Futures* (1989). In a nutshell, he claimed that collapse is upon us, and that overshoot of earth's carrying capacity was passed in the 1980s. International efforts to curb fossil fuel use and reduce CO<sub>2</sub> have been ineffective, and the growth machine continues to grind on. The LtG has had an outsized role in futures studies. Not only has it been grist for the mill when considering scenarios, growth curves, computer models, systems analysis, and the global *problematique* (Slaughter's civilizational challenge), but part of the sinew and fabric of FS, particularly the WFSF. I met Aurelio Peccei, president of the Club of Rome, in my first futures

conference. Mankind at the Turning Point and the Club of Rome where are precursors of debates about growth and carrying capacity that continue to this day and are part of the DNA of the futures movement. Slaughter's defense of LtG is spot-on and moreover the "standard run" results suggest that the global system will come unhinged by 2050. Recent IPCC and UN reports indicate that even more serious climate warming will occur if CO<sub>2</sub> levels are not substantially reduced by 2030; growth of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere continue unabated. He made a compelling case for coming catastrophe due to the delays and feedback loops baked into the system.

By 2010, Slaughter was convinced that the "goose is cooked." He cited Lovelock who predicted that the planetary-scale changes we have set in motion will result in average global temperatures 6° to 8° C higher than today. Civilization may be forced to the poles to survive in the very long term. We have already passed a number of planetary boundaries (climate change, species extinction, the nitrogen cycle)—a theme that Slaughter returns to in subsequent writing. He draws on Diamond, Tainter, and others to paint a picture of how and why Western civilization is teetering on the edge. If the LtG set the context for the interplay between resources, energy use, and pollution, Tainter posits that as societies become more complex, greater marginal energy is required to manage change and growth. At some point, complexity, at least in some past societies, have become unmanageable or simply required too much additional energy to be sustained. A corollary is Jevons paradox, where technological complexity or government policy increases the efficiency with which a resource is used, but the rate of consumption rises to meet the demand. Slaughter said that it is time to wake up, or we will see vast suffering and disruption. He noted that "humanity has become a global force in its own right but is still thinking and behaving as if it lived in a world without limits that could continue to absorb impacts and insults of all kinds without consequence" (p. 16). If we don't collectively find ways to restructure economics, shift growth from outer to inner, and confront values that no longer serve us as a planetary species, we are in for big trouble.

Slaughter (2011) returned to the trouble—now "the global megacrisis"—and introduces his four-quadrant integral perspective model based on Wilber (covered in depth in *the Biggest Wake up Call*, where he also applies to futures thinking the color codes inspired by spiral dynamics). This is arguably his biggest contribution to layered analysis in futures thinking, spawning many others to apply the model (Collins and Hines 2010) to futures analysis. His message is clear: we can't make headway on the global mega crisis if only a few of the quadrants are addressed, that inner development of both the collective and individual are required to balance the overdevelopment in outer realms. He returned to the need for expanded IOF capacity and reach.

His next piece (2012) was a synthesis and continuation of a number of themes and used the neologism of the Anthropocene to continue his warning call to address the global megacrisis and the postnormal contradictions of the "late cornucopian" age. He asked us to pay more attention to global change: to "start recognizing the signals of change and understanding their significance" (p. 121). He described Fry's work on *design futuring* and noted the anthropomorphism that leads us to see and act upon the world instrumentally, not seeing the externalities and shared commons. He also noted that universities have largely failed to embrace foresight, and they remain largely caught up in the instrumental growth paradigm. He asserted that universities need

to take the lead and gear up for the transitions ahead. Sadly, in the interim, short-term and bottom-line thinking seem to have carried the day. Universities' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated their inability to adjust to disruptive change. Slaughter concluded by calling, again, for revaluing futures studies education, environmental scanning, and applied foresight.

Floyd and Slaughter (2014) and Slaughter (2014, 2015) acknowledge the Cassandra nature of the work and analysis. While prescient, those messages and warnings about the immanent Collapse continue to fall on deaf ears. Political and business leaders continue to be captive to short-termism. Slaughter emphasized that he is not preaching *doom and gloom* but presenting an emerging global reality that will not go away, that will not be undone. It must be endured. He asks us not to focus on the Collapse itself/its myriad manifestations, but to help explore and design descent pathways, routes ahead that negotiate the damage already done, and find accommodation with planetary boundaries and honor the kin (see: Haraway 2017). He wants to move beyond the growth paradigm, beyond doom and gloom, and beyond playing Cassandra.

Floyd and Slaughter (2014) asked us to consider alternative pathways to *crash*: "moderate" descent. One is reminded of the LtG models that result in post-crash plateaus or relative equilibrium. A new normal? Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York: 2140* (2017) posits the likelihood of at least three major "pulses" of sea level rise as Greenland and Antarctica shed ice shelves over the next century. Similarly, the ripple effects of the early Anthropocene are likely to be felt for centuries and millennia ahead. In an understandable effort to change the narrative, Floyd and Slaughter suggested that we need to call what is going on *climate disruption*, rather than global warming. My own writing has adopted *global weirding* in a similar fashion (Jones 2019), to encompass the growing intensity, complexity, and chaos in climate and ocean circulation systems. Central to Slaughter's tack to the future in 2014 is the idea, introduced in previous papers and the 2010 book, of denial and denialism in response to the global emergency. It is this resistance to accepting the global weirding reality that has led to inaction and avoidance, to business-as-usual. In spite of the logic and message of 40-plus years of work on LtG, the evidence grows that we are accelerating past the turning point. His refrain: "...a new, or renewed agenda for futures and foresight work is essential" (Slaughter 2014, p. 528). Who is listening?

