



The Namesake: Futures; futures studies; futurology; futuristic; foresight—What's in a name?☆

Ziauddin Sardar

1 Orchard Gate, London NW9 6HU, UK

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ABSTRACT

The term we used to describe the study of alternative futures is important. Disciplines and discourses do not emerge from a vacuum but have a history and a cultural context; and their names can hide as much as they reveal. This paper examines such terms as 'futurology' and 'foresight', and argues that to emphasise plurality and diversity the study of the future is best served by the moniker 'futures studies'. It suggests that remembering the history of futures discourse is necessary to resolve the crisis of identity and meaning, and frequent fruitless reinvention, of the field. Finally, it presents Sardar's four laws of futures studies: futures studies are wicked (they deal largely with complex, interconnected problems), MAD (emphasise Mutually Assured Diversity), sceptical (question dominant axioms and assumptions) and futureless (bear fruit largely in the present).

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In Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* (2003), a Bengali couple struggle to make a new life in the United States [1]. The devoted husband, Ashoke Ganguli, works hard to acquire a doctorate, the passport to a better job and improving the lives of his family. The pregnant wife, Ashima, longs to be with her parents in India so that she can share the experience of childbirth with them. Through a series of errors, their son's nickname, Gogol, becomes his official moniker. While the couple is devoted to creating a new future for themselves, their past is always present, constantly reminding them of who they are and what they could become.

Of particular concern is the young Gogol who longs to sever all links with his parent's heritage. His name has become a big problem for him; and he believes it is hindering his integration in American society. It is frequently mispronounced, and becomes an object of mockery. He feels no affinity with his father's hero: Nikolai Gogol, the Russian novelist, after whom he is named. He 'hates the name Gogol', he tells a judge shortly after his eighteenth birthday. He does not wish to be identified either with his father's chosen field or 'conventional immigrant disciplines' like chemistry, biology or engineering and opts for architecture. But even as Gogol becomes Nikhil, he cannot shake his past which frequently acquires the trappings of the present. The new name may be a nod to a new future but that future cannot be divorced from Gogol's past.

What we call ourselves, Lahiri suggests, is important. It connects us to our history, provides a sense of identity and belonging, and makes the past a living part of the present. Much the same can be said, I would argue, about disciplines. What we call our discipline is not without significance. Whether what we do is described as futures studies, prospective or foresight matters. Like Gogol we may find our label somewhat problematic but changing the name of our discipline cannot expunge the impediments of the past. Indeed, attempts to delink the heritage by a simple name change, as Lahiri shows so

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E-mail address: ziauddin.sardar@btoopenworld.com.

brilliantly, does not alter the fabric of a person but leads only to a crisis of identity and meaning. The past is ever present, Lahiri seems to be saying, and a viable future depends in recognising and appreciating this past.

As a subject of inquiry with a body of learned literature, recognisable knowledge base, and definable contour of concepts, methodologies, practices and processes, futures studies is now well over 50 years old. Indeed, some people trace the history of futures explorations much further. But there seems to be little awareness of this history. The amnesia has led to an identity crisis manifest in the simple observation that we do not even know what to call all those who take the study of alternative futures seriously: futurists, futurologist, prospectivists, foresight practitioners, even horizon scanners have common currency. Moreover, lack of appreciation of this history leads, not so infrequently, to reinventing the field. Now, as a futurist I can hardly be against innovation; indeed, I believe, and have argued extensively, that innovation is essential for adjusting to rapid and accelerating change. But there is something rather odd about meeting professionals at various foresight conferences who think, and sometimes claim, that they have discovered the field – much like Columbus discovering the New World – for the first time! Worse, they proceed to tell their bewitched audience that their discovery will transform the world over night! I think we need to be cautious about such innovations.

