

Futurescapes:
Challenge for Social and Management Sciences

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Retrosapes and Futurescapes – Temporal Tensions in Organizations
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Abstract

This paper is intended to contribute some background knowledge about the future in management and organisation studies. It provides historical information on the way the social sciences have engaged with the future and seeks to identify the difficulties with the subject of the future for scientific study. It suggests that futurity is an inescapable aspect of all social being and thus needs to be encompassed in any study of social life irrespective of the context. However, in the same way that time is taken for granted in the majority of management and organisation studies, much in our approaches to the future is taken for granted, that is, not explicitly explored and theorised. The paper suggests that as long as we leave approaches to the future implicit, we are likely to mis-read and mis-understand some of the key temporal tensions in the organisations we study.

Biographical Note

Barbara Adam is Professor of Sociology at Cardiff University. She is founding editor of the journal *Time & Society* and has published extensively on the social relations of time. Her most recent monograph is *Time*, published in 2004 as part of the Polity Press 'Key Concepts' Series. She currently holds a three-year research grant under the UK's Economic and Social Research Council's Professorial Fellowship Scheme in which she investigates the social relationship to the future.

E-mail: adamtime@cardiff.ac.uk

web sites: <http://www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/futures/>

<http://www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/whoswho/adam/>

Introduction

In this paper I seek to contribute some background knowledge on the way the future is handled in management and organisation studies. Towards this end I provide some historical information on the social sciences' engagement with the future and identify some key difficulties with the subject for scientific study. I suggest that futurity is an inescapable aspect of all social being and thus needs to be encompassed in any study of social life irrespective of the context. This, I propose, applies nowhere more so than in management and organisation studies. Time scholars are aware that time is taken for granted in the majority of management and organisation studies. In this paper I show that the same applies to the future, that is, much in our approaches to the future is not explicitly explored and theorised. As long as we leave approaches to the future implicit, I want to suggest, we are likely to mis-read and mis-understand some of the key temporal tensions in the organisations we study.

The structure of the paper is as follows:

1. The Future is an Inescapably Social Issue
2. The Future as Central Focus at Beginning of Social Sciences
3. Successive Waves of Interest & Bracketing of Social Future
4. Departure of Future Studies & Futurology
5. Futurology in Management: Implicit Assumptions
6. Timescapes and Futurescapes
7. Action, Knowledge & Ethics
8. The Challenges for Social and Management Studies

The Future is an Inescapably Social Issue

Futurity, which means our multiple extensions into as well as our approaches to the future, is an inescapable aspect of social, cultural and economic existence. Futures are created 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, medicine and technology, education and religion. Furthermore, futures are produced at all levels of social relations: the individual, the family, social groups, companies and nations. These created futures extend across the full range of temporal reach: from the very short to the extremely long-term. Finally, they extend spatially from the local to the regional, national, international and global. As such, futurity is the inescapable subject matter of the social sciences

The Future as Central Focus at the Beginning of the Social Sciences

With the rise of scientific knowledge and the socio-economic capacity to apply a rational calculus to ever wider spheres of social life, the future ceased to be the exclusive domain of God. Increasingly it became pulled into the orbit of social action and concern. This change in knowledge brought with it a change in practice. People were progressively able to impose their will on both the personal and collective future. Subject to human intervention and shaping, the future was no longer a mere continuation of the past but became ever more a consequence of actions in the present.

This was nowhere more apparent than in Europe during the period from the middle of the 18th to the middle of the 19th centuries. Accordingly it was the key social thinkers of that period who spearheaded a form of social science that would help to bring about the desired new world. Thus, for example, in France at the time before and after the French Revolution thinkers such as Turgot, Condorcet, Saint-Simon, Fourier and Comte (Manuel 1962) were social analysts and commentators with a social mission. All were concerned not just to ‘unveil’ the future but also to steer it in a particular direction. They saw themselves as moral agents for change working for a better future. None saw a contradiction between their commitment to science as the path to truth and their normative engagement in the active production of futures they prophesised.

