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Beyond Used Futures: Challenging the 'No Limits' Mentality

By Marcus Bussey*

We live in extraordinary times yet we approach the issues these times have generated as the result of increased complexity with eyes attuned to the ordinary.

It is as if we Moderns have been given the keys to the family car whilst the parents are out and in a moment of adolescent exuberance we have pulled out the P Plates and gone for a spin, not simply heedless of risk but actually drunk on it.

Having grown up, for the most part, in the 20th Century we drive the car as if there is no speed limit. Yet limits do exist and they are there for a reason. As we career down the road to the future at full throttle we can hear our parent's voices saying: Slow down! What's the rush? Better to be late rather than dead on time. We ignore this voice (of course).

The paradox is that as a culture we are risk seekers yet our institutions seem to be highly risk averse. We have created structures to slow us down yet our desire is for ever more speed. Perhaps this is the pathology of being human? Yet we can opt for wiser slower futures.

Our default future is what eminent futurist @Sohail Inayatullah has called a Used Future. It is the fast and furious future of the 20th Century. It laughs at limits and delights in risk. Used futures are someone else's future. Futures we have admired, desired. Yet they have been transplanted to the foreign soil of our own times. Then they take off like rabbits, foxes and cats did in Australia to become Feral Futures!

The Used Future

Used futures offer us the security of the known. They inform the favoured lines of conservative politicians in which rhetoric carries more weight than substance.

Used futures promise us:

Security. When times get tough the tough get going and so it is with used futures. They demand that we be realistic, that we stick to the script as what worked in the past must work in the present and will work for the future. They use the anxieties experienced in the face of uncertain futures to edit our alternatives and characterise social innovators as idealists and unrealistic. Remember, always be afraid and let the professionals manage our security and our freedoms.

Growth. The economy is all about money isn't it? Success is all about money too. Growth is the measure of all things and can only be successful by sticking to the script. If we stay with it long enough we too will be rewarded. Failure is due simply to a lack of belief and a lack of fortitude. Remember, stick to the story it is the only thing that will keep us on track.

Reason. Human intelligence has made this world. With it we have conquered nature, ordered the universe and created untold wealth. Our economic theory is rational as is our approach to security. Reason makes order from the crazy mess we encounter in this world. Citizens need to be educated to be rational subjects. They need to be inducted into the cult of speed that citizenship in this world offers us. Remember, it is irrational to hope for alternatives to the real.

Desire. Hope may be irrational but desire is not. Desire is the *raison d'être* of our Capitalist system. It drives the economy where that fair word 'confidence' is treated with deep reverence. Without consumer confidence the future is indeed grim. Desire requires us to submit to the dull monotony of modern regimes of work and spending so that we can play our part in building a strong national economy. Remember, desire is good and should not be moderated by the peevish carping of doomsters and environmentalists.

Beyond Limits- the quest for alternatives

So are limits bad? The adolescent driving the car may, if they live long enough, be grateful for parental exercise of limits. Limits invite a different kind of creative energy into culture. They reframe the used future approach and suggest we take new routes to fulfilling futures.

Sweden has just declared it will be the first fossil-fuel free nation. It is setting aside the used future narrative for richer more sustainable approaches to limits. It is not surrendering to limits and seeking to

turn back the industrial clock to pre-industrial hardship. It is seeking to rethink limits given the current suite of emergent technologies.

Is this move unrealistic? Those committed to the used future narrative would certainly see it as such. Yet since when has hope and cultural creativity not been realistic? Were the first industrial innovators of the Lunar Society unrealistic in their hopes? Not at all. They lead the way to the incredible, but unsustainable, industrialised world of the 20th Century.

Currently Australia is resolutely committed to the used future narrative. Could we follow Sweden's lead? Could we commit as holders of substantial coal and natural gas reserves to a fossil free future? Is that reasonable or rational?

New Rules

If we play by the given rules of the game the answer is no, this is not reasonable, nor is it desirable. Yet we cannot win at this game. We can only keep our heads above water. Rethinking limits means rethinking the rules of the game. Investing in exploring alternative futures.

If risk taking is a pathology of our species perhaps now it is time to take some risks and change the rules of the game. We need to write new rules for the four priorities listed above: Long term security; cultural not economic growth; collaborative rather than competitive reason; desire for quality not quantity.

New rules help us play a different game that can, in extraordinary times, ensure us a broader level of security and promise a wider set of possibilities for enriched futures based on innovation, experimentation and collaboration. Why not follow Sweden's lead?

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