Part of the problem arises from the word 'future' itself. The term, used alone, in the singular and without context, seems to suggest that it is all about looking ahead. The word itself does not suggest that looking beyond the horizon also involves being aware of what lies before and beneath the horizon: it is not for nothing that the first chapter in Richard Slaughter's *The Foresight Principle* is entitled 'Looking Back' [2]. Moreover, the word, as the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* makes clear, contains certain inevitability: 'going or expected to happen or be or become'. Not surprisingly, it is mostly associated with a definite expected outcome. As the editor of *Futures*, I often find that new comers to the field assume that futures studies, by definition, has no history and that their 'discovery' of what could happen within their own subject area in a few years time is exactly what's 'going to happen or be or become'. (Many don't even show an awareness of the journal, or bother to cite it, even though it has a clear 40 years history – but that's another story!).

1. 'Futurology', 'Futuristics', 'Futurism'

But history made its presence felt strongly in a recent discussion on the listserv of World Futures Studies Federation [3] about what the field itself, and academics and practitioners in the field, should be called. Discussants pointed out that the term 'futurology' was first introduced by Ossip Flechteim in his 1966 book *History and Futurology* [4]. Eleonora Masini suggested that Flechteim himself did not have a great deal of confidence in the term, nor was he sure whether the said discipline was a 'science' or a 'prescientific' branch of knowledge [5]. But he was certain that the new field ranged from 'the destiny of man, the future of his society to the entire range of his future cultural activities'. His ardent desire was to see 'futurology as a division of sociology resembling the branch of sociology sometimes called "historical sociology"' (4, p. 73).

On the listserv, the strongest defence of 'futurology' was provided by Pentti Malaska, who has recently – and rightly – been honoured for his services to futures studies in Finland. I have a feeling, Malaska wrote, that there is 'some strong and perhaps derisive opinion and opposition to the term' amongst futurists. It is 'a bit similar to sarcasm and arrogance shown by some journalists, economists and other hard-line positivistic scientists to the futures field as a whole'. The term, Malaska argued, describes 'what futures knowledge is all about – not only epistemologically, i.e. how to acquire knowledge of the future with different techniques for this or that pragmatic purpose (as done in foresight), but especially ontologically, i.e. what the knowledge of the future may mean, in what sense it is possible (and impossible) to know the future, and in what sense futures knowledge can be accounted as a proper scientific field of inquiry parallel with the other scientific fields of knowledge (physics, chemistry, biology, sociology, psychology, anthropology, history, humanities, etc.)' [6].

But the weakness of the term is quite evident from the arguments marshalled by Malaska in its defence. The simplest answer to the question in 'what sense it is possible to know the future' is in no sense! It is a technocratic misconception to assume that knowledge of the future – in a singular, monolith, scientific sense – is possible. After all, futurists are not discovering gravity or antibiotics. Predictions, forecasts, scenarios etc do not provide us with knowledge of the future but only suggest certain, limited possibilities. Moreover, even if this knowledge was possible we would not be able to recognise it – a point aptly illustrated by Jim Dator's playful but serious Second Law of Futures: 'any useful idea about the future should appear to be ridiculous'; and would be dismissed as such! [7].

This is, of course, not the same thing as having knowledge of the numerous tools with which we study the future. Dator's First Law of Futures states, 'The future cannot be "predicted" but alternative futures can be "forecasted" and preferred futures "envisioned" and "invented"–continuously' [7]. We can have knowledge of forecasts and visions, scenarios and expert opinions, concepts and methodologies of futures studies, but this is, of course, not the same thing as knowing the future. Forecasts and visions are themselves epistemological activities – in the sense that they are based on some theory of knowledge – but they do not yield knowledge of the future itself. All they do is to provide us with manufactured knowledge of restricted number of possibilities. Exploration of the future cannot be a quest for certainty which is exactly what Malaska seeks. Hence, the assumption that the study of futures can be, like physics or biology, a 'proper field of scientific inquiry'. This is technocratic determinism both as utopia and myopia, a tendency that seems to be quite common amongst Finish futurists.