Karl Marx too sought not just to interpret but to change the world. Marx did not much rate the work of his French predecessors, yet he took a similar stance regarding his commitment to science on the one hand and the prophetic normative approach to the future on the other. Like the French social thinkers before him, Marx offered visions of how the world could (and should) be different from its present alienated form and he identified paths that would lead to the utopian ideal he constructed. Marx’s work therefore shared some key characteristics with his French predecessors: social theory was indissolubly tied to practice, interpretation to normative conduct, science to politics, and prophesy to a social product. What early French social thinkers and Karl Marx held in common, therefore, was a commitment to make the world a better place. They wanted to identify *and* shape their history in the making. They were concerned not just to foresee and unveil the future but also to help usher it in and guide it in a particular direction. All viewed themselves as future makers who placed their faith in the power of reason and in science as a means to achieve their desired visions.

As such this very Early Social Science Approach to Future was a mixture of:

- Social analysis – of the social world as it IS
- Social diagnosis – What is good and bad / right and wrong about it
- Social prognosis – about what will and could happen if this... then
- Social Critique – analysis of what is problematic in the existing system
- Vision of good society – how the world should be developed
- Strategies for change – how we might achieve desired visions and goals

Contradiction between scientific study and normative engagement in the subject matter, and between science and politics/policy, had not yet emerged as a problematic issue

Successive Waves of Interest in and Bracketing of the Social Future

After these early engagements with the future, the social sciences began to distinguish in their studies of the social world between objective science and normative perspectives. Once the two ways of approaching the social were seen as incompatible, only one or the other could be one’s primary objective. Science became a by-word for ‘objectivity’ and anything considered normative was designated non-scientific. After the distinction was firmly instituted normativity became progressively banished from social science practice. This in turn has consequences for the way social futurity was handled by the social sciences. That is to say, with increasing emphasis on the scientific study of how the world *is* focus on futurity and the social future recedes into

the shadow of social science concern. The future is bracketed and the study of the social future delegated to a separate field, loosely covered by the umbrella term futurology and engagement with the future becomes associated with prediction and prophesy, forecasting and foresight.

Two directions in social theory and research in particular manage to effectively eliminate concern with the future. These are the objective/positivist and the interpretative approaches. Objective/positivist perspectives achieve their bracketing by focusing on the following: past- and present-based facts, past-based causal relations, a-temporal structure and function. Both structure and function are based on synchronic analysis while causal relations require diachronic analysis. Interpretative perspectives, in contrast, eliminate futurity from their frames of reference by focusing on: a-temporal meaning, interpretation and hermeneutics. Interpretative perspectives are grounded in synchronic analysis.

Despite having fallen out of favour as a subject matter for the social sciences, the social future regained some of its popularity during the 1960s and 1970s. After almost one hundred years of neglect the fire that was ignited at the beginning of the discipline was re-kindled. The social context for this renewed interest was the period after World War II with its emerging post-war prosperity largely tied to powerful new technologies such as nuclear power, space travel and the early development of computers. Thus, after the war there emerged a new sense of open future – the future as realm of unbounded opportunity

This shift in outlook is also reflected in the social sciences: the future is once more on the agenda and we see the emergence of a ‘Sociology of the Future’. At the time, networks and institutions dedicated to the study of the future emerged right across Europe, most of them staffed by social scientists. In US, UK and Continental Europe this took subtly different directions:

- The UK saw extensive funding for study of potential and opportunity, better forecasts and foresight studies. The task was conceived as one of ‘looking into the future’ Michael Young (1968) and Christopher Freeman and Marie Jahoda (1978) were some of the people charged to spearhead this futures research.
- In continental Europe Bertrand de Jouvenel (1967) wrote the definitive text which has lost none of its persuasive power even today. Jouvenel argued strongly that engagement with the future is inescapably conjectural, that we are not engaged in looking into the future but rather in the production of best guesses on the basis of a known past. Other key figures on the Continent were Robert Jungk and Johann Galtung (1969).
- In an anti-positivist programme, US sociologists of the future studied not just potential and possible futures but they also debated preferred futures. This entailed that they engaged with social futurity in a combination of scientific, critical and normative approaches (see, for example, Bell and Mau eds. 1971, Moore 1966, Toffler 1970). In the US the renewed focus on the social future meant that social scientists once more saw themselves as future makers, as social engineers that did not just provide knowledge about potential and possible futures but they also saw themselves as judges of the ends to which their knowledge might be put, that is, they engaged with debates about preferred futures. They saw as their task the creation of a better world and this required of them visions, images and utopias of

the ‘good life’. Moreover, they saw themselves as part of (rather than external to) the reality they studied (Bell and Mau 1971). They explicitly recognized the constitutive nature of their knowledge and accepted values and responsibility as central to this task. Thus their ‘sociology of the future’ entailed an action orientation which once more combined description, analysis, and critique with a normative stance.

