

# *The Future: Ways of Knowing and Survival* *A Documentary in Four Acts*

Theodore Von Laue  
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## *The Future: Ways of Knowing and Survival*

(*Geography 263, History 263*)

taught during the fall semester 1973, in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal and on the eve of the fuel crisis.

### *Dramatis Personae?*

Robert Kates, professor of geography; Theodore Von Laue, professor of history; and fifty-three mostly upper-class students, self-selected from the departments of Geography, History, Biology, Psychology, English, Philosophy, and Undecided.

## *Act One*

Professors Kates and Von Laue in the spring of 1973, both amateur futurologists, wonder how to teach a successful course on the future. This is how they first defined their intentions:

The purpose of the course is to make students more aware of the relentless and demanding pressure of the future upon their lives, preparing them for a more rational analysis of the foreseeable prospects and of the likely changes in the conditions affecting their lives and careers in their social and natural environment; to help them overcome widespread "future shock;" to improve their intellectual and emotional capacity for coping both with the certainties and uncertainties of the future in the remaining decades of the 20th century and beyond.

Dealing with the future poses two major problems. The first is the intellectual challenge of devising techniques and methods for forecasting, sensing and isolating significant trends from the past and the present, projecting them into the future, assessing their possible interaction, distinguishing between short-run and long-run forecasts, and essaying the frameworks in which man's individual and collective destiny will be determined. The

second problem deals with man's emotional and spiritual capacity to accept change and the hardships thereof, to move in an unfamiliar or undesired direction, to suffer the consequences of the present actions. This touches on the realms of religion, belief, and ideology — the techniques of developing one's capacity to accept change and suffering without losing rationality, hope or charity. This aspect is not commonly dealt with in a liberal arts education, but on request your instructors (with a shared interest in Quaker religion, existential philosophy and radical thought) are willing to pursue this subject also.

Coping with the future is a highly personal matter, more vital perhaps than the study of other academic subjects. Making up his or her mind about the future and one's relation to it, will no doubt be the major preoccupation of all students in the class. Yet as in all other aspects of learning, making up one's mind requires as good a grasp of all knowable aspects of the subject as one can get. We hope, therefore, that without surrendering your ideas you will participate in the course with a wide open and courageous mind.

Messrs. Kates and Von Laue distributed this prospectus to all students and merrily went away for the summer.

## Act Two

The first day of class, Tuesday September 11, at 11 a.m. in the hot and dark lecture room next to the Geography office. Not enough copies of the syllabus were ready (there is no way of predicting class enrollments, even for a class on the future). At any rate, there was a plan for the entire semester, with readings and class topics listed, "subject to change without advance notice" (like the oil supply, it turned out).

The reading was Toffler, *Future Shock*, and a book of readings by the same author, then *Limits to Growth* by Meadows, and a few shorter occasional readings. Class discussion began with Toffler; next came a survey of how men work out their futures, in politics, in non-political ways, and by coping with the accidental constellations of circumstance, always in a world wide setting.

After that: techniques of forecasting, including systems analysis as illustrated in the world model used for *The Limits to Growth*. The problem of matching population and resources led to a variety of further explorations: concerning the future of the individual, of the relations between men and women, and the family; concerning the rich and the poor in the world, and the impact of technology upon society, with a summary on "The future as history projected forward," "The future as

present projected forward," and (most daringly) "The future as the future projected forward." After the Thanksgiving recess the course turned personal: How do you cope with the uncertainties of the future? The reading assigned was the Book of Job, and the answer was personal religion. Classes divided that week into three "survival" workshops discussing 1) career planning (led by Spencer Potter, director of Clark's career planning and placement office), 2) life center communities (led by Joe deRivera of the Psychology Department and Daria Meshenuk, Clark '71, who now works for the Worcester Campus Ministry), and 3) self-awareness (led by Walter Wright of the Philosophy Department). The following week three more workshops were held on collective ways of coping with the future. Sidney Peck of Sociology dealt with mass action, Cynthia Enloe of the Government Department with political institutions, and Archie Smith of Sociology with organized religion. The last words, of course, were reserved for the two instructors — although, as it turned out, it was a student paper read by Bob Kates which provided a fitting conclusion.

Even more interesting than the class syllabus were the topics of required student papers. The first paper was doubled-barrelled, one exercise to be a list of events during the first three weeks of the course (culled from the *New York Times* or similar sources) likely to affect the students' personal future, the other a description of how

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various types of people planned for the future.

