

Futurizing Risk Management: A Review Essay

Foundations of Futures' Studies: Human Science For A New Era – Volume 1, Professor Wendell Bell (1997), Transaction Books, New Brunswick, 375 pp.

Introduction

In writing this review article, I began by looking across my office at more than six metres of related books and even more shelf-space devoted to planning, control cybernetics and, more generally, public policy. As an initial statement of appreciation to Volume 1 of this work of significant scholarship, I can only say that Bell's erudition will allow me to discard much of the top 'futures' shelves, though not necessarily the lower: this important distinction will be discussed below as it constitutes the most general level of the many strengths and few weaknesses of this publication.

My second reaction was to ponder, for a much longer period, how to condense such erudition, indeed highly eclectic scholarship, into a review article. A conventional book review could never do adequate justice to this major contribution to three fields of study: 'futures' itself, the social and 'human' sciences and, perhaps less directly and generally, 'public policy'. Bell's title includes the first two terms quite deliberately but (as the review will show), I have added the public policy theme. This addition is deliberate as part of an editorial injunction – write the review relevant to the readers of this journal. In so doing, perhaps the ordering of the journal's title should be re-arranged temporarily to: *The Journal of Crisis Management and Contingencies*. Bell's book is replete with examples of both terms, so the task of reviewing becomes less onerous.

Finally, in relating the three key concepts futures, 'sciences' and public policy to the journal and its main topics of interests, it should be recognized at the outset that this last issue is not necessarily a part of Bell's original agenda. However, to deny the *potential* public policy importance of this book would be, at best, disingenuous. He is, from the first section of the study, wholly determined to relate 'futures' studies' (note the apostrophe) to what he cites as a major purpose in writing the book:

(and) to find the correct values and norms of conduct that will lead to the flourishing of human society. I discuss human values, how to put them

to use in judging the desirability of alternative futures, how to evaluate objectively the values themselves, and what major values appear to be nearly universally held (Bell, 1997: xix).

This objective will not necessarily meet complete agreement with those of other distinguished futurists, especially those from within his own discipline, sociology (a point he readily acknowledges). More generally, however, other policy 'scientists' would concur, including the two authors who have contributed a similar tome to this field: Professors Garry Brewer (who was at Yale University with Bell until the early 1990s) and Peter de Leon in their own erudite study, *The Foundations of Policy Analysis* (1983). The connection between the two works is not spurious. Both sets of authors share some of the same key influences, not least of whom is the former Yale luminary Professor Harold Lasswell (one of the founding 'fathers' of the rejuvenated policy sciences in the early 1980s when President Reagan became president, an important factor in both the demise and renewed growth in futures' studies).

Having so broadened the intellectual agenda of the review (though not to an extreme limit) it is now necessary to state the main themes of this critique – they are three-fold:

- to consider Bell's review in its own terms, namely from the intellectual perspective of a 'critical realist' concerning the two main themes of his book's title – futures' studies and the human sciences (albeit within the context of the journal's interests);
- to consider his work as a critique of the previous point, that is a sceptical critic seeking to understand the main themes of the book in the context of both public and private sector crises (the Asian financial 'melt-down' being the case in point); and
- to judge the book in terms of its own criteria, specifically:

'... To show that futures' studies exists as an identifiable sphere of intellectual activity that has already made and continues to make important contributions to the knowledge base of modern society; to show that futures studies just like other fields from anthropology to sociology has a body of sound and coherent thought and empirical results that can fit within the covers of a book and can be the basis of a serious course of study' (Bell, 1997: xix).

This third topic constitutes the easiest of the three review tasks. I will state at the outset that, along with Brewer and de Leon's textbook, I have found Bell's first volume to represent almost encyclopedic erudition, comprehensive methodological considerations and lucid exposition (not always a strength of academics given the first two judgements). But, above all else, its cogency is compelling. Paradoxically, however, this book also evokes some misgivings that are not all that dissimilar to the issues which one could (and has) raised with Professor Brewer.

