

Futures in the Making:
Social Theory Perspectives and Methodological Dilemmas

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Conference Presentation '*The Future Cannot Begin*'
University of Minho, Braga, 25 May 2005

Creation of Futures – Supreme Socio-cultural Activity

Futures are created continuously, across the world, every second of the day. They are produced by the full range of institutional means: scientific and technological, political and legal, medical and economic, educational and religious, at the level of the individual, the family, social groups, companies and nations. These futures extend temporally from the very short to the extremely long-term and spatially from the local to the regional, national, international and global. Examples of futures in the making relate to climate change, depletion of water and topsoil as well as nuclear, bio and nano-technology. By definition, these socio-environmental futures have not yet emerged as (present) phenomena and symptoms, thus lack reality status. As the 'not yet' these futures are not accessible to empirical study. Does this place them outside domain of social science competence? Does their potentiality make the creation of socio-cultural and socio-environmental futures an exclusively political problem? If this was the case, who would be expected to provide the necessary social explanations, analyses and commentaries? If commentary on social futures is the task of the social sciences, how is it to be achieved? What are the conceptual and methodological difficulties involved in the production of those explanations, analyses and commentaries?

Historical Background

Concern with the future is to be found at the very beginning of the social science enterprise and of sociology as an independent academic discipline. This social science concern is closely tied to industrialisation and the periods of intense political turmoil between the middle of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. French social thinkers in particular, such as Condorcet, Saint Simon and Comte were noted for their efforts to aid progress and to participate in the creation of a new order¹. From a different thought tradition and political context Karl Marx too sought not merely to interpret but to change the world. These first social scientists wanted to identify and shape their history in the making. They were interested not just to understand the future but also to help usher it in and play their part in creating the good life for the masses.

With a subsequent focus on 'function', 'structure', 'meaning' and 'action', this normative concern with the future went out of social science favour until the 1960s when a renewed interest in the future began to flourish. The post-war 'sociologists of the future' reflected not only on the complexity of their subject matter but also on the impact their proposed approach would have on the role of the social investigator. This wave of interest has ebbed again and today the future is no longer at the centre of sociological thinking. With the contemporary emphasis on evidence-based science, the future lost its attractiveness as both object of study and potential subject for

normative intervention. In the light of this shift towards positivism, responsibility for the study of this social domain has been abdicated to futurologists. And yet, despite the fact that concern with the future has never been more important, given that futures are created for millennia hence, the disciplines charged to explain our social world are silent on this key aspect of social life. At the beginning of the 21st century they pay scant attention to the disjuncture between the ability to produce futures and the inability to know futures and take responsibility for the futures of our making.

Karl Marx did not rate very highly the work of his French predecessors. This did not prevent him, however, from taking a similar stance regarding his commitment to science and the prophetic normative approach to the future. As he insisted in his Theses on Feuerbach, ‘philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it’ (McLellan ed. 1977: 158). Like the French social thinkers before him, Marx provided visions of how the world could (and should) be different from its present alienated form and identified paths that would lead to the utopian ideal he constructed. Whether or not it was explicitly argued in those terms, in Marx’s work, like that of the ‘Prophets of Paris’ (Manuel 1962), social theory was indissolubly tied to practice, interpretation to normative conduct, science to politics, and prophesy to product.

What early French thinkers, Karl Marx and the sociologists of the future of the 1960s held in common was a commitment to make the world a better place. They were concerned not just to foresee and unveil the future, but rather to steer it in a particular direction. All placed their faith in the power of reason, the idea of progress, the ‘brotherhood of man’, as well as the perfectibility of humans and viewed themselves as moral agents for change. None saw a contradiction in their normative moral stance on the one hand and their pursuit of rigorous science on the other.

This explicitly activist, future oriented approach to social analysis came to an end with the normative science of Marx and Engels and was replaced by the more objectivist science of Durkheim and Parsons on the one hand and the interpretive emphasis in the work of Weber and the Symbolic Interactionists on the other. While the objectivist mode of social science investigation prohibited the normative stance and thus militated against social science promotion of specific futures, the interpretative perspective prioritised the past and present as sources of meaning. Alternatively, investigations were conducted in the de-temporalised, synchronic realm of meaning and social rulesⁱⁱ.

