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*Negotiating the Future*

**NEGOTIATING FUTURES: ACTION, KNOWLEDGE, ETHICS**

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***1. Creating Futures is Daily & Everyday Occurrence***

To create futures and to anticipate what might happen as the result of our own and others' actions, is what we as individuals do on a daily basis without needing to think about it. Along the way we wander through different futures in our mind, considering what might be the best option, the most lucrative choice and what might be the right thing to do in the circumstances: in other words, we negotiate futures. To come to a decision, we tie these considerations to memories and experiences and relate them to the context of action. What is anticipated, in turn, involves necessary considerations regarding what is right and wrong, good and bad, prudent or extravagant.

At the wider social level too futures are created and negotiated continuously, across the world, every second of the day. They are produced by the full range of social institutions: politics, law and the economy, science and medicine, education and religion. Futures, we can therefore say, are produced at all levels of social relations: the individual, the family, social groups, companies and nations. At this collective social level too decisions are rooted in memory and expectation on the one hand and on anticipations and plans, hopes and fears on the other. Here too, values influence what are thought to be right or wrong, good or bad plans, decisions and actions.

Moreover, at all levels, these negotiated and created futures extend temporally from the very short to the extremely long-term and spatially from the local to the regional, national, international and global. This means that the daily negotiation of futures is concerned with action, knowledge and ethics. However, we need to appreciate first, that these three elements of social practice do not play an equal role in every future-oriented situation and, secondly, that there is a particular direction to the contemporary futurity which tends to place responsibility last in the sequential chain.

See *Figure 1*

At the most basic level we extend into the future through action – action that is intentional and/or oriented towards a goal, but effects may also be unintended. Knowledge is required to choose between different options. It is inescapably involved in the context of planning and innovative technology. The question of ethics, finally, tends to be made dependent on knowledge – we cannot be held responsible for that which we cannot know. (Exceptions tend to be made for contexts where decisions

affect people very close to us such as children or grand children, for example, when as guardians we take responsibility for our long-term decisions without being sure of outcomes, i.e. questions about upbringing or schooling.) What is foregrounded in the relation between action, knowledge and ethics, therefore, is not fixed but changes according to context. Moreover, historically there have been major shifts in that triple base to approaches to the future. To bring those relations into sharp focus, let me draw a crude picture about current every-day understanding and contrast this to earlier forms in order to get at some of the key characteristics of contemporary negotiations.

## ***2. Contemporary common-sense ways of understanding the future***

From a conventional common-sense perspective the future is the ‘not yet’. It is the realm of potential and possibility. It is viewed like an empty vessel to be filled by us with our dreams and desires, plans and projects, our aspirations, hopes and fears. As empty space the future is stretching out in front of us: vast, unlimited and open-ended. As unclaimed, virgin territory the future is ours to negotiate and occupy, to take, make and shape. In our everyday lives we know this future on the basis of experience rooted in the past and through repeating events and stable continuities in both nature and society. From this common sense perspective the future is not fact. Instead, it is an aspect of mind, a conjecture. And, as such, it is not real until it materialises into present fact.

To give some substance to these points, let us take the example of this international seminar. While the conference was being planned, the organisers were operating in the planning realm of the ‘as if’ and functioned in the domain of the ‘not yet’. But every decision was taken on the assumption that the conference was going to happen. Only since it has started, however, has the conference become reality. Only the participants’ attendance – giving and discussing papers – has turned the plan into reality, and with it has transformed the future into the present. As *present fact* all earlier possibilities have evaporated. The opportunity has gone where the organisers could still decide to have different speakers. They no longer have the option to select a different venue. They no longer have the choice of different caterers.

Once the future has happened it is no longer the future. It becomes the present and the past. We have to appreciate, however, that we have not always viewed the future like this. Assumptions about the future differed in complex ways and on many different, interdependent levels.

## ***3. It has not always been like this: knowing fate***

We can appreciate the difference in perspective and understanding by examining a cluster of interdependent assumptions. These relate to *ownership* (who is thought to own the future), *origin* (where and when the future originates, its source) and its reality status, *expertise* (who are deemed to be experts in the future), and to the *methods* (what methods and knowledge tools are considered legitimate) employed to access it.