The "types" included among others a Kalaharie bushman, the abbot of a monastery, a Clark Student, the President of Clark, a supermarket manager, a black American, and the President of the U.S.A. The second paper was a practical exercise in population forecasting regarding an imaginary city named Aquarius, for which students were given a mess of data on which to base their predictions. The third exercise was imaginative: how to assess the impact on society and the individual student of certain technological innovations such as choosing the sex of your child, a universal creditcard system, or energy production by nuclear fusion, the purpose being to make students more aware of the interconnection between technology and society. The description of the fourth exercise read as follows:

Examine the year-end summary in the *New York Times* or a similar newspaper for the year 1953. Compare that summary with the summary you would draw up for the year 1973. On the basis of your estimate of what has happened in that 20-year interval essay a year-end summary for the year 1993.

The fifth and last exercise again was addressed *ad hominem*; it turned out to be the most intimate, revealing, and often deeply touching of them all:



*Prof. Robert W. Kates, a nationally recognized expert on environmental perception and resource management, has been a faculty member in the Graduate School of Geography since 1962.*

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Consider your personal future and choose three different foreseeable turning points in your life, for example: marriage, raising a teen-age child, retirement. (We hope that you will choose other points as well.) For each of the three turning points

prepare an imaginary entry of your state of mind and the state of your living and working arrangements and your general environment at that point into your diary or journal.

Given the volume of work required, this was not going to be a gut course. It was remarkable that in the end so many students signed up for it.

Also at the first session we put the question to them: Do you consider yourself an optimist or a pessimist in regard 1) to the future of society, and 2) your personal future. The optimists far outweighed the pessimists in terms of personal futures (48:5); less so in terms of society (27:26). Not many students, incidentally, changed their minds as a result of the course.

Thus we charted the future of our course on the future. As it turned out, we did run pretty much on track, proving that one can indeed plan successfully for a circumscribed and limited future in a reasonably stable environment like Clark University. Yet it is one thing to lay down a formal pattern of instruction and another to make the class come alive. As one student observed: "There were bad classes and not enough discussion, and as usual not enough time to get the group going successfully, but the feeling of the course is special to me — Thanks." The start was uncertain, but toward the end the course somehow developed a dynamic momentum.

*...man's emotional and spiritual capacity to accept change.*

## *Act Three*

December 11, the last week of classes, the fuel crisis having begun and the future looking rather grim. What better climax for a course urging students — and society — to take more heed of the needs of the future, to look further ahead in time, and to broaden one's range of social awareness as well?

We discussed the instructions for the final examination. The main questions were drawn straight from the news, one quoting an editorial berating the government for issuing conflicting information on fuel reserves and asking students how in the light of their experience in the course they reacted to the editorial and the underlying issue; the alternative question quoted the *New York Times* on Nelson Rockefeller's commission of public figures studying the problems confronting America's third century. The students were to evaluate the prospects of this commission and to express their own sense of the choices ahead. In the last part of the final exam (which was of the take-home variety) the students were asked to state their views of the course. Here are some of their answers:

"The process of actively thinking about and discussing the future within the framework of the course stimulated me to analyze my hopes, fears, and expectations of my own



*Prof. Theodore H. Von Laue, an author and expert on Russian history, came to Clark in 1970 as the Hiatt Professor of History. Before coming to Clark, he was a full professor at Washington University in St. Louis, Mo.*

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future. I began to lose my feelings of impotence towards determining a viable personal future. The future seemed much more real; it lost that quality of an abstract nebulous threat. I am leaving the course, and

leaving Clark, with an altered perception of the future. I feel vitalized, I feel the potential for positive action. No longer are my life and world controlled by vaguely malignant indeterminate forces. And there is a synthesis: my personal choices influence my future and the future of the world. Those are very strongly optimistic statements."

"... I have a good attitude toward my personal future. I can see myself foreseeing problems, weighing the different possibilities, and coming to a decision. On the other hand, I feel that U.S. and the world are running pellmell into the future without considering any other alternatives. Thus, if anything, I have become more an optimist for myself by knowing, and more of a pessimist in other areas, because there is so little preparation for the future."

"My future today appears much brighter from the discoveries I have made during this course. Now I feel I can make some of my future into what I want it to be. I say only some, because the course has also shown me that not everything always goes right, no matter how well planned. But if I can cope with the problems I am confronted with, I will do okay. And, I am sure I can cope."