There are, of course, other problems with the term. Not only has futurology the connotation of crystal gazing and fortune telling, also, it has rather imperialistic connotations. The point did not escape futurists behind the Iron Curtain who dismissed it as a capitalist term. There is a deliberate association with biology, entomology, palaeontology and other 'ologies' of science suggesting scientific neutrality and certitude. The pretention that exploration of the future is, or can be, an exact

field of inquiry is both naïve and dangerous. That is why serious explorers of futures have dismissed the term without reservation. If the study of alternative futures was an 'ology', as one contributor to WFSF listserv discussion pointed out, it could only be mellontology, from the Greek word *mellon*, meaning the study of time, past, present and future. But somehow mellontology is not going to catch on.

During the 1960 and 1970, the term futuristics had some currency for a while. I remember the cyclostyled magazine of the World Future Society's London chapter that I edited for a while was called *Futuristics*. On the listserv discussion, both Jim Dator and Wendell Bell admitted to using futuristics in papers and talks; but as Bell noted, 'it did not flow trippingly from the tongue nor did many people adopt it' [8].

But at least futuristics is not as lethal as futurism. In his seminal work *Foundation of Futures Studies*, Bell rightly suggests that 'futurism' should be avoided at all cost: it's a label associated with the far right radical art movement that flourished in Italy during the early twentieth century [9]. There are couple of interesting points to note about the fascist Italian 'futurists', as they called themselves. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944), the grandfather of futurism, and his followers, were great believers in scientific certainty. They believed that science would discover a way of knowing the future. Their vision of the future was totally technocratic and based on speed, technology, and fusion of man and machine. And their method for realising this vision was to destroy the past in every way: they wanted to get rid of 'smelly gangrene of professors, archaeologists, tourist guides and antiquarians', destroy old cities and museums, set fire to the library shelves, as Marinetti declared in his *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* [10]. Not only was the future monolithic but it could only be realised by delinking from all human history [11]. So for the Italian futurists, the future was not simply a domain of time but an ideology. Hence, it was an 'ism', like capitalism, socialism, communism, with a specific social and political worldview.

Just how important it is to use correct terminology is well illustrated by Warren Wagar in his *The Next Three Futures*. In tracing the history of future studies, Wagar [12] consistently uses the term 'futurism' thus (1) unconsciously allying himself with a fascist movement and (2) revealing his ignorance of a major movement of twentieth century art. Wagar's otherwise excellent treatise – focussing on futures of earth, wealth and power, war and peace and living – is thus irreparably marred.

2. Foresight

This leads me to 'foresight' a term much in vogue nowadays. On the listserv Ruben Nelson provides fascinating insight into how the Canadian Association for Futures Studies (CAFS) changed into Foresight Canada. 'We used the language of futures studies', Nelson writes:

because it was common and showed that we were serious about the work. We could have used 'futures research', as we took it to mean the essentially same thing. However, we are inclusive Canadians to a fault, so we chose the term we felt to be more welcoming. Then, we rejected, 'futures' and 'futurology'. The former was too general and unfocussed; the latter too awkward and pretentious. We also distinguished our work from 'long-term planning' and 'strategic planning'. The term for folks who undertook the practice of interest to us was reasonably constant—we were 'futurists'...

CAFS died in the early 1990s, in part because while futures studies did challenge present assumptions and mind-sets in order to explore possible futures with fresh eyes, it did not routinely come back to the present and ask, 'Now that we know what we know about the dynamics of the future, what would we do now, in order to make the kinds of differences we agree we need to make?' In short, and in hindsight, as others have pointed out, it is now clear that most of our work back then, and that of others, was focused on the excitement of breaking out of the miasma of one's inherited consciousness and views and into fresh views of future possibilities. But far too often we left managers (clients) out there in the future on their own to figure out what to do next. It is no wonder that serious organizational interest in the work declined dramatically in the late 1980s and 1990s in Canada...