When we extend ourselves back, deep into human history to the world of mythical stories or, alternatively, to traditional cultures, we find that the future did not belong to people. Ownership of the future was split between two sacred domains. The future

either belonged to the gods or it was set on its path by ancestors. What the future held in store, therefore, was in their laps. It was not in the hands of people. As such our future was subject to fate.

The future originated with extraterrestrials. Ancestors and gods set the world in motion and pre-determined its development. Both played an important role, therefore, not only in this overarching development and destiny of the world but also in establishing the fate of individuals, groups and whole societies. In those mythical times and places of traditional cultures, people were (and still are) mandated to manage, negotiate and control space. Time and the future, in contrast, was (is) controlled by extra-terrestrials. The future which belonged to gods and ancestors was an already *existing future present*. It was conceived as a pre-existing realm because it was pre-determined and controlled by its owners.

Experts on the future, therefore, were people skilled in interpreting the signs and symbols provided by the extraterrestrial owners of time and the future. These experts engaged with the pre-destined *future present* of individuals and groups. As prophets and oracles they were either acting as conduits for the intentions of the gods, or they had the task to affect those intentions through sacrifice and other means.

Knowledge of and privileged access to that future did not empower you to change the pre-determined fate. Rather, expertise grounded in pre-destination helped people to prepare for their fate but did not enable them to alter it. Think, for example, of Greek and Nordic mythologies which abound in stories of unsuccessful attempts to avert fate that had been pre-destined and foretold.

Responsibility for the pre-determined and pre-existing future lay unambiguously with the owners of the future since you cannot be responsible for what is not at your disposal and over which you have no power. You can merely act responsibly *towards* something which does not belong to you and this is not at all the same as thing as having responsibility *for* and *over* something which you own.

#### ***4. Contemporary assumptions: forging futures***

We can see here important differences to today's secular societies' approaches to the future on every one of these clustered, interdependent domains of assumption: ownership and responsibility, origin and reality status, expertise and methods of access.

In distinction to predecessor societies, we assume to own the future: the future, we say, is ours to take and shape. We treat it as a resource for our use in the present. As such we plan and negotiate, forge and transform the future to our will and desire. This has consequences for responsibility: as makers of the future we become responsible for the outcomes of our future-creating actions. Our responsibility *towards* a future that was owned by others, therefore, changes into our responsibility *for* the future.

The second shift relates to both the origin and the reality status of the future. In contrast to predecessors we do not think of the future as already existing or pre-determined. Instead, we think of the future as created by us, in and for the present. We see ourselves as producers and managers of an open future, which we shape and

negotiate to our plans and intentions. The future is assumed to be subject to our will, even if it does not always work out the way it was planned. This means, in our hands the future loses its determined quality and emerges instead as a domain of possibility, as a realm of pure potential, which we influence, negotiate, co-produce and realize. (And this, by the way, is the case even where we have a deep trust in fate, credit the stars with the power to affect our destiny or hold strong religious beliefs. In such cases we live with the paradox of a future that is simultaneously open and determined, without giving much thought to the matter). Regarding its reality status, this contemporary future of negotiation is 'not yet', not material, not factual and thus has no reality status. Only the factual present and past (as I have already indicated) have the status of factual reality. Often the conclusion is drawn that the future is therefore an aspect of mind, belonging to the realm not of the real but the ideal.

The third shift relates to expertise. Modern experts on the future are no longer specialists on ancestors, gods or the stars. Instead they are experts on people and their behaviours as the contributions to this meeting show. Consequently they are not drawn from religious elites but are predominantly connected to the academic fields of business studies, economics, history, politics, psychology, sociology, social policy and the arts, especially science fiction.

With respect to methods, contemporary experts on the future have to know not the pre-destined *future present*. Rather, they have to know the *past* in order to be able to calculate the probable future. And these probable futures are established not with reference to individuals and unique events but are instead calculated on the basis of aggregates. Namely, past-based calculations are produced about probable averages and rates of change. Thus, collective, historically sedimented knowledge, rooted in the factual past, is the foundation upon which contemporary experts on the future conjecture about the 'not yet'. Past repetitions and continuities in nature and society allow for anticipation and comparison. As such, repetition acts like a projected conceptual structure and scaffold for action in the present.

