

# New Windows onto New Worlds: Final Thoughts on the Future of Strategic Foresight

Richard Hames  
Asian Foresight Institute  
Thailand

## Hypothesis

Set against the rich tapestry of mankind's evolution on this planet our current era seems increasingly to be characterised (at least through Western eyes) by escalating turmoil and disquiet on so many different fronts. The scent of suffering and uncertainty hangs eerily in the air - the hint of fragrance perceptible only to those who have become attuned to a gnostic sensitivity informed by cross-cultural meme assimilation.

A feeling that our lives are spinning out of control is made all the more palpable by three overwhelming factors:

1. Asymmetric affluence in the post-industrial world compared to the crushing poverty, inequality and injustice experienced by citizens elsewhere.
2. Western hubris that allows empires in decline to believe it is their exclusive right to resolve all its autogenous problems – even if they had the capacity to do so. Which they do not.
3. Our willingness to give up serious public discourse in return for a media intent on diverting collective attention via a mix of sanitised news, entertaining pap and a seemingly endless parade of celebrities behaving badly.

Linear progress itself has become a dangerous delusion. One has only to reflect on the news headlines that bombard us throughout our waking hours: an unremitting nightmare of horror, corruption, ecological catastrophe and the spiralling costs of even the most basic elements required to sustain life – nutritious food, potable water and plentiful energy. In all of this turmoil our humanity has gone missing. Purer intentions have been lost. We are in thrall to materialism; obsessed by economic and political power in ways that could easily wreck our way of life - if the past collapse of previous civilisations is any judge. Unknowingly perhaps, but frighteningly real nevertheless, our actions have spawned almost perfect conditions for the mass extinction of homo sapiens. The truly terrifying spectre is that we have developed an awareness to know this is the case as well as the intelligence to do something about it. But is it too late for wisdom to prevail?

Over the coming decades we will need to redesign the material basis of our civilisation. We have no collective cognition of how to do this. There are no narratives in the archives of antiquity to which we can refer. There is no process flow chart. No rule book. No training manual. No compass directing us towards more desirable futures. Nor is there much leadership.

But wait. Perhaps we have been looking in the wrong places for viable solutions. Despair, after all, does not loom large in humanity's chronicles. The human spirit is far too resilient and adventurous for that. Optimism and hope can spread its wings once again.

Already an emerging consciousness is evident in certain quarters, particularly among the young who are not weighed down by the gravitational pull of the past and also in parts of the world relatively unsullied by the dominance of the prevailing materialism of the civilisational worldview. This is especially apparent in parts of Asia and across the Global South.

In pockets around the world a cadre of enlightened, purposeful and interconnected individuals is emerging. Many of these people live in places where their voices have been hard to hear as yet. Their ideas, often transcending discrete cultures, ideologies and history, have not yet influenced mainstream debate because of poverty, geography, ostracism and, in places oppression. Their unique experiences can help us comprehend what needs to be done and we need to listen loudly to propositions offering genuine alternatives to the overbearing Western paradigm that locks us into a cycle of endless economic growth, escalating production and excessive consumption.

The way forward is not contained within conventional approaches, competitive states or ideas of national primacy - even less in trying to dominate nature or ignore humanity's impact on the biosphere. On the contrary it is embodied within integral intelligence, collaborative networks, appreciative systems and, above all I believe, the liberation of wisdom through epistemological foresight.

But in order for these new voices to be heard, their ideas incorporated into global dialogue and their advice acted upon, we all need to think differently. Innovation has to embed at the level of human purpose, strategic philosophy and societal institutions. Only then might we create a context that allows us to see differently. And seeing differently is necessary if we are to behave differently.

Futuring (the practice of strategic foresight) has rarely been utilised as an enabler of intentional evolutionary design. Most of the time it has lapsed into abridged models and tools that remain both disconnected from pragmatic political, commercial and social realities on the one hand, while burdened by a lack of imagination on the other. Foresight as most commonly practiced (with its emphasis on coherent trends and its appropriation by pop science, engineering and technology) oscillates between tedious logic at one extreme and seductive clairvoyance at the other. It has become just another instructional toolkit. It is no longer transformative, either in form or content. Furthermore it has become paralysed by a cognitive paradox: we seek to understand an indistinct future using patterns and metrics decipherable only from past performance—the antithesis of foresight!

It follows that the future praxis of strategic foresight offers us a rare opportunity to create unique value through demolishing orthodoxies that are well past their shelf life while liberating new wisdom. Whatever form that might take, and whatever tools are used for that purpose, we must remain mindful that the ultimate goal is (a) to design engaging methods for imagining viable pathways that (b) shed light on how we can make provision for the future needs of humanity (c) in ways that lead to more intelligent, resilient choices and through the demonstration of more coherent, empathetic collaboration than has previously been possible.