It was not until the 1960s that the next explicit and intense social science engagement with the future was to be encountered. In the US this turned out to be a serious commitment to post-Parsonian sociology that extended over a period of twenty years and more. In the UK scientists from across the full range of social sciences received funding from the Leverhulme Trust and the Social Science Research Council to think about the future and to establish the social sciences’ contribution to that central aspect of social existenceⁱⁱⁱ. While much of the UK’s social scientists’ work on the future was primarily concerned with the production of better forecasts and methods for foresight, a number of their US counterparts wanted to achieve more than that and sought to make the engagement with the future central to the sociological enterprise, that is, to adjust its focus and method to a social world for which the orientation to the future was at the core of social activity. It is this ‘Sociology of the Future’ that I want

to focus on before relating it to some of the methodological dilemmas identified by Max Weber and, in the last section of this paper, exploring the suitability of its principle assumptions for the analysis of contemporary social futures.

Re-emergence of Social Science Focus on Future

The social context for a re-emergence of sociological concern with the future in the USA during the 1960s was the Vietnam War and the technological promise of space travel, computers and nuclear power. The emergent Sociology of the Future^{iv} provided a scheme for analysing social reality as well as a way of directing efforts. It was the study of possible futures that included values and responsibility, an action orientation that combined description, analysis and formative stance. As such, it included efforts to create a better world and required from social scientists visions, images and utopias of the good life. It explicitly acknowledged the constitutive nature of knowledge and saw sociologists as part of (not external to) the reality they studied. The sociologists of the future thus took on board scientists' responsibility as participants and creators of reality and saw the task of sociology as engaging with purposes, planning and social engineering.

Methodologically the sociology of the future entailed a focus not on what *is* but on what society *could* or *ought* to be. It was thus concerned with social values, their achievements and their consequences. Its emphasis was on dynamics, emergence and change. As such it left behind conventional scientific beliefs in objectivity, value neutrality and scientific detachment without, however, letting go of some of the principle assumptions that underpin the scientific study of reality, the belief in progress and the trust in scientific control. In agreement with George Herbert Mead's (1980/1932) analysis of the reality status of the social future they considered the future to be real only in the present and thus conceived of both past and future as the ideational spheres of memory and anticipation. At the same time, they insisted that there is an irreducible difference between past and future, which has significant implications for social science study: 'There are no past possibilities and there are no future facts'.^v This means you can study the 'not yet' only in the present. To research prospective and projective aspects of social life requires the study of images on the one hand and the production of predictions of the possible on the other. Waskow (1969) defined this as the study of 'possidiction'. For the study of images (individual and collective) visions were conceived as orientations to action in the present and considered to be facts that could be tested against future events. 'Possidiction', in contrast, was seen as the search for real possibilities (rather than repetitions of past) where actual possibilities were imported into the future as an in-determinate realm of possible present futures that was amenable to planning, projection and activation in the present. Values were central to this enterprise in which social scientists saw themselves as agents for change, engaged in future making and social engineering for betterment of the human condition. This meant sociologists of the future considered themselves not mere tools but judges of ends to which their knowledge will be put. Despite its passionate and far-reaching concern to re-orient the discipline, however, the approach left unresolved a number of the contradictions and dilemmas that arose between the positivist and normative stances on the one hand and between the future as an aspect of mind and as potential material reality on the other^{vi}.

Max Weber's Approach to Social Futures

At beginning of 20th century Max Weber addressed these contradictions for the social sciences in his methodological writings^{vii}. It is therefore worth our while to re-visit his methodological writings in order to explore Weber's proposals on how to take human futurity seriously. When we consider a range of Weber's key concepts such as rationality and progress, options and choices, calculation and the means-end schema, purposes and motives, values and reasons, ethics and morality, as well as responsibility and professional vocation, we realize that they carry within them the strongest possible future connotations. To Weber, the future is *the* social domain of action. To be human is to be future oriented in a dual way: being oriented towards the future and guided by it for action in the present. Since humans cannot escape their futurity, this futurity is *de facto* the proper subject matter of the social sciences. Moreover, since social scientists as humans cannot escape their own futurity, this futurity too needs their reflective attention. However, the logic of science makes the study of human futurity a hazardous and most difficult endeavour.

Futurity in the Subject Matter

Weber acknowledged that the future is both cause (past) and reason (future) for human action. At the micro level, all we do is future oriented: we choose between options, allow values and beliefs to guide action, decide on the most appropriate means to ends, behave rationally and act with commitment. At the macro level, he suggested, modernity is marked by belief in and pursuit of progress and innovation, which in turn creates not just instability and fluidity but also incessant obsolescence. Modernity is secondly characterised by rationality which renders everything calculable and knowable in principle (if not in practice) by experts, who inhabit niches of specialist knowledge.