However, the more we create futures, the more intensely we pursue progress, the faster we change society in the process and the more interdependent our creations are the less those projected structures hold and the less the past can act as guide for knowledge of the future. With the modern pursuit of progress and innovation, for example, the aim is precisely not the repetition of the past but the pursuit of the new and novel. This clearly has consequences for knowing what is to come: in contexts where we are the owners of the future who pursue progress and innovation rather than stability and permanence, the past contains only very limited useful knowledge (in the sense of projectable information not in the sense of wisdom) about the future. Carefully constructed scaffolds and structures of stability and certainty dissolve into processes. All that is solid melts into air, to use Marx's evocative phrase. This has the effect that prognoses of future effects and outcomes have to be built ever more on conjecture, fantasy and imagination rather than fact and secure knowledge rooted in the past. And in such contexts experts inevitably disagree about their calculations of probability.

Expertise, therefore, becomes contested when there is no way of answering, with any degree of certainty, the questions: 'What will be?' 'What will happen?' 'What does the future hold?' When these questions become futile, however, we find ourselves in

the realm not of science and empirical analysis but in the realm of morals and ethics. In such contexts, the old questions need to be replaced with new ones that are more appropriate to the contemporary condition. We need to ask instead: ‘What should happen?’ ‘What might be the right thing to do?’ ‘What could be a just solution?’ Importantly, these are not questions that science or economics can arbitrate (not even the law as it is currently designed but I can’t deal with this here). Instead, these are questions of values, of morals and of ethics. As such they belong in the public domain: they have to be addressed by us, not as academic experts of a particular field but as citizens who are all implicated in the decisions and actions that are carried out on our behalf.

### ***5. Social Science Assumptions about the Future***

When we now briefly focus on the social sciences it becomes obvious that they too have largely adopted the implicit assumptions I have just outlined. Social science assumptions about ownership and responsibility, origin and reality status, expertise and methods of knowing may well differ in detail between economic, psychological and sociological perspectives. However, the overall thrust tends to follow the everyday assumptions I have identified above. As empirical disciplines the social sciences have difficulty with the ‘not yet’. That is to say, the future is a deeply problematic domain for factual investigation.

As the ‘not yet’ the future is not fact. But if not fact, what then is it? Social scientists work (implicitly and/or explicitly) with the Latin distinction between *facta* and *futura*: *Facta* refer to past events, done, achieved, completed and thus empirically accessible as facts. *Futura* encompass that which has not yet come about, something non-factual which *will* become a *factum* only after it has occurred. *Facta* have already taken (unalterable) form, *futura* are still open to influence, i.e., ‘there are no past possibilities and there are no future facts’ (Brumbaugh 1966: 649). *The* future is not real, only present possibilities are. To become real, the not-yet has to be activated into present existence by our actions.

Furthermore, if we acknowledge that the future is open and subject to human design, that human actions are interconnected and mutually implicating, and that people can act in the light of new knowledge, then knowing the future becomes a contradiction in terms. Futurologists have recognized this long ago and are pursuing instead possible, probable and preferred futures. They do this with methodological tools that range from, for example, Foresight and Delphi methods, to horizon scanning, back-casting and scenario building (May 1996, Slaughter 2004). What we need to appreciate, however, is that all these methods are still operating in the futures sphere of knowledge: knowledge to gauge potential outcomes of actions – past, present and future - and knowledge to provide a better basis for action.

Social scientists can approach the future either in terms of extrapolations from the past or as an aspect of mind. For Sociologists of Expectation, for example, the future is rooted in intentions, expectations and plans. As such the future is located in the present from where it influences potential outcomes. In both cases it means that methodologically social scientists (on the whole) are not concerned with the nature of future-oriented actions or the ethics involved. Instead, the future dimension of actions and ethics forms a largely implicit part of the disciplines concerned. Thus, social

action as *futures in the making*, that is, as lived and living process futures, largely escape social science attention. Since, however, society and its members are future oriented and our actions affect the future present of many generations hence, a key aspect of the social is missing from social science analyses when future making and futures in the making are disattended.