I shall defer further critical comment until the end of the review, where it deserves to be placed. Otherwise, such criticism might render an unnecessary imbalance in what is essentially a deservedly favourable review for the reasons expressed above. For anyone seriously concerned about the crises of the day, this book is required reading. Take your time, however, it is not light reading despite the lucidity of the prose. Some of the ideas are opaque but definitely worth the intellectual effort. Indeed, given this criticism, it is surely a compliment to suggest that concerning some key ideas (such as presumptively true (or false) predictions (PTFP) (Bell, 1997: 227)) one would even want further explication of such a difficult and important concept.

Critical Realism: Futures' Studies as Contingencies and Crisis Management

Viewed as 'science', it is not surprising that Bell bases his study on well-known ground. Therefore, the work of first Sir Karl Popper and, then, Thomas Kuhn feature with general approval in the key Chapter Five 'An Epistemology for Futures' Studies: From Positivism to Critical Realism' (Bell, 1997: 191-238). Before considering these key concepts, it might help to provide the prospective reader with a brief summary of the organization of the book and its sequence of ideas which lead to this discussion of what the author claims 'critical realism' to be.

As summary, the chapter titles are shown as follows:

- 'Futures' Studies: A New Field of Inquiry';
- 'The Purposes of Futures' Studies';
- 'Assumptions of Futures' Studies; and
- 'Is Futures' Studies an Art or a Science?'

The key assertions will be noted, any critique will be discussed in more detail later in the review. The initial and general elements of Bell's philosophical position have already been stated above. Such assertions, however, deserve further explication as follows. First,

The modern approach to the study of the future, like primitive divination, includes an effort to discover and often, if possible, to control the future, to bend it to human will. Unlike divination, though, it is not based on beliefs in the supernatural, magic... Future studies is a part of modern humanism, both philosophical and scientific. (Bell, 1997: 5)

Summarizing the major elements of such futurism studies, we should note the following distinguishing sufficient (though not necessary) conditions:

- it is 'secular';
- seeks to de-mystify the future by using explicit methodologies;
- be systematic and rational;
- base results on empirical observation;
- test rigorously the plausibility of the logic used in open discussion and intellectual debate;
- while being creative and intuitive.

He concludes this important discussion by observing:

Although some futurists occasionally abuse these values, they remain the ideals that most futurists strive to fulfil (Bell, 1997: 5).

The remainder of the chapter is essentially historic and constitutes a succinct statement of the key players and their major studies, particularly since the late-1930s. Why that time? Well, in part, for two reasons. He is keen to dissociate himself from the notion that his idea of 'social control' relates in any way to Fascism. Secondly, and more important for this review, not only are Popper and Kuhn key formulative influences, but the work of his Yale colleague Professor Harold Lasswell (as with Brewer) evokes the key organizing concept 'humanism' often.

Therefore, the intellectual presumptions of these three distinguished philosophers (Popper, Kuhn and Lasswell) constitutes a triage of intellectual underpinnings for his work. Lasswell's contribution will be considered in this context in the next section of the review (when discussing the Policy Sciences); for the moment, the Popper/Kuhnian inspired post-postmodernism is of more relevance here. In organizing this review in this order, I am reversing the stated sequence of the book's sub-title: instead of a 'human science', I will first discuss Bell's view of science before considering what 'human' means in the circumstances of 'futurism'.

I shall begin this inquiry with a question: how can 'the future' be 'known' if it is always 'becoming' empirical but, in a temporal sense, never exists? As C.E.M. Joad often said on the

BBC (infuriatingly to many listeners) 'it all depends on what you mean by...'. Bell knows what he means by science (at least of the post-postmodernist variety). In part, the answer lies with his two main sources of philosophical inspiration, Popper and Kuhn. Popper's debate about Hume's 'anti-inductivism' is well known (Bell, 1997: 223) but more important in this context is his key argument concerning the irrelevance (to scientific inquiry) of 'historicism'. Bell agrees.