This explicit focus on the future, however, was not to last. With the renewed rise to dominance of evidence-based, positivist social science the ‘Sociology of the Future’ once more receded into the shadows, right up until the last years of the 20th and the first years of the 21st century.

Today there are a number of reasons why the future is once more re-emerging and foregrounded as a pertinent subject matter for the social sciences: socio-environmental risks emerged as constitutive features of the contemporary industrial way of life and sustainable Development as a socio-political goal. Regarding the social production of these problems and the potential risks and benefits of technological developments, however, experts cannot agree and find themselves in public disputes. Closely related to this is a dawning realization that non-knowledge rather than increasing knowledge about potential time-space distanced outcomes accompanies many innovative technologies. Finally, the era of imperialism and colonisation has run its course, which means that competition over space and territory has been expanded to include time and especially the future. This means that the future is both a resource to be exploited and a territory that has yet to be colonised and conquered. All these features necessitate social science to track, monitor, analyse and provide critical comment on these interrelated practices.

Engagement with the future, however, affects the social sciences at every level of our work: theoretically it bears on our subject matter at the level of ontology and epistemology while methodologically we have to confront once more the question about how to study empirically that which is ‘not yet’, thus empirically not accessible. Ethically we have to come to terms once more with the issue of implication – that we cannot extricate ourselves from the consequences of our knowledge practices.

In order to understand more fully the contemporary challenge presented by a ‘futurescapes perspective’ let me briefly focus on the field of futures studies which had been hived off from mainstream social science and explore what kind of future is being addressed by the various methods associated with futurology before considering ‘futurescapes’ in relation to ‘timescapes’.

Departure of Future Studies and Futurology

Future studies became a separate field of study that was taken up primarily by business, politics and social policy. Moreover, this field of expertise moved largely out of the universities into the private sector, the Rand Corporation being the prime example.

Futurologists developed a wide range of techniques that allowed for deliberate extension into the future. These techniques facilitated planning and advertising. They aided anticipation and expectation. The most popular and widely used methods are

widely recognised as an integral part of contemporary management. They include among others scenario planning, trend analysis, foresight, horizon scanning and the Delphi method as well as forecasting and back-casting. Let me here just identify some of the general principles and underlying assumptions involved. The principles I would like to focus on relate primarily to where along the past-present-future spectrum the method is located and what kind of future is being assumed.

We can consider trend analyses and forecasting together as both are rooted in the traditional method of scientific prediction. Both apply to recurring phenomena (cyclical or linear) that can be tracked and recorded and, on the basis of those data, allow for calculation of their continuity into the future. Here the past is the basis for knowledge of the future, that is, accumulated past facts are the sources of prediction and the future is conceived as a continuation of the past. This form of future knowledge obviously works best for stable situations and least well for contexts of high volatility. This means that prediction and trend analysis are *inappropriate* for situations of innovation where something genuinely new is produced or emerging, since in such cases no accumulation of data will have occurred on the basis of which appropriate calculations could be produced which would allow for estimation of repetition and/or continuity.

When we look at scenario planning, foresight exercises, the Delphi method and horizon scanning, we find that these are premised on rather different assumptions. They are mind-based exercises that build jetties into the open sea of the future. As such they are grounded on past-based knowledge on what is likely to happen, on conjecture what is possible and on a vision what is desirable. All three options can then be furnished with detail and compared to each other. These techniques primarily assume an empty and open future that is subject to being filled and colonised. They further presuppose a future that is subject to human intervention, a future that is ours to make and shape.

Both past-based continuity and empty-future discontinuity, however, are rather unsatisfactory tools for engagement with the future, be this in management, the economy or politics. It is the principle assumptions that pose the problem here. And it is the poor understanding of the way past, present and future interrelate and are constructed and produced in practice that poses one of the key problems in our relationship to the future. Let us therefore scrutinize those assumptions and contextualise them in organisational and management practice.

Futurology in Management: Implicit Assumptions

First we need to recognise that both key assumptions – continuity from the past into the future and the empty future to be colonised – do not square with experience.