Let me briefly explain with the example of nuclear power. Socio-political decisions about nuclear power, made in the middle of the last century, determine and delimit not just our present but the present of thousands of generations hence. We can't see, or touch, or smell or taste the reality of those effects. We don't know that reality the way we know other things (spatially located matter) through our senses. Only our cells recognise these futures in the making as they already live that reality. Of course, we can talk about nuclear power facts. We can talk about the bombs that were dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the post-war nuclear treaties, about new countries having joined the previously exclusive nuclear club or existing nuclear power stations. We can also talk about the committees charged to come up with recommendations about nuclear waste or the consultation exercises about the proposed new reactor programmes. All these are past and present facts extending into the future. In such contexts, however, we can no longer oppose the factual past and present to a non-factual potential. This future is already in progress and real even if it is not accessible as sense data in its full time-space distantiated impact. Thus, we need to avoid the conclusion, which arises from the distinction between *facta* and *future*, that there is no pre-figured or pre-set future to be known, nothing to be foretold beyond the patterns, cycles and rates of change that continue from the past. I want to propose instead that there *are* process futures already in progress, that there are futures on the way, futures that have reality status even if they have not yet materialized into phenomena and symptoms: radio-active futures being an excellent example. These are not empty and open futures. Rather they are futures in progress, real and material, even if their networked time-space distantiated outcomes elude our grasp. As futures in the making they are not accessible to the conceptual tools with which we conventionally approach futurity and the production of futures whose effects extend into the short, medium and long term future.

Clearly there is potential for action. However, this future is anything but open. And it is anything but an empty vessel to be filled with our desires. It is instead an extremely crowded domain. It is a process realm where past decisions and actions influence and delimit current decisions and actions. Here certain futures are set in train already. Just think of the legacy of nuclear waste, the unpopularity of nuclear power and associated protests, the fact that certain unwanted guests have infiltrated the previously exclusive 'nuclear club' or the massive costs involved in 'new build', decommissioning and radio-active waste management. You might further think of the associated globalisation of the criminal trade in nuclear materials and the potential for terrorism. All these ongoing processes and futures in the making play a crucial part in what decisions *are* being taken today, what decisions *can* be taken, and what decisions *make sense* to be taken. What tends to be bracketed from our concern is the full depth of extension into the future that is appropriate to the reach of the consequences of our actions. With respect to nuclear power we are talking here not of the already unusual timescale of 20 to 50 years of planning, not even a couple of hundred years but a timescale of many thousands of years.

As social scientists we therefore need to find ways of engaging beyond the present and extending our serious attention to the time-space distantiated reach of our actions. We need to find ways, in other words, to make the timescale of knowledge and responsibility appropriate to the time-scale of effects of our actions. This however, is a political act which brings its own problems for social science methodology, which I have addressed elsewhere but cannot discuss here (Adam 2004b, Adam 2005a and 2005b).

### ***6. Politics of Posterity***

As an inescapably political activity, social science engagement with the future draws on a politics that is deeply steeped in the everyday, common-sense assumptions I have outlined in this presentation. This means the future in progress is also a problematic domain for politics.

When we once more focus on the future explicitly, we see that politically, the future is an extremely difficult territory. Our political representatives' mandate is 4-5 years. This means that in local and national government they have no mandate to operate in the vast temporal domain of an open future. Since most political decisions have effects that outlast their creators, we the public give our political representatives an implicit mandate to effect us and our children - at a push maybe even our children's children. But here we are already pushing the boundaries of *our* legitimacy of consent: Can we be sure that our children and our children's children would approve of our consent and agree with the rationale for our thinking and acting? Of course, we can't be sure. Governments certainly have no mandate in and for the long-term future since the people and species that will be affected by those decisions have no voice and no vote. Once you become aware of these temporal issues you realize that we have no political structures in place that address this problem: We have no appointed guardians of the long-term future, no political body charged with the task to represent the unborn.

