

BRIEFING 1

IN PURSUIT OF THE FUTURE

ESRC PROFESSORIAL FELLOWSHIP 2003-6
(RES051270049) The Research is concerned with the way the future is known, anticipated, planned for, secured and produced. It seeks to connect isolated fields of enquiry and works toward a comprehensive, socially relevant theory of the future.

Humans as cultural and social beings are future oriented. *How* they live and produce their futures, however, is biographically, culturally and socially distinct. It changes historically, over people's lifetime and with specific contexts. As knowledge practices these approaches to the future have social consequences. As such, they are an important subject matter for social enquiry.

Looking back in history we find that first of all the future belonged to gods/God. Much later it was entrusted to priests and sovereigns as gods/God's representatives on earth. Where the rule of gods/God has receded and society is organised in a largely secular way, it is individuals and their elected representatives that are entrusted with the future.

In industrial societies, the future is understood with reference to its use value for the present. Accordingly, individuals are charged with the construction, control and colonisation of the future, to exploit it for their benefit in the present. For the social sciences this raises questions about accountability and responsibility.

Key questions to be asked

How is daily life oriented towards the future?

How is the future planned & secured?

How are aspirations realised?

How are futures produced?

How is responsibility handled?

How are potential futures recognized?

How are future consequences dealt with?

Human futurity

To be human is to be extended in time: past and future. Our futurity is marked by anticipation, fear, hope and desire; by the capacity to use our imagination, calculate and speculate, plan and make choices; by entering contracts, honouring obligations, taking responsibility and acting on trust; by being guided by ideals, ethics, morals, faith and visions of how the world ought to be.

The future is:

Affirmed, appropriated, averted, calculated, created, colonised, controlled, commodified, divined, discovered, deciphered, discounted, expected, encoded, embodied, embedded, envisaged, engendered, expanded, extrapolated, engineered, exploited, eliminated, foreshadowed, foreseen, foretold, forecasted, foreclosed, invoked, interpreted, meditated, mapped, managed, narrated, prophesied, projected, predicted, planned, prospected, pursued, promised, produced, politicised, symbolised, speculated, shaped, secured, told, traded, transformed and visualised.

Industrial societies' approaches to the future

Industrial societies produce long-term futures by scientific-technological, economic and political means. This capacity to produce futures, however, is not matched by the ability to either foresee effects or take responsibility for potential and eventual impacts of those future-creating actions.

Industrial societies rely on science and economics for their knowledge of the future. However, neither source of knowledge seems to be adequate to the task. It is the job of social science to investigate the problem and identify potential openings for change.

The future in science

Science projects trends, predicts and makes forecasts. Its knowledge of the future is based on evidence that is derived from a known past. The future in science is thus an extension of the past.

Much of human futurity, however, is not of the kind that can be extrapolated from a known past. Rather, it is open-ended, subject to choice, and rooted in human freedom, being unto death, ethics and morality.

Importantly, the outcomes of scientific knowledge and its technological applications are rarely amenable to knowledge extrapolated from the past. The scientific *production* of the future, in form of technological innovations for example, stands in an inverse relation to the capacity *to know* the scientific creations with all their potential consequences. That is to say, the ability to produce futures is not matched by knowledge of futures thus created. This raises the spectre of structural irresponsibility at the very core of science and the translation of scientific knowledge into products.

The future in economics

Economics calculates the future with reference to credit and debt, profit and loss and with regard to risks that are to be balanced out and averted. The economic future is equated with money. It is commodified. As an economic resource the future is traded, managed and controlled like any other resource. Costs and benefits of specific futures are established with reference to their utility for the present. In order for its present value to be established the future is discounted.

The economic approach to the future is therefore characterised by a utilitarian present orientation and a parasitic exploitation of future others' presents.

Politics of the future

Modern democracies delimit the periods of government of their elected representatives on average to four to five years. The impacts of policies pursued during periods of government, in contrast, outlast their creators by decades, even millennia in the case of nuclear, chemical and bio-technological decisions. Thus democratic politics transgresses not only the spatial but also the temporal boundaries of its jurisdiction.

Science and economics are the primary knowledge base for contemporary politics. They are the unquestioned sources of evidence and justification for decisions. Yet science and economics are appropriate neither to foresee outcomes nor to take responsibility for potential impacts. Clearly, new conceptual tools are required to take responsibility for futures of our making. As products of the industrial way of life, the social sciences are not yet ready to step into that breach. Their own conceptual base needs to change if they are to become adequate to this task.