Kuhn's contribution to Bell's epistemological discussion is likewise matter-of-fact. After carefully summarizing 'the received view of positivism' (Bell, 1997: 197) he concludes that Kuhn's version of science may be stated baldly as being '...that scientific change (is) fundamentally revolutionary'. Therefore, in combining Popper's 'anti-historicism' with Kuhn's 'anti-evolutionism', Bell seeks to evoke an image of 'futurism' as related more to concepts of change *per se*: that is, where the future may be related in the past in a 'non-linear' manner leading to possibly 'revolutionary' changes in societal direction.

It must be understood that this summary is too 'simplifying', especially concerning Popper's overall philosophical writing. The dilemma is this: if Bell acknowledges the importance of Popper's disagreement with the 'historicists', he would also be mindful of Popper's concern for the 'Open Society'. Yet Bell's interest in the relationship between futurism, planning and control is likewise a centrepiece of his distinct form of such futurism (cf. Bell, 1997: 2, 24, 100, 107, 224, 232, 233, 291). So, if both Bell and Popper are concerned with need for an 'open' (and presumably 'democratic') society they cannot be one and the same. This distinction remains unresolved.

Critical realism, based on the predicates listed above concerning secularism, de-mystification and so on, in Bell's form of an open society is much more than being anti-historist, anti-evolutionist (but, note comment on page 213) and assertively post-postmodernist. In more positive mode, he and a colleague, Jeffrey Olick, present an important concept, 'presumptive predictions' (Bell, 1997: 227). Concerning the relationship between science and futurism, Bell argues:

Taking predictions that come true as indicators of the validity of knowledge, as is commonly done in science, is often misleading ... predictions are contingent upon conditions, and, since conditions may change, a prediction that is perfectly sound when it is made may turn out to be false. Moreover, the existence of a prediction itself may contribute to changes in conditions, as is the case of self-altering prophecies....

Presumptively true (or false) predictions are assertions about the future that are assessed, that is subjected to refutation as far as is possible, *before* the time arrives with which the predicted event deals.... Thus, we make the grounds that justify our prediction explicit and subject them to verification, especially to attempts to refute them. Presumptively true predictions, thus, are those whose grounds withstand such attempts (Bell, 1997: 227 ff.).

Bell then goes on to discuss the US involvement in both Vietnam and Grenada. At this point of his discourse, the linkages between futurism as 'science' and 'humanism' become most obvious (and again complicate his use of Popper's arguments; see the next section of the paper for further discussion). It is enough to say here that Bell's presumptive prediction methodology should be studied by not only futurists. Most crisis managers and contingency planners actually do what he is suggesting much of the time without actually using his relevant and useful terminology. I shall conclude this section by way of stating his concluding remarks concerning critical realism, thus:

...we turn to the critical realism theory of knowledge. Within this framework, we can do two sets of things. First, we can make the grounds for making the prediction explicit, intelligible, and logically coherent (all of which make formulations open to the critical assessment of others). Second, we can make a serious attempt to refute them by seeing whether or not they are congruent with relevant past and present facts (corrigible though they are), consistent with other predictions concerning the same time frame that have been shown to be presumptively true, and logically correct. If predictions can withstand such critical analysis, then we have a reasonable basis for believing they are presumptively true (Bell, 1997: 231).

One is reminded of Socrates lament before drinking the hemlock. This is not a trivial aside. As Bell (here, as a policy analyst) laments, 'How many more American and Vietnamese lives might have been saved with more accurate and more honest futures thinking?' (Bell, 1997: 229). He goes on to say:

a prediction can be useful... but used cynically by persons interested in a given course of action simply to persuade others that such a course of action ought to be adopted... Such people deliberately deceive others in order to control them by making false prophecies (Bell, 1997: 299).

This statement of lament leads onto the next point to be discussed in the next section. In this context, the work of both Popper and Kuhn are now combined with that of Lasswell whose insistence that the policy sciences are really about the issue of 'human dignity' opens up a Pandora's box of important issues.