In the late 1990s, a few of us who are professional futurists in Canada began a new conversation about the need for the work and what shape it would take if it were reinvented for the 21st century in light of the many developments that had occurred in the last 40 years. We noted the following:

1. The field needed (and still needs) a huge dose of conceptual clarification. Even today, many working understandings of serious futures work include, essentially without any serious distinctions, all of these practices—foresight, strategic foresight, forward looking, outlooks, forecasting, strategic planning, long-range planning, technology assessment, technology foresight.
2. 'Foresight' implies action in the present, in light of anticipated future states of affairs.
3. 'Foresight' seems to be understood by both the lay public and managers.
4. 'Foresight' has the problem that it is an infinite practice that includes virtually every human activity from eating cereal for breakfast, to crossing the street, to handling nuclear waste, to...
5. Ours is a time of both ontological and epistemological revolution. We are slowly changing our minds about the nature of reality, the earth and ourselves as persons in relationship to both of the above [13].

These observations led Nelson and his colleagues to set up Foresight Canada. Now Nelson is correct to point out that the term foresight is much easier to understand for the lay public and managers than futures studies. But what do ordinary

folk actually understand by the term? There is the dictionary definition of foresight as ‘the process of foreseeing’ something that is not too far and can be actually pinned down: hence the front sight of a gun is often called foresight. Then there are associations with the term in popular imagination: prudence and wisdom being the most common. When managers ask for foresight they are actually asking: how can I do this in the most prudent – that is careful and cautious – way to achieve the results that I want. That is a legitimate question; but it is not a question about alternative potentials of the future. What the managers and bureaucrats want is a product—something that tells them, *a la* Lenin, what is to be done to avoid certain pitfalls or make the most of certain future potentials. And I think that is the real essence of foresight: it is product oriented. This is why foresight is most commonly associated with business and bureaucracies like the EC which use the term exclusively. And it has the added advantage of the illusion that the product comes wrapped with wisdom—with foresight!

Moreover, it is not quite correct to suggest that futures studies are not about the ‘now’. If you focus purely on predictions, which was the dominant trend in the 1980s and 1990s in the US, you are unlikely to come up with a viable plan of immediate action. But futures studies contains a plethora of methodologies some of which, such as backcasting, are specifically concerned with bringing everything back to now and designed to motivate people to spring into immediate action. I remember running futures workshop with Sohail Inyatullah in Malaysia which used backcasting to galvanise the most fatalist people on the planet: the Mullahs! Futures studies have been used in the Philippines to improve the lives of fishermen and farmers, to save their environments from pollution, and to empower their marginalised communities. While foresight has developed as a useful tool in decision making, classical futures studies serves the purpose just as well. It is interesting to note that in *The Foresight Principle*, Richard Slaughter uses the terms ‘foresight’, ‘futures’ and ‘futures studies’ interchangeably as though they were synonyms. And he offers nothing more or less than the standard, established tools of futures studies. Yet, the Millennium Projects annual reports, such as the recent *2009 State of the Future* could hardly be called ‘State of Foresight’!

A great deal of foresight work is concerned with ‘scenario planning’, which, in my opinion, is devouring futures studies. Within some businesses, corporations and government institutions scenarios are seen as the only way of exploring the future. Futures studies thus becomes synonymous with ‘strategic foresight’ or ‘scenario planning’ with a clear emphasis on winning over others, instead of exploring and developing creative, novel and inclusive solutions. Indeed, it is turned into a ‘management tool’ as we can see in Michel Godet’s extensive work [14].