Or: there are powerful voices obscuring and subverting the message. Slaughter noted the work investigating conservative and fossil fuel industry groups that sow climate change doubt and spend hundreds of millions of dollars to do so. Since the piece was written, the Trump administration in the USA took denial to its pinnacle and may have done irreparable damage by building and reinforcing social media networks based on conspiracy theories and disinformation. The forces of denial are likely to continue to advance the narrative of uncertainty and distrust, in spite of the overwhelming scientific consensus and concern that trends are growing worse than anticipated. The conservative nature of the peer review process, and meta-analysis of climate research tends to downplay worst case or more extreme scenarios, at the very time we need to consider the unthinkable and to engage more deeply with what it is we do not know, our ignorance and deeper levels of uncertainty. He gives exemplars and positive responses, such as the *degrowth* movement, but in the end Western civilization is only left with paths that abide entropic principles and honor planetary boundaries.

He reasoned in the last article “Farewell Alternative Futures?” (2020) that alternative futures have been attenuated or foreclosed, because collapse and various flavors of descent are the only futures left. He argued that the use of normative alternative futures signified optimism and a sense of agency in the field to envision and imagine preferred futures. He noted in the article that he draws a distinction between this general use of alternative futures and “images of the future,” but I think that is a false distinction.<sup>1</sup> In the Alternative Futures program, we were taught that the boundaries between futures were permeable, and that one future could potentially morph into another. That is, the Continued Growth future could become a Collapse or Disciplined Society, and that from Collapse could come any of the others. I see no indication that those images of the future have disappeared, although clearly Collapse and catastrophe images have become a more present and persistent possibility. The emergence of a green Disciplined future is not out of question as a backlash later this century. Fundamentalist greens still exist. The degrowth movement, anti-globalization, and anti-colonialization forces have not gone away. The transhumanist movement is still making noise. Disciplined futures bubble away around Trump, Bolsonaro, and other authoritarian regimes fueled by social media, alienated populations suffering from future shock, and fueled by vast conspiracy theories. My point is that alternative futures and alternative futures images will not go away because of catastrophe, but are likely to be reignited and express the inner desires and creativity of people, particularly the young. I do agree that a focus on doom and gloom does distract from those visions.

In spite of what I think it was a faulty premise, I wholeheartedly concur with everything Slaughter (2020) has to say. While he did not refer to the work being done in postnormal times analysis and futures work<sup>2</sup>, he did address VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) and the role of systems thinking, complexity, unpredictability, and unexpected developments. He pointed a finger at the role of neoliberalism, denialism, and forces of resistance to change that he argued may only make the crash worse. After touching on many of the themes in this selection: planetary boundaries, critical futures, applied foresight, and the global emergency crisis and futures studies in a macrohistorical context, he left us with two futures. The upbeat version with monstrous problems but shifts to “survival, healing and recovery” (p. 13). The downbeat version is a future where all societies are in some stage of collapse, with uncertainty about what will remain once the planet adapts to the disruptions of the Anthropocene. What struck me was his use of a “best case/worst case” approach. For my part, there are too many moving parts, an infinite number of combining variables and factors that will determine what our futures are. There is still a spectrum, a multiplicity, of alternative futures.

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<sup>1</sup> Full disclosure: my Masters in Political Science at the University of Hawaii at Manoa was a concentration in Alternative Futures and my PhD was completed in the futures program under Jim Dator. He developed the four futures approach that included 4-5 archetypal images of the future derived from popular images of the future. The work based on Polak posits that futures are realized by the images that people have in their heads.

<sup>2</sup> Sardar’s (2010) postnormal times analysis considers the speed, scope, scale, and simultaneity of change across technological, economic, political, and environmental change. Multiple domains and systems demonstrate growing complexity, chaos, and contradictions. The result is layers of ignorance and uncertainty.

Beyond degrowth is analysis such as Morton (2013) and others who have argued that the roots of the Anthropocene are in the invention of agriculture 12 to 15,000 years ago. Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1972) argued decades ago that hunter gather societies devoted far less time to “work” compared to either agricultural or industrial societies. Given that humanity’s “normal” state of existence for millennia was nomadic, that certainly is one potential future. It is mostly unthought futures like this that this that need exploration. My own speculation about the collapse is informed by Wallace-Wells (2019), whom Slaughter acknowledged, who reminded us that for some populations on the planet, such as indigenous peoples, the Collapse has been unfolding for the last 500 years. First Peoples and remaining hunter gatherer cultures, and subsistence economies—to the extent that they exist—should be cultivated and supported: they may be critical links and resources to survive in “wilder” futures. Furthermore, Wallace-Wells suggested that Collapse will be uneven, come in cascades, and the evidence supports the idea that the bottom billions will be the first victims. Elites will spare no expense to sustain, at least for some time, city states, walled communities, and castles of high technology splendor, or even colonies on Venus or Mars. It is not hard to imagine a fractured global system with high-tech cities, garrison states, and the wastelands portrayed in myriad postapocalyptic movies and novels. Of course, as Slaughter points out, there is also the potential for human extinction and the risks are high.

One thing that Slaughter does not seem to acknowledge are the prospects of wild card events, black swan events, that could provide either opportunities or even greater challenges in the face of global weirding. In any case, it is incumbent on us as responsible futurists to consider his analysis, and hope that he is wrong, and work to avoid the outcomes that he fears. As a thought leader, one of FS/AF’s most prolific writers, a scholar-practitioner of global stature, innovator, and student of inner experience, we will continue to take Richard Slaughter’s words to heart.

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