Epistemological foresight<sup>1</sup> (a deeply systemic framework for comprehending and reacting to panarchic<sup>2</sup> relationships at a paradigmatic level in which intuition and reason are interwoven across individual and collective levels of human experience) offers us one such pathway - but only as long as we remain open to the implicit systemic and existential challenges this framework introduces.

The most challenging of these is the need to transcend the civilisational worldview

to which most of humanity unconsciously subscribes in one way or another.

## Epistemological Pathologies

The civilisational worldview is as natural to us as the air we breathe. We are not conscious of any other framework. And while some of us may resist certain facets of this worldview at an instinctive level we still respond autonomically to its general principles - an implicit framework guiding meaning-making and which we assume to be just a normal part of being human. In effect it is the life-condition we discern, experience each day of our life, and in which we are immersed from birth.

This worldview has endured at least since feudal times and possibly much longer. Along the way it has been reified by sundry beliefs related to human purpose and capability, tested by competing ideologies and sustained by five moral impulses. These five foundational moral impulses are best depicted as (i) it is wrong to hurt people (ii) justice and fairness are good qualities (iii) allegiance, loyalty and patriotism are virtues (iv) people should respect social hierarchy (v) purity and sanctity are good while contamination and pollution (and their associated character traits of greed and lust) are bad. Note that different cultures and groups bring different weightings to these shared five moral imperatives.

These theories, ideologies and impulses have been progressively moulded into a set of seven deeply ingrained tenets defining what the majority of humanity believes to be real - and consequently incontrovertible truths in terms of the human condition:

1. A powerful elite serviced by a cooperative, subservient, underclass of serfs
2. Wealth and power held by the elite and protected via state political, military or policing mechanisms
3. A religious or mythical structure (in some instances where the elite are commonly depicted as representatives of a deity or divine beings) often used to manufacture consent
4. An industrial war machine, seen as a crucial driver of the economy, in which all aspects of production are controlled by the elite
5. Sport, entertainment, education and media are used as a social distraction in ways that help maintain compliance within the social order
6. Nature and the environment are exploited as a “god given” right
7. An irresistible narrative within society based upon competition, indifference and scarcity - rather than cooperation, empathy and abundance.

This set of seven attributes does not imply universally applicable monist integrity. On the contrary our worldview is a chameleon, changing its tone, colour and intensity according to its surroundings or, in a social context, its culture. But the critical thing to appreciate is that this worldview was invented by us. It is a social construction and, as such, can be remodelled if that is what we want.

A more profound dimension of the worldview that we must take into account is the variances that occur within and between different cultural mindsets. Of course taking cultural mindsets and their associated value systems into account can complicate matters considerably. Let me explain. There are currently three dominant mindsets in our world-system: these are the Occidental, the Sinic and the Indic mindsets. Each aspires to perceive knowledge accurately yet sees truth and beauty, and interprets goodness, in different ways.

The Occidental mindset, for example, overwhelmingly sees reality as a logically

explicable system of physical artefacts, calibrations and observable phenomena. This mindset has been dominated by scientific rationalism. In comparison, the Indic mindset sets far greater store on iterative cycles of internal reflection and spiritual transcendence, the prominence accorded to the relationship of the individual soul to the manifestation of external phenomena amounting almost to an ecological metaphysic. The Sinic mindset is different again, cherishing balance in all things – the feminine yin and the masculine yang preserving a delicate equilibrium between extremes.

There are other secondary mindsets that were once considerably more important in locally circumscribed situations than they are today in a global context. The ancient Amerindian, African Ubuntu and various Indigenous mindsets, for example, hold far less sway in today's world, largely because they signify values, relationships and ideals that do not sit comfortably with our addiction to material wealth and scientific progress. These islands of humanity serve as observatories where gender, social order, symbiosis and persistent narrative can inform many of our inquiries. For that very reason we should be paying more attention to them, specifically in terms of how we might develop a greater consciousness of evolving to a less exploitative worldview where communities can live in harmony with each other and nature.

Finally, to make things even more fascinating, there are subtle hybrids that blur the distinctions between multiple mindsets - as in the recent amalgam of the dominant contemporary mindsets across much of Asia, resulting in part from globalisation as well as the intended and unintended remnants of imperialism.