My concern with foresight is twofold. The term is not universal and does not exist in many cultures: it has no equivalent, for example, in Polish or Croatian languages. But every culture has some notion of the future even if sometimes the words for future and tomorrow are the same. Moreover, foresight is intrinsically singular in nature. The term suggests a monochromatic vision, a solitary way of ‘foreseeing’ with a sole outcome. Indeed, there is no plural in the English language for foresight. Foresights does not really exist. The man who first called for Professors of Foresight ‘who makes a whole-time job of estimating the future consequences of new inventions and new devices’ knew this well – and he ought to know. H.G. Wells wanted the world to be prepared for the things to come. He lamented the fact that ‘we did nothing to our roads until they were choked; we did nothing to adjust our railroads to fit in with this new element in life until they were overtaken and bankrupt; we have still to bring our police up to date with the motor bandit. That is what I mean by want of Foresight’. But lack of foresight was not only choking up our roads, it was also leading to war and violence. Foresight would do something about ‘acts of war that have become hideously immediate and far reaching’ by producing a single outcome: ‘the whole round world’, Wells said in his famous broadcast, will be ‘brought together into one brotherhood, into one communion, one close-knit freely communicating citizenship’. ‘Peace throughout the world’, the enlightened outcome of foresight, could only be ushered in through a single means: ‘one worldstate, one world-pax, with one money, one police, one speech and one brotherhood’ [15]. The term just does not allow for multiple possibilities.

3. Topologies

H.G. Wells and foresight do not appear in Pentti Malaska’s inventory of terms used to describe futures thinking over the ages that he helpfully provided to the WFSF listserv discussion [16]. The list demonstrates that while futures thinking has a long and distinguished history, the thinkers themselves had problems in describing what they were actually doing. Here’s a (slightly) edited version, Wells included, of Malaska’s list:

‘conditional future contingents’

Luis de Molina, 1589

‘social mathematics’

Concordet, 1804

‘Kondratieff long waves’

Kondratieff, 1930s

Foresight

H.G. Wells, 1932

'scenarios approach'

RAND, 1940s

'futurology'

Ossip K. Flechtheim, 1946s

'futurable'; conjecture

Bernard de Jouvenel, 1950s

'prospective analysis' (French)

Gaston Berger, 1957

'futures studies'

World Futures Studies Federation, late 1960s

'futures research'

World Future Society, 1960

'strategic management'

different schools, since 1960s

'futures study'

World Future Society 1970s

'strategic foresight'

Slaughter, 1995

'visionary management'

Holstius and Malaska, 2004

'futuring'

Ed Cornish, Jerry Glenn, 2004

There are, of course, other ways of producing futures topologies. Slaughter's 1991 scheme starts with the most conceptual and theoretical and works its way to the most active and utopian [17]. Inayatullah [18] has taken a thematic, 'schools of futures thought' approach:

empirical
predictive interpretive
hermeneutics critical
poststructural
action learning

But Malaska's catalogue make one point clear. Where the term future is avoided, the thinking involved appears both to be one-dimensional and static; and the word used is often combined with another to suggest disciplinary specificity. Hence, 'scenario approach' (which suggest that not just the approach but the scenario itself is monochromatic), 'perspective analysis', 'strategic management', 'strategic foresight' and Malaska's own invention, 'visionary management'. But plurality is indicated whenever future is used, with the exception of futurology: futures research, futures study and futures studies (which was missing from Malaska's original list, a strange omission considering he is a former President of the World Futures Studies Federation). Even back in the Middle Ages, Luis de Molina, thought 'conditional future' had 'contingents'. And both

the French term ‘futurable’, and Edward Cornish’s rather absurd term ‘futuring’ have active and multiple connotations. This suggests that the label we use to describe explorations of the future is not only significant but it can point the practitioners towards multiple possibilities and open the mind of the layman to pluralistic potentials of the study of the future.

4. The nature of naming

Naming and labelling are a natural human instinct, a universal and fundamental human activity essential to understanding the world. But when we put a label on something, we tend both to reflect our own prejudices and follow what appears to us to be natural, albeit, unwritten rules. In other words, we project our own limitations as well as the narrow confines of our culture and society onto the subject that we label. The label then becomes the filter that both focuses our gaze and through which we see the labelled subject. The label need not, and often does not, actually describe the ‘reality’ of the subject that must inevitably be recognised. But we assume that we are actually seeing the subject from all possible perspectives. Thus labels we give to disciplines and discourses often hide much more they reveal. That is why I think the label we append to the study of futures must consciously be open, pluralistic and emphasise a diversity of perspectives.