Assumption 1: Continuity & cyclicity

Even where the past is reliably repeated, it repeats with variation. Very often, however the variation is so great that we can no longer speak of continuity. Furthermore, in the futures and management literature there is much talk about ‘wild cards’ about the surprises that throw the best laid plans and predictions. Yet in business, as in everyday life, as everyone knows only too well, surprises tend not to be the exception but the norm. I would like to suggest that

we are rarely dealing with either-or situations – either continuity or discontinuity. Rather, in contexts of cyclical continuity we invariably find variation, fluctuation and discontinuity, while on the other side of the coin we may expect discontinuity but find instead great regularity, cyclicity and continuity, again a situation that could not have been predicted on the basis of past facts.

Assumption 2: The Empty and Open Future

When the future is planned, projected and produced it is conceived as the empty and non-existing realm of potential and choice, as the not-yet which becomes real only after it is activated into present existence by our actions. Futurologists insist on the Latin distinction between *facta* and *futura* (Jouvenel 1967: 3). The former (*facta*) refers to past events, done, achieved, completed and thus empirically accessible as facts. The latter (*futura*) encompasses that which has not yet come about, something non-factual which *will* become a *factum* only after it has occurred. While the one has already taken (unalterable) form the other is still open to influence and thus ‘capable of ending or being completed in various ways’. A different way of expressing the distinction is to say that ‘there are no past possibilities and there are no future facts’ (Brumbaugh 1966: 649 in Bell and Mau 1971: 9). No matter how we express the distinction, the past is closed to influence, thus open to factual knowledge while the future is open to choice and efforts to colonize and control, and thus closed to factual inquiry. This, I want to argue, is a distinction that does not hold for today’s techno-futures in progress. Yet, it is this very distinction that underpins the logic of scientific inquiry and it is the reason why science can only project the future on the basis of a known past.

When the temporal realm is divided into *facta* and *futura*, we need to appreciate, then past efforts to tell and know ‘the’ future have to be considered futile since, on the basis of that distinction, ‘the’ future does not pre-exist but is instead open, yet to be formed, shaped and designed. Thus, from this perspective, not ‘the future’ but present possibilities for the future are real. Not future presents but only present futures are amenable to futurological inquiry. At the same time, however, we need to recognize that the greater a society’s innovative change is, the less it can rely on scientific knowledge of past facts to provide knowledge about the consequences of the change processes set in motion. This means that, to quote Bertrand de Jouvenel (1967: 275), ‘our knowledge of the future is inversely proportional to the rate of progress’, that is to say, increased progress is tied to decreasing knowledge about the future. In contexts of accelerating innovation, therefore, knowledge of the future is moved progressively closer to the present and knowledgeable extension into the long-term future is moved ever further out of reach.

While all this is clearly and unquestionably the case, the retreat to past and present-based knowledge of the ‘not yet’, that is, to *present futures* only, cannot and must not be accepted, given that our actions reach into ever more distant futures and cast ever longer shadows. Moreover, as I have indicated already, 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: think, for example, of pension futures, financial futures, labour market futures, health and illness futures, or radio-active waste futures. None of these are 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.

Finally, the assumption of an empty and open future has still further consequences for management and organisational practice. When we plan our (or our company's) future, we tend to do so in the bounded sphere of own (or company's) interests, motives and needs. Others' needs and interests are taken into account but, ultimately, the future is planned, designed and produced on the assumption that it is amenable to our intervention, that the future is ours to make and shape, ours to organise and colonize. Whether or not this is explicitly theorized, we tend to think of the future as a resource to be used and utilised and we treat it as the last frontier to be conquered. These images and assumptions too are highly problematic. I would like to propose instead that the future is not an empty territory but that, instead, it is always already occupied: It is occupied by the future visions, plans and decisions of predecessors that have already materialised or are in the process of materialisation. Moreover, actions, transactions, interactions and products of both the past and present populate our and our successors' futures. This means not only that we are operating in a rather overcrowded space but also that, to the extent that current actions affect *future presents* (in other words the present of successors) we are trespassers in that presumed open territory.

Assumption 3: Foresight

Let us now briefly turn to the idea of foresight. The term suggests that the future is amenable to the sense of vision, that we can see what lies ahead, that to better know the future is a question of better and more accurate vision. Again this is a woefully inadequate assumption. If we assume that there is something to be seen, then it has to be pre-existing. This clearly is diametrically apposed to the idea that the future is open and subject to human shaping. It is the basis of human freedom that we could act otherwise, that our lives are not pre-determined. Human freedom and determinism are not compatible. Human freedom means the future is not subject to foreknowledge or foresight – fore-sensing and forethought may be more appropriate terms to capture the process.