Futurity and the Logic of Science

While futurity constitutes an inescapable aspect of the subject matter of the social sciences it poses problems when the scientific methods are applied. That is to say, as a *science* the social sciences are bound to the logic of science: to empirical investigation, non-evaluative knowledge and projections based on past experience. As a *cultural* enterprise they have to square the circle of dealing with the (future-based and future-creating) realm of ideas, values, goals and purposes with tools designed for the study of objects in motion where the future is irrelevant. Staying within the logic of science investigations, social scientists can achieve a number of important aspects of studying futurity. They can establish means to existing ends, show the advantage of some means over others, calculate the various costs involved, assess the internal consistency between ends, and calculate probable outcomes of present actions. As such, the scientific method cannot only aid social control but it can also help to clarify methods of thinking and identify the nature of ideas and assumptions. The logic of science does not, however, permit social scientists to comment on these ideas being right or wrong, good or bad. That is to say, answers to questions about how the world *ought* to be are not in the gift of an empirical science. Its logic excludes values, beliefs and ideals. In contrast to the physical sciences, however, the study of culture needs to take account of individually pursued purposes, ideals and belief as well as socially constituted values, rules and moral codes. Social futurity, Weber therefore concludes, requires a subject-specific mode of enquiry, which is fundamentally different from the study of (physical) objects in motion. Since the future is not an empirically accessible

sense datum, Weber proposed the construction of ‘ideal types’ (stereotypes) against which actual events and purposive, prospective activities could be plotted and compared (see below).

Futurity of Investigators

As *scientists*, social investigators are bound to the logic of science. As *cultural* beings they are future-creating and future guided in their actions, making judgements about right and wrong, good and evil and analysing social phenomena in terms of their ‘cultural significance’, which in turn presupposes a value orientation. As *scientists* they cannot escape the need for innovation and progress. As *cultural* beings they are guided by value relevance, moral concerns and the question ‘How should we live?’ While the logic of science prevents social investigators to address that question, it does empower them to acknowledge that their object of study is defined and circumscribed by our questions and methods and requires that they make clear where science ends and politics begins^{viii}.

Differences in Approaches to the Future: Weber and the Sociology of the Future

Weber explicitly acknowledged the methodological dilemmas that arise with the investigation of social futures where the subject matter and the scientists investigating are future oriented and future bound whilst the logic of the method is firmly past- and present oriented. In the light of this dilemma, as I mentioned above, Weber proposed the cultural construction of ‘ideal types’ as basis for comparison, which would allow him to conceive of reasons as causes of action, that is, it admitted teleological explanation for the social sciences. In contrast, the sociologists of the future proposed images and visions of the future as basis for comparison with subsequent facts. This meant that explanations remained wedded to linear, past-based causality rather than future-based teleological causality. While the *present* future is the subject matter for the sociologists of the future, Weber encompassed both the *present* future and *future* presents, a central distinction that has been elaborated by Niklas Luhmann (1982: 278). This difference in orientation between present futures and future presents is of great importance for social analyses of contemporary socio-environmental processes where futures are underway but have not yet congealed into matter. Finding ways to engage with and study future presents, I want to argue, is one of the most urgent contemporary tasks for social scientists.

Future Presents as Contemporary Challenge for Social Scientists

Today the human social world extends beyond social relations, institutions and social structures to encompass a world of socially produced potential effects that are time-space distantiated. This social sphere spans the globe and stretches into open futures. Its influence reaches beyond the human world to the natural environment. Much of this world is not material in the conventional sense. Rather, it is constituted by the latent and immanent deeds that are already under way. It is a world that has not yet materialised as symptoms. It is the future of processes – chemical, nuclear, biological, genetic, fiscal, to name just a few – which are set in motion by socio-political, scientific and economic action. It is the future set on its way, currently in a phase of development in which it is not ‘matter’, not sense data in the traditional scientific sense and thus not amenable to empirical study. The actions and processes of this future in the making are ongoing. Their eventual time-space distantiated outcomes, in

contrast, are potential. Once these latent processes materialise as symptoms, it is very unlikely that their causal connections can be established backwards with certainty. Examples of past futures that are no longer traceable to precise origin(s) are: radiation, acid rain, global warming, the effects of hormone-disrupting chemicals, or the stock-market crashes of the 20th century.

