

L I S A S U C K E R T

## *Back to the Future. Sociological Perspectives on Expectations, Aspirations and Imagined Futures*

### **Abstract**

Since the 1990s sociology has rediscovered a theme already present in the discipline's foundational theories: the salience of future perceptions for social action. This article provides an overview of "the sociology of imagined futures", a diverse but still scattered research field explicitly engaged with expectations, aspirations and future orientations. A review of recent scholarship emphasizes how an imagined future perspective is related to a wide range of topics and allows for innovative vantage points on persisting sociological research concerns, such as inequality, social identities, agency, coordination, power or understanding innovation and change. By systematically highlighting these contributions, but also by pointing to promising lacunae and perspectives that merit further development, this article shows how a reorientation of sociological research "back to the future" seems a promising way forward.

*Keywords:* Future; Temporality; Social Theory; Expectations; Aspirations; Sociology of time.

### *Introduction*

IN HIS TREATMENT of the epistemological role of "outcome" for scientific reasoning, Andrew Abbott argues that sociology as a discipline "looks back at the causes funneling into a final result" [2016: 177]. Unlike economics, which Abbott characterizes as a forward-looking discipline interested in the prospected outcomes that motivate present

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Lisa SUCKERT, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Cologne, Germany  
[\[lisa.suckert@mpifg.de\]](mailto:lisa.suckert@mpifg.de).

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decisions, he sees sociological explanations as being driven by what Alfred Schütz [1982: 69f] called “because motives”: to understand social reality, sociologists consider factors shaped in the past and present, like institutions, cultural frames, networks and power relations. In contrast, forward-looking expectations, i.e. the “in-order-to motives” of social actors are not acknowledged. In sociology, scholars like Abbott argue, the future plays a neglected role.

This article neither denies sociology’s dominant temporal orientation towards the present and past nor challenges that both of these time horizons are crucial for understanding social reality. However, it seeks to qualify the general claim regarding the absence of the future in sociology by contouring a research field in emergence: the sociology of imagined futures.<sup>1</sup> This diverse research emphasizes how “imagined futures”, i.e. perceptions and representations of a future that is yet to come, are highly instructive for understanding societies of the present. It explores the versatile social ramifications of expectations and aspirations but also dreams and hopes, misgivings and fears, projections and forecasts.

I argue, first, that the future and its role for social reality has indeed been addressed in many of sociology’s most seminal theories. Concern for the future is inherent in the foundations of the discipline. What is more, the sociological interest in studying future orientations has significantly increased in recent decades. A growing number of sociological publications<sup>2</sup> is currently rediscovering the future as a theoretical perspective, an analytical category and an object of investigation. While such approaches only make up a small part of sociological research today, sociology appears on its way “back to the future”.

The assumption, however, that the increasing scholarly concern for imagined futures constitutes a veritable “field” of research is not beyond reproach. The sociology of imagined futures is vividly growing, but hardly integrated. Most of the works do not actively situate themselves within the literature on future orientations and the amount of cross-referencing and cumulative knowledge is still moderate at best.

If considered as a field, the sociology of imagined futures can therefore best be described as an emergent or a weak field [cf. Vauchez 2008]. This field is first and foremost connected by a shared rationale of the future being crucial for exploring and understanding social realities of the

<sup>1</sup> The term “imagined futures” appears across the field but has particularly been defined by Jens Beckert [2016], who associates it with fictional expectations as a driving force of capitalism.

<sup>2</sup> For a historical assessment of the emergence and growth of the field see also BECKERT and SUCKERT 2021; for a database on research articles concerned with perceptions of the future see SUCKERT, BECKERT and FENKNER 2020.

present. Recent special issues<sup>3</sup> and various conference themes<sup>4</sup> explicitly referring to an imagined future perspective serve to institutionalize this research approach. Moreover, we can observe several, initial “cores of gravitation” to this field, i.e. more consolidated research clusters that visibly engage with perceptions of the future in a specific domain. This is particularly true for “the sociology of expectations” [Van Lente 2012], a research strand that emerged in close proximity to Science and Technology Studies (STS) and the study of technological innovations; it also holds for perspectives from economic sociology, particularly on financialization [cf. Beckert and Ergen 2021]; and it applies to the cumulative work on educational aspirations [cf. Kao and Thompson 2003].