Bell as a Realist Critique: A Risk Management-Based Analysis

To summarize Bell's role as a scientific 'critical realist' leads to the following set of putative criteria considered useful to both the students of futures' studies and crisis (risk) management:

- secular – de-mystifying belief systems;
- temporal – relating the world of observation (*post hoc*) to the future world by structures speculation;
- sceptical – open, peer-review analysis;
- rational – the goal of policy-making is arranged as an ends-to-a-means decision process;
- deductive – logic tests are required so as to perform 'presumptively' true/false predictions;
- conditional – such predictions vary as new data become available and analyzable; and
- controllable – plans are based on prediction so that action can be guided in specific direction(s).

This short-list of criteria is doubtless of the 'necessary' and not 'sufficient' variety: a factor which Bell readily associates with most futurist studies. Such an injunction is needed as it is readily acknowledges that the conditional-controllable relationship will always remain problematic to the implementers of such 'policy'. What is now needed is to broaden his discussion to consider what 'humanist' policy science might be.

Such an issue inevitably returns to an issue identified earlier as requiring more thorough analysis: namely, the book's sub-title, 'Human Science for a New Era'. I shall propose a re-wording of this theme thus 'A Humanist (Policy) Science for a New (Age/) Era'. This second amendment has not been discussed above but deserves some attention considering the composition of the readership of this journal.

First, the consideration of the 'humanist' aspect of his study. Again, the Greek philosophers are instructive; as with Socrates/Plato, Brewer and Bell are all (morally) supportive of Socrates, not Thrasymachus, whose rhetoric, bombast and belief that 'might is right'. All would judge such an abuse of power repugnant and, in most circumstances, 'un-ethical' (the topic of Volume 2 by Bell). More specifically, the humanist focus of both Brewer and Bell's 'foundations' books have been inspired, at least in part, by Lasswell's early contribution to policy studies and later the policy sciences. Lasswell's contribution in this regard suggests that his humanism still influences the work of thoughtful scholars, even today.

The 'New Age' amendment also deserves brief comment.

In the context of this review, it is necessary to emphasize the 'public' nature of the policy sciences. This does not mean that only public sector policy issues will be considered; quite the opposite. In an era of (New Age) reform, the public demands for 'leaner and meaner' public and private bureaucracies is presumed to be sustained and, occasionally, shrill.

More to the point, public policy constitutes the basis of Lasswell, Brewer and Bell's research (although Bell is the least explicit in this regard). A quick and local illustration; in a quality Australian newspaper a recent article was titled 'Lose Control: From Chaos comes Complexity Theory'. The rapid convergence of the public with the private is a new age phenomenon. Therefore, my reading of Bell's work is predicated on the belief that in this more frugal public new age, humanist equity-related issues will become a key element of most policy arenas. Further, in a more globalist context, the humanist sciences will be most problematic as ethics re-enter the policy debates as they did in ancient Greece.

Bell's humanism, as influenced by Lasswell (as with Brewer), is predicated on the issue of the public need to enhance 'human dignity'. Brewer's statement is quite unequivocal concerning the importance of this issue to policy scientists. He asserts:

For policy scientists, the most important value is human dignity a summary idea defined in terms of distinctive human needs for respect, well-being, affection, enlightenment, skill, rectitude, wealth and power. By definition, policy analyses and the policy goals they seek to inform and facilitate are thus means to influence the shaping and sharing of these basic needs and values. Policy scientists are constantly challenged to clarify and specify in operational terms society's long-term goals by relating them to decisions made in a policy process. Lacking such guideposts, policy-makers and those who work to advise them simply fly blind... (Brewer and de Leon, 1983: 5).

This quotation is worthy of an article in its own right. The point worth making is that both Brewer and Bell seem to support the same contention: that is, one might need to define the term 'neo-rationalist', that is: societies *per se* seek to define goals based on presumed value premises so that they can 'progress' in a relatively orderly manner by performing within the limits set collectively by these policy scientists.