Thus a multitude of different interpretations and understandings can materialise from societies operating from within differing cultural mindsets – to the extent that extreme behavioural divergence between them is often evident even though the worldview itself, we must remember, is a shared phenomenon.

So, depending upon our cultural upbringing and mode of induction into the modern world-system, we will inevitably perceive, translate and respond to any crisis within the civilisational worldview through a distorting lens and with an intensity that differs from one society to the next, reflecting deeply implanted cultural attributes. It is only comparatively recently that there has been any rigorous critical appraisal of the civilisational worldview. But there are now sufficient numbers of highly complex, interconnected, escalating, seemingly irresolvable problems created or nourished by this worldview, that are leading many thoughtful individuals to question how much longer its entropic nature can persist before totally unravelling into chaos. This is not whimsy but a grave epistemological issue and one best suited to exploration through integral foresight.

## **Intentional Evolution**

There are far more inspiring alternatives to the enervating cynicism, uncertainties and increasingly shrill revelations of impending disaster that flood our daily lives in the Occidental mind. Stories that may offer hope and intentions that chronicle a brighter future for all. Human civilisation is in a state of transition. Indeed I believe we have reached a developmental crisis point - one that necessitates a redefinition of what we interpret to be progress. Yet while we can only analyse past transitions, the future paradigm is ours to invent. Along with technological revolutions, socioeconomic crises offer exceptional opportunities to move to higher levels of evolution. We just need to be able to see the promise of societal renewal with greater clarity and conviction, which is why epistemology (the framework of understanding within which we make meaning)

becomes so vital.

Contextual dynamics both establish and reflect dominant belief systems in the culture. An appreciation of context becomes particularly critical when evolution is required in the ideas and institutions defining our culture. It is the ideal time to be learning from the Sinic and Indic cultural traditions as an alternative to insisting upon the validity of a superior Occidental position. The various indigenous mindsets, too, enable an entirely different quality of reaction to the global crises than that afforded through the Occidental lens. Most symbolise their relationship to the external world as mythical: if Earth is mother then destruction of the Earth equates to the pillage and rape of the community's identity and soul.

Possibly the most profound transition in history, one that has taken literally hundreds of years so far and is still far from completion, was the move away from pious notions of an infallible 'maker' or supreme being, to the concept of scientific materialism. Here it is the physical world that really matters. This shift required discarding deeply imprinted fears and fallacies. Unsurprisingly it led to the modern obsession with material goods and the acquisition of personal wealth.

But evolution cannot stop there. Among the most vital of contemporary principles is the rejection of the idea of the world as a machine and the adoption of the world as a living, interconnected, ecosystem. The transition towards a new society instilled with such a fundamental ontological shift appears most likely to lead to a new holistic consciousness that integrates both science and spirit.

Today, the voice of every citizen can be heard. Individuals can contribute to a global community of mind (a collective intelligence for change) should they wish to do so. Indeed some pundits argue the case that it is impossible to remain quarantined from such participation, given the potency and insidious nature of new social media. Furthermore, social networks help create the *collective consciousness* we so urgently need to reboot civilization.

In attempting to address the inevitable impacts of our crowded hot planet on individual lifestyles the application of collective intelligence, supported by all the innate wisdom and expertise we can muster, is vital. But whereas collective intelligence urges the immediate deployment of smart technologies, a shift to clean energy and the rapid phasing out of toxic products and practices, wisdom entreats us to pause, to change the conversation, to pose questions that are currently not part of the dialogue.

The most urgent questions for humanity no longer focus on discrete issues and their impact but on how we can adapt and evolve to changing conditions, lessening the damage wherever we can and exploiting opportunities that are bound to emerge and delaying more serious consequences. There are two philosophical questions we need to answer: how can we tread more lightly on this planet and how can we preserve for future generations what is uniquely beautiful and inherently precious about our world?

## A Critical Role

So how do we achieve maturity in our response to these questions? On deeper, more spiritual issues, such as how we can accelerate our capacity to adapt to the laws of physics in ways that enable more sustainable relationships, with each other and with the Earth, there has been a deafening silence.

Within this context the role of foresight is critical. But the methodology itself will need to evolve and adapt as an integral praxis in the following ways:

1. Practitioners must awaken to their role as curators of authentic integral

experiences. Active self-reflection in the quest towards self-mastery has to be a pre-requisite for evolving foresight theory and praxis. It is only when mastery is fully achieved that more relevant questions around design can surface and be transparently explored. If an important part of our work is to facilitate the intentional evolution of society we need first to engage in that project at a deeply intimate and personal level. Viewing *self* as a mechanism for transition needs to be part of the process of bringing greater clarity, depth and rigor to the field and its efforts.