There is another, vital point to consider. Disciplines and discourses do not emerge out of vacuum. Rather, they emerge from a certain social and cultural milieu, are deeply embedded in that society, and reflect the biases and myopia of that worldview. Nature or reality ‘out there’ is not compartmentalised into ‘physics’ and ‘chemistry’, ‘sociology’ or ‘anthropology’ or ‘humanities’ and ‘social sciences’. These categories are not based on some universal axioms: they are a product of how western culture structures knowledge and discourses, and reflect the worldview of the West. As I have written elsewhere, Eurocentrism is not a marginalised perception but deeply embedded both in how disciplines are structured and shaped and how knowledge is acquired and propagated. The dominant mode of thinking about the future, as Malaska’s inventory demonstrates so well, has a western genealogy with all its attendant problems. Eurocentrism is all too evident in this mode of inquiry from the way time and space are perceived, masculinity and technology are privileged, social organisation and institutional arrangements are structured, and non-western cultures made totally invisible. Thus, by implicit definition,

the future is defined in the image of the West. There is an in-built western momentum that is taking us towards a single, determined future. In this Eurocentric vision of the future, technology is projected as an autonomous and desirable force: as the advertisement for a brand of toothpaste declares, we are heading towards ‘a brighter, whiter future’. Its desirable products generate more desire; its second order side effects require more technology to solve them. There is thus a perpetual feedback loop. One need not be a technological determinist to appreciate the fact that this self-perpetuating momentum has locked us in a linear, one-dimensional trajectory that has actually foreclosed the future for the non-west. An illusion of accelerated movement is produced to create an illusion of inevitability and shroud the Eurocentric dimension of the exercise. Conventionally, the colonisation of the future was known as ‘westernisation’. Now it goes under the rubric of ‘globalisation’. It may be naïve to equate the former with the later, but the end product is the same: the process that is transforming the world into the proverbial ‘global village’, rapidly shrinking distances, compressing space and time, is also shaping the world in the image of a single culture and civilisation [19].

Any singular term for the exploration of the future will only perpetuate Eurocentrism. This is why plurality has to be emphasised consciously, constantly and continuously. This point, I think, was not lost on the founders of the World Futures Studies Federation; hence their insistence on using double plurals: futures and studies. Moreover, there are now conscious efforts to open up the field to non-western perspectives in such methodologies as causal layered analysis [20] and, to some extent, integral futures [21], which has been criticised (correctly in my opinion) as ‘foundationally western’ [22]. On the whole, there seems to be constant tension between futures studies, seen as pluralistic, multicivilisational, and challenging the basic axioms of the dominant system, and all the other terms we use to appear normal, objective, strategic and business-like. I would argue that this suggests that we lack confidence in ourselves as futurists; although there is also the ever present need to compromise with current institutional and bureaucratic interests.

5. Sardar’s laws of futures studies

So how do we move forward?

To begin with we need to abandon the idea that futures studies is a ‘discipline’ with rigid boundaries, fixed theories, esoteric terminology and ‘great men’ – always men – who have laid the foundations of this entity [23]. I think the discussion of whether futures studies is a ‘multi’ or ‘trans’ discipline mode of inquiry is also fruitless. There is a hint of the real nature of the exercise in the word future itself. It comes in two parts: fu and true. Fu is a ubiquitous term in Chinese and can be seen in all sorts of names from Kong Fu to Fu Manchu (the stereotypical Western representation of the Chinese as irredeemably evil). It also has literary connotations and represents a form of rhymed prose. And it is a type of ancient vessel, designed with some sophistication and with elaborate decoration. So we can see futures studies as an erudite vessel that contains and shapes our inquiry into various aspect of the future—or a discourse that guides our systematic examination of future potentials and possibilities. The second part tells us something about the nature of this discourse. From our own perspective we perceive the discourse to be ‘true’ – a vessel for uttering true statements about the future; but from the perspective of Others – different generations, classes, cultures, societies, civilisations and disciplinary outlooks – this truth is contested and is seen as