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"One way this course has changed my perceptions is that now much more than before I continually project into the future various consequences of issues that are raised now, trends that are developing, and choices that are now being made. But again, it's much easier for me to do this on a global level than on a personal level. I think though, that I will continue to choose to keep the quality of mystery in my own personal future."

"This course has forced me to think about, and therefore in some way deal with, the various possibilities that the future holds. Rather than thinking about months and years, I was forced to consider the state of being of a world decades and even centuries into the future. In conjunction with some other courses that I've completed, the course led me to have grave doubts as to the direction that our society is taking. Specifically, the social values and way of life of our society seem headed on a collision course with the future. Western society's dependence on technology, and the sublimation of nature that accompanies it seems totally self-destructive in concept. Only a re-evaluation of our society's cultural values, accompanied by a radical cultural shift, would seem to avert the physical and moral decay, whether rapid or slow, of the quality of life on earth for the future. These

attitudes confirm my initial declaration of world pessimism, while my personal declaration of optimism, although slightly shaken, still stands."

When the course was over, a whiff of nostalgia hung in the air. This is how one student felt as she sat alone when all others had left the room:

*To think of the people that slipped through your fingers in time too short, in time you'd not even seen pass.*

*What happens when a coming together suddenly ceases to be coming together . . .*

*Where do they go . . .*

*all those who once came . . .*

## *Act Four*

Epilogue. As the course prospectus had stated: "Coping with the future is a highly personal matter, more vital perhaps than the study of other academic subjects." And so it turned out to be. Moved by their students' response and openness, the instructors wrote the following farewell letter to their students and to the course:

This is Mr. Kates speaking (with one interruption by Mr. Von Laue), but Mr. Von Laue wholeheartedly shares the spirit and intent of this message.

Dear Friend:

The Future: Ways of Knowing and Survival is now past. For us it was a labor of love, as for many of you; for a few of you little labor and little love; for a few more little labor and much love, and for some unlucky persons, hopefully few, much labor and no love at all.

Least-loved and most-labored for us has been the chore of grading. It is done now, and in a relatively just way even by those rigorous expectations of our colleagues in Psychology. The initial papers were acknowledged, the intimate ones had their presence noted, and the others, including the final, are graded relatively by class standards on such qualities as research effort or substantive knowledge, cumulative use of what was learned, and clarity and internal consistency of thought or argument. As in all such efforts we were easily swayed by the well-expressed phrase and unable to grasp the important ideas hidden in the poorly said or poorly organized sentence. Thus there are a few A's and many C's, but none who have completed the assignments have failed.

But the comparative justice of our grades is injustice to you as persons and to your growth. What has been so remarkable over the semester is the measurable growth

for so many of you. Growth, not just the accretion of knowledge, took place in your confrontation with the unusual or unthinkable, in your imagination, in your sense of self and society. For this measure, how far each of you has personally come from where you began, our measuring stick is most imperfect. In this we, and the system we are part of, fail. But this is too much said about too little; grading the experience which this course has brought us, diminishes us all.

(Interruption from Mr. Von Laue: I fully agree that all grading is degradingly imperfect, but I would argue that to expect more from a setting which, by necessity of numbers, cannot but remain rather impersonal, leads to unnecessary disillusionment. Every student, no doubt, would love to have his teachers watch him as closely as he watches himself in his academic effort, but no teacher alas has the time or energy to live up to that standard, no matter how hard he tries. Please respect his goodwill, but consider that he too is only human. No "system" can do any better. In the essentials of learning everybody is on his or her own.)

(Back to Kates): What was the experience of the course? For us, in the words of one of you: "We saw two people coming from very different places, move towards an understanding of each other. Most

importantly, they were able to function together while maintaining their individual viewpoints. The course became a dynamic process, in which we all taught and learned from each other."

And for all of us, as well in the words of the same student: "Toffler says we will be a highly mobile society, which will have little chance to form community ties or meaningful relationships on any large scale basis. Yet I see in this class the growth of a community, out of a random group of people come together for very different reasons. We have grown together in our understanding of the future, we have shared ourselves with one another, and we have done it in a very short time. The end of the semester left many with a sense that a community had been shared, that we had profited greatly from our coming together. There was, perhaps, a sense of loss at the end of a community, but it was the kind of loss that is easy to bear, for it comes out of an appreciation of what has come before."

With respect, affection, and good wishes for the future.

Bob Kates — Theo Von Laue

Feeling well rewarded for their labors, both instructors agreed to repeat the course, duly adjusted to the future, in another year or two.