The first issue to be dealt with is the reality status of the ‘not yet’, the invisible future in the making, the latent future in progress. This is a social sphere that is decidedly not encompassed by mind-based images or vision of the future that can be compared to subsequent facts. Nor is it contained in projections based on past experience – it is in the nature of innovations that not just the product but also the effects comprise unexpected and unforeseeable consequences. Rather, it is a world of processes that have not yet congealed into visible phenomena. In terms of conventional science, therefore, these futures are immaterial, thus unreal. As not (yet) real they are immaterial to our scientific concerns and considerations. As not (yet) real, moreover, they are beyond the realm of socio-political responsibility. This is a grave error of judgement, which, in turn, is inescapably tied to contemporary environmental problems. Since, furthermore, these environmental problems are socially produced they are *de facto* the subject matter of the social sciences. As such, these socio-environmental futures pose problem for social analyses. Again, it was Max Weber who suggested that,

‘A new “science” emerges where new problems are pursued by new methods and truths are thereby discovered which open up significant new points of view’. (Weber 1969/1904: 68)

The new problems, in other words, require new understandings, new conceptualisations, new methods. In this instance, it is clearly not sufficient to constitute the social future as an aspect of mind only. Instead we have to find a way of according reality status to the future in the making, that is, to invisible and latent processes underway.

A second issue relates to the nature of scientific causality. Science deals with causal chains. It asks ‘how?’ questions. It gives answers to *how* the present and the future arise from preceding events, that is, the past. To explain the present, and by extension the future, on the basis of the past has the advantage that it brings certainty to what might otherwise be thought of as uncertain relations. From a known past we can project the future as trend and probability. There is, however, another, much older way of explaining causal relations and this is grounded in ‘why?’ questions. Why questions are predominantly focused on the future. They are associated with what is known as final causes or teleological explanation. This way of understanding temporal relations is directed to human purposes, intentions, goals and value orientations and most generally to the meaning of action. Here the future is regarded to be the ‘cause’ of the present and the temporal flow moves in the opposite direction from scientific causality, that is, from the future to the present. With causality that emanates from the future, the certainty gained through past-based causality evaporates. Choice, freedom, morality and the fact that humans can act in the light of new knowledge and desires makes future-based causes irreducibly uncertain, indeterminate even. In the world of future-based causality, therefore, conventional

scientific and political quests for control become inappropriate. Other quests come to the fore. Questions of ethics and aesthetics are given room to flourish.

When social scientists intend to use the two knowledge traditions to complement each other, they need to be conscious of the differences between them and utilise the associated conceptual tools accordingly. If sociologists do not merely want to describe the world but help to change it, then these differences need to be surfaced as a precondition to identifying and showing potential openings for social change. Only with teleological causality is it possible for sociologists to extend themselves into the future, not just for the purpose of taking account of values, goals and aspirations, but, more importantly, to place themselves in the future and to view the present from that perspective. Only with this understanding of temporal relations is it possible to take responsibility for the (often unknown) outcomes of actions, is it possible to take seriously Hans Jonas' (1984/1979: 129) proposal that 'duty springs from the deed already under way' as well as his suggestion that social responsibility has to be adequate to the sphere and temporal reach of social influence.

Sociologists are 'future makers' – that was the assertion and the vision presented by the founders of the social sciences and by the sociologists of the future of the 1960s. In this paper I have identified some areas where this challenge had been left unfinished and others where it had not yet begun to be addressed. To re-consider this innovative work and apply it to the contemporary condition requires a collective effort not just from across the social science perspectives but from the humanities, the arts, the natural sciences and the professional spheres of medicine and technology. Each member of these spheres of knowledge is implicated in the social futures in the making, each challenged to play their part in closing the gap between the relentless production of political, economic, scientific and technological futures, the knowledge of their immanence and impacts and the responsibility for potential time-space distantiated outcomes. Future makers need to identify for society openings for change and construct alternatives to facilitate a more just order for posterity.

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Acknowledgement

This research has been conducted during a three-year research project 'In Pursuit of the Future', which is funded by the UK's Economic and Science Research Council (ESRC) under their Professorial Fellowship Scheme.

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ⁱ For an excellent account of the ‘Prophets of Paris’, see Manuel 1962.

ⁱⁱ A notable example of this would be Peter Winch’s influential (1958) *The Idea of a Social Science*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Examples of UK work would be Bell 1974, Clarke 1964, Cole et al. 1973, Dumont 1974, Freeman & Jahoda 1978 and Young ed. 1968. See also a list of relevant committees set up to shape the future across the social domains, listed in Young ed. 1968 pp.35-6.

^{iv} For analysis of the US Sociology of the Future of the 1960s see Bell and Mau eds. (1971), also Moore (1966)

^v Brumbaugh’s (1966: 649) statement is approvingly quoted by Bell and Mau (1971: 9).

^{vi} For an extended discussion on the Sociology of the Future, see Adam 2004

^{vii} For Weber’s methodological writings which address matters concerning human futurity see Weber 1959/1919, 1969/1904, 1969/1917, 1978/1913, 1989/1904-5.

^{viii} For a more detailed discussion on Weber’s approach to the study of human futurity, see Adam 2005