power, an attempt to define future reality. The ‘true’ dimension of the discourse thus defines the limits of what is seen by Others as acceptable. Thus, while one aspect of the study of ‘the future’ is concerned with intellectual structure and organisation, the other focuses on its impact and consequences on cultures and societies, how it is realised in actuality. One cannot be separated from the other. The development of the conceptual, methodological and academic aspects of the discourse has to be assessed in the broader and more inclusive perspective of the world that actually emerges.

Now the world as it actually is imposes its own conditions on futures discourse—which leads me to Sardar’s four laws of futures studies.

5.1. Sardar’s first law of futures studies: futures studies are wicked

Almost all the problems we face nowadays are complex, interconnected, contradictory, located in an uncertain environment and embedded in landscapes that are rapidly changing. Indeed, as C.H. Waddington (who was amongst the first to argue that futures studies should become an academic discipline and taught in universities; and whose contribution is now totally forgotten) noted in 1975, ‘in this great complex of problems any single problem is itself complex’ [24]. Because of complexity, uncertainty and interdependencies, efforts to solve one or a collective of problems often creates a plethora of new problems. C. West Churchman described such problems as ‘wicked problems’ [25], a phrase that has currency in social planning. Almost any exploration of the future brings us face to face with such problems, which are often impossible to solve. Indeed, it would not be an understatement to say that futures studies deals almost exclusively with wicked problems. But futures studies are wicked not simply because the discourse, by its very nature, tackles wicked problems, they are also wicked in the sense that they are playfully open ended (like a ‘scientific’ discipline it does not offer a single solution but only possibilities), their boundaries, such as they are, are totally porous and they are quite happy to borrow ideas and tools, whatever is needed, from any and all disciplines and discourses. The discourse of futures studies is wicked in yet another way: it is not just multi- and trans-disciplinary, it is unashamedly *un-disciplinary*: that is, it consciously rejects the status and state of a discipline while being a fully fledged systematic mode of critical inquiry.

5.2. Sardar’s second law of futures studies: futures studies are MAD

The capitals in MAD are important: it is an acronym for Mutually Assured Diversity, a concept that I first introduced in 2004 [26]. Diversity, in all its mindboggling forms, is the essence of what makes us fully human. Mutually assured diversity is the proposition that full preservation of our humanity requires that this diversity is assured, that it not only survives but thrives in any desired future, and that future generations mutually recognise and appreciate each others’ diversity. MAD has certain specific requirements for futures studies. First, it requires the recognition that there are different ways to be human; and, as such, different future paths to the full realisation of our collective humanity. Second, it requires the appreciation of the fact that the human condition is a cultural condition and that culture is an essential relational attribute, an enabling feature of knowing, being and doing. Given the diversity of cultures on this planet, there are different knowledge systems, different histories, different forms of living, different criteria of accomplishment and different ways of adjusting to change. Futures studies need to take account of this diversity in their frameworks of concepts, theories and methods. MAD provides futures studies with the imperative to ensure that the future is assured and remains continuously open to all potentials and possibilities of mutual diversities. From the perspective of MAD, the epistemology of futures studies is socially constructed—it involves the participants of all those who will be actors in the future and would have to live with the consequences of future outcomes.