2. We must ensure that foresight invites the possibility for identifying the true nature of individual and collective pathologies as well as putting forward solutions that are systemically viable and strategically resilient in a context that is morphing by the minute. The former demands integral intelligence, uncompromised by filtering and compartmentalized thinking. The latter requires a genuine blend of systemic consciousness and imagination coupled with commercial pragmatism and entrepreneurial flair.
3. Foresight must shift from its obsession with technology and uncomplicated issues to encompass a broader mix of “higher altitude” observations about the purpose of humanity, the provisioning of resources to accommodate the needs of an escalating global population, design criteria for social change, disparities between affluent and less privileged individuals and communities, and the rules and conventions that exacerbate division, competition and conflict within society.
4. Tools and methods must embrace both collective insights and expert opinion in an attempt to transcend obsolete knowledge and epistemologies in the co-design of new wisdom. This will take an expansive process of collaborative inquiry blended with a curated dialogue that probes far more deeply into our inner belief systems and collective cultural traits than has hitherto been considered relevant.
5. Foresight must move from conventional environments into immersive decision theatres (i) that facilitate the visualisation of dynamically complex patterns, (ii) where an intense interrogation of intended and unintended consequences can be undertaken more rigorously and comprehensively, and (iii) where solutions can be prototyped and stress-tested.
6. Whole-system, collaborative inquiry and design conversations must take pre-eminence over increasingly hackneyed foresight methods. This is critical if we are to engage a broader clientele in understanding that emergent patterns in our systems are simply the product of the way the system has been designed to work.
7. Foresight can no longer simply be about the future. It must pull information from past and future states into an “expanded now” of new consciousness. In this way the field of strategic foresight itself can be expanded, becoming genuinely transformative and therefore more strategically significant.

## Future Pathways

Traditional foresight methods have been remarkably useful in the development of a more sophisticated approach to strategic thinking - especially in allowing us to imagine and rehearse what we would do if future realities turn out not to match our best-informed guesses. Today these same methods require philosophical and operational

upgrades if they are to remain relevant. We must think again. And differently this time. Not only through different lenses but also from a variety of altitudes. Integral foresight methods can help us move beyond the civilisational worldview by:

- Reimagining our collective purpose - ensuring that prosperity, well-being, equity and justice are rights to be inherited and enjoyed by all human beings
- Separating private ownership from shared assets (like the sky, knowledge, silence, the Internet, forests, oceans, ecosystems and our cultural heritage and traditions, for example) thus ensuring protection and management of our common wealth
- Manifesting creative alternatives to current patterns of production and consumption by focusing on shared sufficiency rather than selfish excess
- Restoring the centrality of storytelling and praxis, including engagement of functionality and beauty to our lives within limits determined by natural laws over which we have no control.

Essentially these four imperatives equate to society’s new bottom line. They are nonnegotiable. The real difficulty is that they require us to find ways of integrating and transcending current praxis in order to address more fundamental issues than just climate change or food prices or terrorist activities. They call for a compelling vision. In the absence of compelling and appropriate narratives, and of a unified global purpose, together with the necessary collaborative will and mechanisms needed to escape “lock-in” to an unwanted destiny, society will struggle to achieve the resilience, imagination and consciousness required to adequately transform its state of being and to create better futures.

So what do we imagine when we speak of a “better” future? What inspires us about this future? And how does it stack up with what we already have and what we believe we may be about to lose? These are critical questions and we need to find answers fast. Again, integral foresight is an enabler we ignore at our cost.

## What If Not Progress?

At least since the industrial revolution, possibly before, the Occidental mindset has been conditioned to identify progress in concrete terms. By and large material wealth (together with its entourage of by-products emphasising status, style, experiences, gadgets and technical wizardry, in addition to the speed and persistence needed to acquire these of course) is what Westerners gauge, compare and value. What is more we have been indoctrinating others into this belief system whenever we have had the chance. We call it progress. It has created immense wealth for some and has been immensely damaging for others. Ironically, although there is an emerging consensus among psychologists that individual happiness and contentment is what most of us genuinely desire, the factors that might reasonably be expected to provide such fulfilment (collegiality, kinship, reciprocity, peace, the time to do simply nothing, read a book, or walk along the seashore, for example) tend to be valued far less in the West than in places like Iran, India, Bhutan, Bolivia, Cambodia and China.

