

The Study of the Future

Humanities 327

Section: D100

Term: 1999 Summer

Instructor: Basil McDermott,

AQ 5111, 291-3763

Email:mcdermott@sfu.ca

Discussion Topics: 'The future is difficult to learn and almost impossible to teach and/or vice-versa'

Most of us hope to exit the university alive. The sensible also guess that the truly interesting challenges, so to speak, of the future transcend the midnight hour when we shall leap or crawl into the year 2,000. That we shall be no more forever one fine or sad day in the future does not distress us nearly as much as our chances for a parking permit, a successful job interview, the selection of an admirable mate, or the fine

tuning of our grade point average. But my ambitious friends, there are naysayers in our midst. Life forms pretending to be humans who spread doom and gloom about our aspirations; negative commentators who smirk that even if we get what we want it will never turn out to be what we expected. I counsel you to ignore these dismal defeatists and adopt pride in the fact that our nation is more prosperous than many, that our freedoms are more secure, that our prospects for 'more' never seemed brighter. What the privileged few in the past were able to enjoy shall surely become the heritage of the many. After all the human race would never be stupid or careless enough to destroy our prospects for progress. 'Moonshine and horse feathers,' retort our depressing critics. 'On what planet dost thou think thee lives? Confuse not, valiant optimist, your preferences for what is either possible or probable. Nothing is guaranteed and a closer examination of what most or many people value in life will reveal unsustainable aspirations that will lead to increased competition and greater tragedies for our children and their children.'

You are now probably expecting me to resolve this vigorous debate about the prospects ahead, about our capacities to guide or to control various aspects of the future. After all, what is the point in studying

the future if one does not have hot tips that will increase our wealth and prosperity. Believe me, I am on your side. But the 'knowledge' of the future we think we seek simply is not lodged in my mind, nor in any of the

books I have read nor in conversations I have had. However, I believe our task is to learn how to think thoughts we do not yet know how to think. I suspect this will arise more through necessity than advanced conscious choice even as we today think quite differently about how certain aspects of our world works. Dare we assume similar shifts in understanding for those to follow us? No one knows what kinds of assumptions, thoughts, and feelings our distant survivors shall make about their own future [should they be fortunate or unfortunate enough, depending on the conditions in which they find themselves, to have such a future]. They may even redefine what it means to be more fully human and worthy of our role in an evolutionary and cosmic drama that dwarfs our comprehension.

Grading: Two essays [8-10 pages]: 1/3 each

Seminar Participation: 1/3

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Required Texts: R. Heilbroner. Visions of the Future. New York: Oxford, 1995.

D. Quinn. Ishmael. New York: Bantam, 1992.

Lee M. Silver. Remaking Eden: Cloning and Beyond in a Brave New World. New York: 1997.

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Recommended Texts: N/A

Materials/Supplies: N/A

Prerequisite/Corequisite: 45 credit hours. Students who have taken GS 427-5 cannot take this course for further credit.

Notes: N/A

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For inquiries contact wendy_sjolin@sfu.ca

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