Michael Lee  

What does the future hold for us? Curiosity about our future is a shared human trait, albeit pursued in differing ways. There is clearly a significant appetite for futurist thinking, as well as funding and careers in the field. So given the level of buy-in, why is a book such as this intent on building a case for futurology?  

*Knowing Our Future: The Startling Case for Futurology* attempts what its title states, by setting out an argument for the feasibility of futures studies. The author, Michael Lee, founder of the Institute of Futurology and of the South African chapter of the World Future Society, aims to convince his audience (presumably, mainly futures practitioners, potential clients, and lay people) that the future is inherently knowable, and he presents the bases for why he considers that futures studies should be approached as a “science” rather than an art.

This relatively short book begins with graphics in the foreword, illustrating its main theme of pattern recognition being reliant on levels of available information. Its 16 brief chapters can be loosely considered to form six broad parts. The first part explores the *raison d’être* for the book and a few attempts at prognosis with mixed results, followed in the second part by a look at the origins and early attempts to predict future technological and social developments.

In the third part, Lee focuses on scientific concepts of time provided by Newtonian physics, thermodynamic laws, and Einstein’s and Hawking’s theories, while the fourth part examines the possible epistemological bases for developing the future studies field into a more credible science of “futurology.” Issues of the tractability of history and the possibility of the political arena being amenable to prediction are examined in the fifth part. This culminates in a sixth part that is very polemical in its statements of the potential role of futurology in the academy and societal evolution. Three appendices respectively focus on the ten greatest predictions, evidence for Einstein’s theory of relativity, and why Lee considers the uncertainty principle to be misconstrued and overrated.

Lee questions and challenges what he considers to be an overly timid or pessimistic view of futurist capabilities propagated by Bertrand de Jouvenel’s 1967 classic, *The Art of Conjecture.* He argues that this influential text did not adequately examine futurist predictions that *had* been successful and did not engage with the implications of Einstein’s spacetime conceptualization for the field. However, little mention is made of more recent futurist studies with similar objectives to his. Lee does mention a “crisis” in the field, and its “art” status,
but not the attributes or effects—ironically from futurism’s own vulnerability to unanticipated technology, politics, and economic trends explained by James Harkin in 2005.

A difficulty for the reader is Lee’s use of key terms such as “prognostication,” “preconstruction,” and “prediction,” which he highlights as important in the foreword, then seems to use in distinct ways, but never properly defines—nor are they listed in the index. “Foreknowledge” is another key term, but it fares better, with its principles being derived in chapter 9 and helpfully illustrated in a diagram.

In chapters 1 and 11, Lee first states, and then attempts to support his contention, that there are laws of history (arising from its deep structure) comparable to laws of nature and physics. This eerily echoes Isaac Asimov’s proposal for a psychohistory in the fictional Foundation novels, though Lee bases his on the systems notion of a “biomatrix.” He draws on Nikolai Kondratieff’s 1935 economic waves and Joseph Schumpeter’s 1939 innovation theories, linking these to biological evolution and Pitirim Sorokin’s 1957 study of social evolution.

The latter in particular, derived from Sorokin’s analyses of 2,500 years of history in the West, is claimed to represent dynamic patterns throughout the whole span of civilizational history, but it is, in my view, problematic. Firstly, it is now seriously dated and, secondly, Eurocentric in perspective—history, being subject to cultural biases and hegemony, is never value-free. And 2,500 years is not the full span of civilisation, going back only to the early Greek period. Far older civilizations, such as ancient Egypt, are thereby excluded (except for its twilight years under Persian, Greek, Roman, and Arab invasions). Thirdly, there is extensive new and revised data; for instance, premises of features of urbanity underlying the notion of civilization have undergone significant revision, with ideas of hierarchical structure as essential for complex social organizations being overturned following archaeological evidence since 1980s of early “hierarchical” cities in West Africa and Shang China. (See Roderick J. McIntosh’s Western Representations of Urbanism and Invisible African Towns, 1999.)

In addition, there are contested and hidden histories revealed by critical theory-based, postmodern reviews of absolutist claims in the last 30–40 years. Considering that we have still not come to terms with, much less resolved, such histories, attempts to project Sorokin’s analysis into the future will be deeply flawed.

Lee ignores such issues in the main text, dismissing postmodernist challenges as motivated by the uncertainty principle and a pessimism of predictive capabilities. Methodological links are not made with philosophical worldviews (paradigms) that reflect critical epistemology (knowledge), ontology (reality),