So let me re-cap at this point on the problematic of the implicit and contradictory assumptions that underpin approaches to the future in organisations and management practices. Current assumptions are based on problematic premises, which means we inescapably get our predictions about the probable, possible and preferable future wrong. Continuity and discontinuity are not alternatives but have to be thought together: discontinuity in contexts of continuity and continuity in contexts of discontinuity. The empty and open future is an illusion. The future is an always

already occupied territory in which we operate largely as trespassers. Much of the future is already under way in the form of processes that have not yet materialised into empirically accessible phenomena. *Facta* and *Futura* shade into each other in contexts of accelerated change and innovation where our actions cast ever longer shadows. The future is not a sense datum, is not amenable to sight only to thought and action. This in turn poses a problem for social science practice.

Timescapes and Futurescapes

So what then might be involved when we look at futurity and future production from a timescape perspective (Adam 1998 and 2004) and what might be encompassed by a *futurescape*? The first thing to note is that all the structural features that comprise a timescape perspective also apply to the futurescape perspective.

- *Time Frames* are the boundaries within which futures are pursued planned and produced these range from the very short term to the very long term from financial quarters via live-times of projects to Kondratief cycles, to life-times of companies and the half life of radiation
- *Temporality*, refers to the processual aspect of futurity and future production
- *Tempo*, refers to the speed, pace & intensity of the planned futures
- *Timing* and synchronisation play as important a role in the future as it does in the past and present
- *Time Point*, applies as much to the future as it does to past and present
- *Time Patterns*, which are rhythmicity, periodicity, cyclicity have already been mentioned as important aspects for prediction
- *Time Sequence*, which is series, order, cause-and-effect chains again applies to the pursuit and production of futures
- *Time Extensions*, which are duration, length, continuity: from the very short term to eternity refer to the impacts and the reach of future-creating practices
- But, most important of all is the relation between *Time Past, Present, Future* and all the modulation that are possible, since each one provides us with different *subject positions* and 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 it 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, organisational practice, of rational instrumentality, of planning, politics and policy. It is the world of many 'Ps' I have mentioned earlier, the world 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 and as such it is the domain of social science.

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 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.

Challenges for Management Studies: Action, Knowledge and Ethics

The challenges associated with taking the future seriously and taking account of it explicitly in our studies are multiple: There is a need to make futurity and the production of futures an object of social science attention. There is a further need to render explicit our implicit assumptions associated with futurity and to let go of either-or thinking and, instead, to embrace temporal complexity. The final challenge relates to the practice of abstracting and isolating the domains of social action. Crucially, we need to re-connect what has come adrift in the modern age: the making, knowing and minding of futures, that is, the spheres of *action*, *knowledge* and *ethics*. This means that a futurescape perspective not only encompasses the temporal complexity of social futurity but it also encompasses the triple sphere of action, knowledge and ethics. It thus moves away from the exclusive emphasis on knowledge to encompass what we do and its potential consequences that stretch across various stretches of time and space. And it proposes that in contexts of high indeterminacy, we no longer route responsibility via knowledge and establish instead a direct link between action and responsibility. It suggests that we need to accept our status as future makers and embrace responsibility. This entails that we provide analyses that take the future seriously as supreme realm of social and management action.

Future
Futurities
Future presents
Management challenge

Future makers are we
Our desires & expectations
Hopes & fears, projections & plans
All implicated in our knowledge practices

The study of futurity is focus on shadows
The shadows beckon to be illuminated
Illusions of detachment disintegrate
Implicated we are contributors

Contributors are responsible
The future their subject & duty
Present futures amenable to science
Future presents realm of values & morals

We study futurity as present future
With tools from a by-gone age
Finding answers in the past
We seek the unknowable

Management challenge
Future presents
Futurities
Future

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:

Adam B, *Minding Futures*, The Futures Project, Cardiff University, School of Social Sciences, 2004, <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/futures/>

Adam B, *Towards a New Sociology of the Future*, The Futures Project, Cardiff University, School of Social Sciences, 2004, <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/futures/>

Adam B, *Futures Told, Tamed and Traded*, (2005) <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/futures/>

Adam B, *The Future in Max Weber's Methodological Writings* (2005) <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/futures/>

Adam B, *Futures & Complexity* (2005) <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/futures/>

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