5.3. Sardar’s third law of futures studies: futures studies are sceptical

The third law is a natural corollary of the first and second. Futures studies need to be sceptical of simple, one-dimensional solutions to wicked problems as well as of dominant ideas, projections, predictions, forecasts and notions of truth to ensure that the future is not foreclosed and colonised by a single culture. Thus the scepticism of futures studies is not criticism for the sake of criticism but directed towards certain ends: opening up pluralistic potentials. Like Elis Pyrrho (360–270 BC), the Greek philosopher and founder of the system of scepticism known as Pyrrhonism, futures studies rejects the idea that the future can be known with certainty. In the futures field certainty is impossible to attain not because, as Pyrrho suggested things are neither good nor bad and there is no way of knowing, but because uncertainty, complexity and accelerating change are the fundamental components of the future. For Pyrrho, who was probably the first postmodernist, doubt was perpetual: the wise man doubts everything, he argued, because the reality of things is inaccessible to the human mind and certitude is impossible to attain. But doubt in futures studies is an instrument of positive change: it expresses the question what else is possible? What other perspectives are there? What impact this or that future will have on others? And ultimately: *cui bono*? Who benefits from future outcomes of certain trends, developments, projections, forecasts, scenarios or visions? The ultimate aim of Pyrrho’s scepticism was ethical: he believed that happiness was only possible by being suspicious of truth claims. Futures studies is equally sceptical of declarations that suggest that concepts and methods of the discourse, the *fu* part of future, logically leads to true claims about how the future will turn out. Doubt serves as a tool to prevent futures studies itself becoming an instrument of oppression.

5.4. Sardar's fourth law of futures studies: futures studies are futureless

Futures studies are futureless not in the dictionary sense of 'having no prospect or home of a future'. It does not mean that futures studies will not continue to exist in the far distant future. But futures studies are 'futureless' in a technical, specific sense: since we can have no true knowledge of the future, the impact of all futures explorations can only be meaningfully assessed in the present. We can look back on predictions and forecasts and see how right or far off the mark they were. But we cannot assess how right or wrong they actually are from the future itself. Thus the real relevance of the discourse lies in the present. All futures activities, from forecasts to visioning, causal layered analysis to the Millennium Project, have a direct impact on the present: they can change peoples' perceptions, make them aware of dangers and opportunities ahead, motivate them to do specific things, force them to invent or innovate, encourage them to change and adjust, galvanise them into collective social action, paralyse them with fear, empower them, marginalise them, or tell them they and their cultures and belief systems are important or unimportant. So ultimately what really matters is the impact futures studies has now; and its value and quality can only be judged in the present. The law forces us to focus on the consequences of the discourse on the present and the immediate future.

6. Conclusion

Switching names and labels, as Gogol discovers in *The Namesake*, does not really solve the crisis of identity and meaning. Like Gogol, futures studies too have suffered a series of crisis both of identity and relevance. It is interesting to note that throughout the novel Jhumpa Lahiri insists on calling Nikhil, which after all is the character's real name, Gogol, which is both a nickname and a mistake. Why? Because it symbolizes a profound truth: the past is an integral part of our being and there can be no future without a past. But Lahiri does something even more profound. She writes the past in the present tense not only to suggest that Gogol's past is ever present, but also to indicate that the past and the present combine together to create a future. It is Gogol's decisions and actions now, in the present, that can be evaluated, discussed and dissected for their future implications. Ditto for much that futures studies has to offer.

What is in a name includes not just the problem of naming. Most of all it specifies the problems of what to do in consequence of the name. Futurists spend so much time and energy on the problem of naming because they are perennially concerned about what, and in what way, they should be applying themselves to their field of study. On the basis of Sardar's four laws of futures studies I would argue our problem is not one of naming but of applications, endeavours—the doing of our inquiries. And, equally on the basis of the same four laws I would assert that the histories of futures studies, with all their omissions, contradictions and problems, are *the* source of confidence for and in the discourse. We need to learn from the experience and wisdom, as well as mistakes, of those who wrestled with the questions and issues of alternative futures in history rather than repeat their errors by constantly reinventing the wheel.

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