It does not take the brain of an Einstein to know that this is the paradigm we need to change. Some of us are anxiously biting at the bit, eager to change things for the better on any number of fronts. Others may need time to be weaned off current addictions and their underlying assumptions. Quite possibly they have more to lose or allow principles of scarcity, rather than of abundance, to dictate their values set. A

new society is struggling to be born – of that there can be no doubt. It needs to be as enchanting as the old as well as triumphing over prior fears, anxieties and phobias. Resilient, too, and environmentally sustainable. But this new society is contingent upon changed intentions and reinvented outcomes. That means designing it collaboratively and with renewed purpose.

Purposeful design (or *deep design*) targets our collective neural system, exciting our emotions, imagination and aspirations in the fulfilment of a new promise to replace the old. It is akin to aligning our interior psychological states (in terms both of individual and collective conditions and convictions) with the exterior infrastructures, artefacts, architectures and systems we want to construct. Integral in nature and displaying a natural integrity, deep design is a product of integral foresight, entailing the embodiment of new values (enacted through every strata of society - from individuals to institutional and community governance and management structures) and the composition of new memes (self-replicating narratives reflecting the advantages to human beings, natural ecosystems and future generations) to reflect new and enlightened circumstances.

## Corollaries

Over the past few decades futures studies and foresight methods have advanced our thinking and capacity to design better, more integral and purposeful, futures. Now is the time to harness that knowledge, using it more effectively to help transform our thinking. There are two critical aspects to using foresight techniques effectively.

Firstly, we must adopt systemic thinking. Trying to plot a linear course from a dynamic present to a world-changing future can be a beguiling speculative exercise. In practice it is bound to fail especially when we focus solely on the external world of physical materiality but pay no heed to our inner worlds of deeply held values and convictions. Secondly, the human condition has become far too complicated to fully comprehend and to chart with existing tools, although it is not the long view that is so much the problem as the immediate future. By that I mean the next decade or so. Being caught up in such a convoluted here and now makes any attempt to map short-term future options (at least from our currently prevailing perspectives and altitude) out of the question.

Integral theories teach us that because of this pervasive complexity in both our outer and our inner worlds it is vital to come to some kind of broad understanding and agreement as to our paramount purpose and intent before resorting to the reassuring routine of detailed planning. But finding such strategic purpose also requires uncovering common ground for collaboration, being clear about our shared aims, and articulating the most critical and desirable goals from an array of latent options.

We know that broadly defining a compelling future, one that is healthier, sustainable and more abundant than present actualities, is critical to progress being made. That means envisaging radically different alternatives, accompanied by a degree of consensus that the futures for which we yearn are technologically achievable, socially desirable, politically prudent, economically feasible and mutually beneficial. Only when this initial work has been done will we be capable of standing in that intended future with confidence, commence the work of designing viable future-to-present pathways and resource local activities that can be leveraged to meet shared aspirations.

Now is the moment for re-creating strategic foresight in terms of a transformational integral philosophy, not just a compendium of information, trends and tools. There can be little doubt that the genuine transcendence of the civilisational worldview is the most vital yet audacious key towards the intentional evolution of an enduring global community. The potential for panarchic collapse calls for new possibilities, new visualisations, new memes and new strategies.

What is the future for our civilisation? How can we begin thinking like a species instead of self-interested individuals? What do we have that we value in common? What will it take to achieve an authentic community of nations? Above all else, what will it feel like when our systems of governance, finance, production, education and health care all work in concert with one another rather than in competition? These are the critical questions to ponder as we take the first tentative steps of a new consciousness.

It is now time to cast off that old paradigm, re-vitalising and empowering ourselves, in order to advance towards a new and more compelling reality and to open new windows onto new worlds. And that is precisely where integral foresight has a unique and enduring niche.

## Correspondence

Dr Richard Hames  
President, Asian Foresight Institute.  
Asian Foresight Institute  
100/229 Waterford Park  
Sukhumvit Soi 53  
Thong Lo  
10110 Bangkok, Thailand.  
Email: rdhames@asianforesightinstitute.org

## Notes

- 1 Epistemological foresight in this context is the all-encompassing domain of human consciousness, experience and knowledge. It includes the various 'integral' theories put forward by contemporary scholars like Ken Wilber, Rudolf Steier, Sri Aurobindo and Ervin Laszlo as well as those in other, more ancient traditions but also goes beyond these by stepping into alternative ways of knowing that are not constrained by orthodox technological rationalism.
- 2 Panarchy is the framework in which systems, including those of nature (such as forests and oceans) and of humans (such as capitalism and governance) as well as combined human-natural systems (such as institutions that govern the use of natural resources) are interlinked in continual adaptive cycles of growth, accumulation, restructuring, and renewal.