This, however, is a problem not of science, not of economics, not even of politics. It is a problem for contemporary civil society, which needs to be addressed therefore by contemporary civil society. It is to be handled through debates concerned with what is right and what is just. As citizens we need to hold those debates in the full knowledge that our decisions and actions and their effects make us trespassers in the future present of others, that we are inescapably illegal immigrants in their worlds; and that they have *not* given their consent.

We can only achieve such a shift in perspective and concern if we reconnect the social spheres of action, knowledge and ethics. Moreover, given that certainty of knowledge is not available for the contemporary process world of futures in the making, we need to approach the ethical domain not as the third element in this tri-partite domain but as the first one. Especially where knowledge is patchy or not available, we need to establish a direct connection between action and ethics and stop making ethics dependent on knowledge about outcomes of actions. Instead of making responsibility dependent on prior knowledge, therefore, we need to utilize knowledge as a helpful but subordinate source to responsible action.

See *Figure 2*

### **7. Task for Workshop**

I would like to encourage the participants of this international workshop on *Negotiating the Future* to first observe and analyse to what extent the social sciences, as represented here in the first instance, have adopted the assumptions I outlined. I would like them, secondly, to consider where on the triangle of action, knowledge, ethics these approaches are located and, finally, to investigate how the direction is conceptualised: is the focus on action in the present (real or imagined) or projected into the future? Is the primary focus on knowledge? Where and how is the issue of responsibility addressed? And, equally importantly, what is the direction between those elements of futurity?

### **8. Reflections**

Finally, and in summary, let me suggest that we need to accept and embrace the recognition that creating long-term futures is not exclusively an economic, a scientific or a political decision realm. It is not even a decision realm based on the agreement between all three. Rather, the futures of our making, are process futures that are already set on their way. As such, they are our collective responsibility, which means that they require our collective effort as citizens. This collective effort involves all sectors of society (old and young), all domains of skill, and all knowledge practices.

See *Figure 3*

As social scientists we need to learn to move with agility in this triple domain of action, knowledge and ethics. We need to work with different and multiple directionalities and, above all, we need to understand the social future in the making as *real* even where it has not yet materialised into present form and we need to fully understand the difference of the contemporary real to the future of providence and predestination. Finally, we need to learn that different perspectives on the future afford us different action potential.

So, for example, when we explore *past futures*, we are investigating historical records of hopes and fears, past visions and choices, decisions and plans. We are dealing with memories of future (both singular and plural). The question then arises whether or not this sphere is still subject to our influence? The answer is both yes and no and depends on whether or not the processes set in motion in the past are fully formed i.e. have already materialised into phenomena (such as the change to Euros as a common currency) or are in parts still in the process of becoming such as the planned identity cards in the UK. *Future pasts* in contrast are our mind worlds of imagination, vision, projection, speculation, potential. Together with *Future futures* they are the world not only of science fiction, futurology, and scenarios but also of the potential multiple worlds, produced by us in interaction with successors, which we cannot foretell but to which we are connected by our plans, decisions and deeds as well as our inactions.

The sphere that is most un-problematically accessible to empirical investigation is the *present future*. This is the realm of management, economic activity and organisational practice, of rational instrumentality and of planning, politics and policy. It is the world of many 'Ps': of prophesy, projection, prediction, planning and promise. It is a world

pursued, produced, performed, prospected and polluted. As such it is the world of social action, of management and organisational practice. It is therefore the primary futures domain of social science investigation. Moreover, focus on present futures provides us with access to the social sphere of expectation, choice, selection, option and instrumentality. The present future is the base on which utopias are constructed. From the position of the present future we compose scenarios, produce foresight studies, and engage in horizon scanning. Extending the focus on present futures to include the past affords us the possibility to predict, produce trend analyses, and study both probable and possible futures. The present future is thus the sphere of knowledge practice that is readily amenable to study, although never in any wholly uncontroversial way, as a number of significant studies demonstrate (Bell and Mau eds. 1971, Bell 2003/1997, 2 Vols., Jouvenel 1967, May 1996, Slaughter 2004).

