

Future: A Recent History, by **Lawrence R. Samuel**. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009. 244pp. \$45 cloth. ISBN: 9780292719149

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It was with considerable trepidation that I agreed to review this book. I have been researching and teaching futures studies within a department of political science for almost forty years and over that time have read thousands of books, articles, and plans; discussed ideas about the futures with people in every region of the world; and viewed many movies, videos, and games that purport to be about the future whether from the perspectives of fiction, science, or conjecture. Lawrence R. Samuel was not a person I recognized as being an active member of the futures community. I could not recall that he had written a book about the future before this one (though it turns out, he has), nor that he had published in the recognized peer-reviewed futures journals in English, such as *Futures*, *Journal of Futures Studies*, *Foresight*, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, *World Future Review* (formerly *Futures Research Quarterly*), or *World Futures*, many of which have been in existence since the 1960s and none of which he references.

Still, the book was published by the University of Texas Press and so should have some kind of academic foundation, I assumed.

Future is the result of an enormous amount of research over what seems to be a long period of time. There is no doubt that any person who is completely unfamiliar with America's obsession with "the future" will be stunned by what she reads from so many sources. They may be even more stunned by the equal weight Samuel gives to his sources be they *Cosmopolitan*, *The New York Times*, or *Popular Science*, or--very rarely--some early scholarly source.

Samuel relies heavily on Joseph Corn and Brian Horrigan, *Yesterday's Tomorrows: Past Visions of the American Future*. Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1984, which is indeed an excellent source. He also cites five other "histories of the future" published between 2000 and 2007. I don't see that Samuel contributes anything to our understanding beyond what these have already provided--except for his attention to high school and college yearbooks of the pre- and immediate post-WWII periods.

Even though every sentence he writes is rich with modifying phrases that often both exalt and ridicule the ideas expressed, there is no attempt to contextualize or evaluate by any criteria any of the statements quoted. What he praises one author for writing, he often ridicules another for writing.

The book is basically a series of quotations flowing with no apparent logic from one to another in a book roughly--very roughly--organized in chronological chapters as follows: "The Shape of Things to Come, 1920-1939"; "Great Day Coming, 1940-45"; "The Best is Yet to Come, 1946-1964"; "Future Shock", 1965-1979"; "The Empire Strikes Back, 1980-1994;" and "The Matrix, 1995--".

Samuel states there are certain enduring themes moving through or demarking each of these periods with each chapter considering "the idea of the future as it relates to (1) the public or civic arena; (2) popular and consumer culture; (3) the economic arena; (4) travel and transportation; (5) architecture and cities; and (6) science and technology..." (p. 14). Would this were so! Instead, one breathless quotation follows another page after page in no consistent order and very often in complete contradiction with one another.

There are numerous annoying errors. One example: Bertrand de Jouvenel's name is routinely misspelled, and the name of his futures organization is not *Les Futuribles*, which Samuel follows with the phrase, "of course", as though *futuribles* were a common French word for the future rather than one adopted specifically to show the plurality and openness of the future--a perspective that Samuel steadfastly refuses to acknowledge, so intent is he on insisting that "futurism" pretends to "predict" the future, even though most academic futurists, such as de Jouvenel, do not.

This brings us to a fatal flaw in the book: when defined at all, fundamental terms and concepts are defined only briefly and incompletely. Then they are redefined as though for

the first time later, and in any event are used inconsistently throughout so that it is impossible to be sure what Samuel really means about anything he writes. For example, Samuel states on page two: "futurism (the practice dedicated to anticipating the future)"--and that's it as a definition until much later (p. 116) when he writes, "futurism (also called futuristics and futurology, the latter term coined in the 1940s)" with no further mention of those two terms and their relation to each other, to futurism, or to other terms. Towards the end (p. 201) Samuel writes, "Futurism--the study of the future". This is at odds with every implication of the term as used on every other page of the book. But a few sentences later (p. 202) he refers to "the academic and applied field of Future Studies,...the dry-as-a-bone school of futurism born between the wars". However most futurists within or without the academic field never refer to the field as "futurism." It is instead "futures studies", with the insistent "s" indicating the openness and plurality of the futures. Futures studies is the study of *ideas* about and *actions* towards the future from various theoretical and methodological perspectives, and is neither the study of "the future" (which does not exist to be studied) nor the assertion of some specific ideology about the future, as "*futurism*" clearly implies--and futures studies *per se* certainly does not try to "predict" the future as Samuel routinely insists.

However, Samuel more often applies the term "futurism" not to designate the academic field but mainly to describe any statement made by anyone about the futures. Even so, most frequently Samuel uses "futurism" only for optimistic views about the futures, dismissing gloomy views as somehow not "futurism"--and indeed somehow not even about "the future". He makes other strange distinctions between "futurism" and "the

future" such as: "the future and futurism can of course be going separate directions, the two concepts in fact often sharing an inverse relationship", (p. 2), as well as the completely bewildering assertion that "much of the future had been transformed into marketing research" (p. 154). What in the world does he mean by "the future" in these and so many other instances, and how is "the future" different from "futurism"?

Future is basically a shoddy whirlwind look at pop futures in America--and only in America ("Another reason why this book is so American-centric is that the idea of the future is so American-centric." p. 6). As such, it is severely flawed, but harmless. However, entirely out of the blue Samuel occasionally makes totally unsubstantiated pronouncements about futures studies as an academic and applied field, completely ignoring the reality and global compass of the field. These utterly undocumented pronouncements are found sprinkled throughout the book--as with everything else, unrelated to what comes before or follows. Especially annoying is his last chapter where he makes a considerable number of firm judgments about what futures studies is, and should and should not be, that have absolutely no basis in facts about the actual field whatsoever.