Bell and Brewer's contentions, however humanist, would certainly encounter considerable opposition generally within the academic social sciences and, specifically, on the Yale campus itself, the home of the most

articulate 'non-rationalists' Professors Lindblom, Dahl, Hirschman, Lane and others, not to mention (in any detail) the former students, Professors Wildavsky and Polsby, who have dominated the policy analysis school at Berkeley. The neo- versus non-rationalist debate is too complex to discuss here: I have tried elsewhere to use this distinction in an earlier paper related to the explosion of NASA's shuttle in 1986 (Jarman, 1994).

What is important to note is that Bell is quite adamant that value questions are an essential element of 'worthy' future's studies as he showed in an earlier paper titled 'Bringing the Good Back In: Values, objectivity and the future' (Bell, 1993: 333f.). This ontological position is, of course, quite at odds with the presumptions of the non-rationalists mentioned above. The Yale-centred group of both non-and anti-rationalists spent much time in debate with philosophers who opposed vehemently the 'behaviouralists' objective of taking value-systems out of the debate. Again, this is too complex a topic to discuss here but there is little doubt where the policy scientists stand in this regard.

But Bell has gone one step further with regard to the Lasswellian version of the policy sciences. In this book, Bell argues that:

Even in democratic societies, questioning the status-quo can be unpopular and sometimes efforts are made to suppress it. Futurists clearly have a stake in keeping societies open to free inquiry and to the civil exchange of ideas.

Thus, the future qua futurist has a right, if not an obligation, to work for a political and social order within which future studies can be carried out, within the limits of respect for human dignity... (Bell, 1997: 74).

Such neo-rationalism provides a cornerstone for both futures' and policy scientists' research and advice. Bell, however, does not simply confirm this affinity. He states, quite categorically, that while the policy sciences' professionalism and success are to be admired, he is also insistent that:

Finally, there is a source of conflict in orientation between policy scientists and futurists on one critical point. Futurists aim to open up the future, to make a virtue of the uncertainty of the future for the purpose of empowering people to achieve futures better than the past and the present... Policy scientists to the contrary often aim to 'defuturize' the future by increasing security. Through technology, law, policy and insurance, policy scientists hope to secure the future by taking its uncertainty away (Bell, 1997: 91f.).

This is not the place to enter into the subtleties of this yet-to-be-joined debate. In terms of risk management, I would seek to stress the conjunction of both the Brewer and Bell

approaches. From my understanding of the two books, the risk analyst needs to combine the strengths of the main elements of the works of each. Specifically, whereas Bell's expertise lies in the direction of setting policy goals using 'presumptive' forms of analysis, Brewer's strength is more concentrated in the goal-setting and the needed implementation aspects of such neo-rational analysis.

In this regard, Brewer and de Leon developed the general systems' language concerning the related concepts of complexity, control, performance, implementation strategies and program termination to a new level of policy-related understanding. Not only do they consider the strategic elements of such systems. Their discussion of 'dynamics' of systemic overload is likewise of great importance to contemporary risk analysis in general where the issues of organization design and organizational 'reliability' are being considered.

Within this context of systemic control dynamics, Bell's approach is more general and sanguine concerning such issues. However, the two books used together can indeed be 'synergistic'.

Conclusions

As a teacher of both public and private sector administration, I would have to conclude by saying that Bell's encyclopedic study of the futures' studies field is most admirable for many reasons. It is erudite, enlightening and economic in its outline, organization and carefully constructed prose. The few caveats deserving expression have been stated above.

To the scholar, especially those who lean toward 'neo-rationalist' forms of policy analysis, the book must be considered as a truly significant contribution to the literature within the last decade. This scholarly work will set the futures' benchmark for high quality scholarship for years to come.

Finally, to conclude with a paradox. The Yale tradition of strongly-held, even polemical views lives on. Concerning an earlier intellectual debate between Yale and Chicago academics, Fine (1976) observes:

In the end, the department at the University of Chicago achieved preeminence at the expense of Yale because 'it exhibited the professional values and purposes appropriate to the consolidation and expansion of the discipline'. Yale, on the other hand, ... retained a biological model ill-suited to the demands of professional sociology. (Fine, 1976: 6).

With regard to futures' studies, this book sets the new standard.

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