*Future presents*, in contrast, are not readily amenable to the empirical investigation. They encompass: either the 'not yet' or the inaccessible, invisible, latent world of processes which proceeds outside and beyond our ability to study by conventional social science means. As such future presents are also the world that is not knowable by conventional scientific means: the world that we can set in motion, but not know in all its consequences; the world we can produce without knowing the product with its effects; the world we can plan and promise but not guarantee or control. Future presents are thus marked largely by non-knowledge, uncertainty and indeterminacy, by the immanent/latent/invisible process realm of (techno-scientific) productions. The situation, however, is even more complex than that because present futures and future presents, as well as past futures and future pasts shade into each other through our values and what we consider to be good, right and just in our actions.

To take on board the insights and findings I have outlined here present the social sciences with major challenges. I want to propose that these challenges have to be taken on board if our theories and methodologies are to become appropriate to the contemporary condition.

### References:

For my presentation I have drawn on the following texts, arising from the ESRC Professorial Fellowship Project *In Pursuit of the Future*, which are all available from the futures website: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/futures/>

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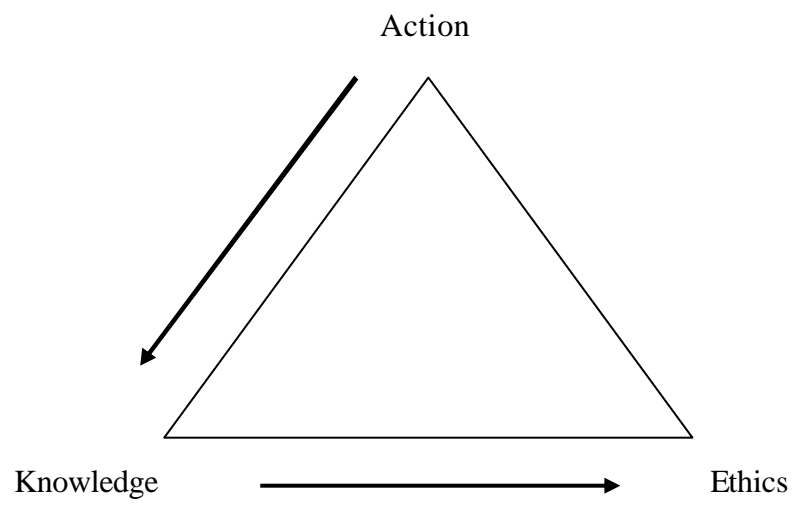
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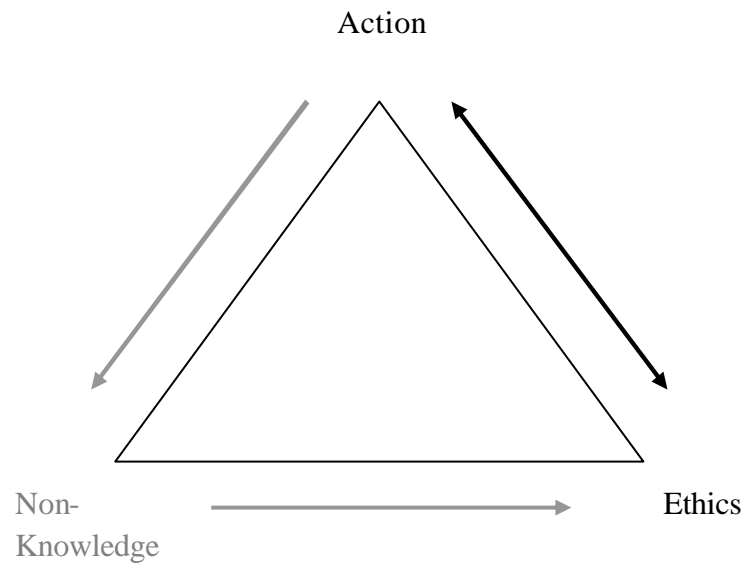
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*Figure 1: Ethics Based on Knowledge*



*Figure 2: Uncertainty and Future Making*



*Figure 3: Reconnecting Interdependencies*