Therefore, the purpose of this article is twofold. First, it provides an overview of *the research field* and its explanatory potential. The main sections of this article depict how an imagined future perspective has been applied to many of sociology’s major research questions. This review does not, however, only render existing contributions visible to the outside and qualify Abbot’s initial claim—but in doing so it also sets out to create awareness for this research *within the field itself*. It invites scholars concerned with expectations, aspirations and imagined futures to realize the existence, scope and versatility of the very research field in which they are engaged. In this vein, the article sets out to inspire processes of “field-building”, of theoretical integration, empirical consolidation and, eventually, more cumulative modes of knowledge acquisition.

Based on a brief sketch of how sociology’s foundational theories have dealt with the future, the main sections of this article highlight recent scholarship adopting an imagined future perspective. They show how such work addresses some of the discipline’s fundamental research concerns: inequality, social identities, agency, coordination, power or the possibility of innovation and change.

The scope of this review is guided by a number of delimitations. First, building on an empirical assessment of the emergence and development of the research field [Beckert and Suckert 2021], the review focuses on the research of the last three decades. The review thus accounts for a time frame in which research on future orientations has particularly increased

<sup>3</sup> Examples of such special issues can be found in *The Sociological Review* [COLEMAN and TUTTON 2017] or *Current Sociology* [SCHULZ 2015].

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the general themes of the ASA Annual Meeting 2012, the ISA

Forum for Sociology 2016, the SASE Conference 2019, the ESA Annual Conference 2021, the BSA Annual conference 2021 and the emergence of numerous smaller conferences and panels.

and diversified, and the field as such becomes apparent. Second, the review depicts what I label the “sociology of imagined futures” i.e. sociological work that analytically engages with *perceptions* of the future, addressed, for instance, as expectations, aspirations, goals, forecasts, hopes or fears. It does not include sociologists’ attempts to predict societal futures; nor does it systematically engage with descendants of Bell and Mau’s “sociology of the future” [1973], i.e. a futurologist<sup>5</sup> sociology that sees the assessment of imagined futures only as a first step for a wider “sociological revolution” in which scholars promote social change and engage themselves as a “maker of the future” [1973: 37].<sup>6</sup> Third, the review cannot address growing scholarly interest in imagined futures in anthropology, psychology, political science or history—though this research may certainly provide inspiration to sociologists, too. It adopts, however, a broad understanding of sociology, including work that engages with basic sociological research questions but may “formally” be located in neighboring disciplines. Finally, this review cannot claim to exhaustively capture this field of research, which continues to grow and change. The articles and books presented here are a selection that is shaped by in-depth engagement with the field, but nevertheless remains subjective. By demonstrating the diversity of existing scholarship, this review invites sociologists to consider how turning “back to the future” can enrich sociological research in different empirical fields and advance their sociological imagination.

*Theories of the social – theories of the (imagined) future*

Current studies that focus on expectations, aspirations and imagined futures are rediscovering an analytical theme already pertinent in many seminal sociological theories. Sociology’s versatile “grand” theories provide important—but also divergent—approaches to theorizing the future. From Max Weber to functionalism and phenomenology, to structuralism, pragmatism and more recent accounts of late modernity, these classical theories offer instructive perspectives on how the future can be conceptualized and employed to increase our knowledge of the social [cf. also Beckert 2016: 49 ff.; Mische 2009].

<sup>5</sup> For the historical phenomenon of futurology in the social sciences and beyond, see ANDERSSON 2018.

<sup>6</sup> For more recent versions of this argument see e.g. ADAM and GROVES 2007 or COLEMAN and TUTTON 2017.

Even though there are rarely explicit references to expectations, aspirations and imagined futures in Max Weber's work, many of his central concepts—and thus cornerstones of sociology as a discipline—implicitly refer to the future and its role for social action [cf. Adam 2009]. In *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber depicts how the Calvinist doctrine of predestination gave way to a new mode of secular future orientation. According to Protestant convictions, only those who embraced a modest life, systematically working towards forthcoming profit and secular achievements were to “acquire and maintain certain *knowledge* of one's future (next-worldly) salvation” [Weber 2011: 145]. Rejecting the idleness, leisure and emotions of the present moment and instead focusing on secular future success reduced anxiety about “being chosen” for a distant and divine future. Once detached from the original religious fear of damnation, this imperative to “subordinate life to the supremacy of the organized will”<sup>7</sup>, to rationally strive for the worldly future, Weber argues, served as foundational “spirit” for modern capitalism. In Weber's perspective, rationalization then becomes the core principle of Western modernity and its versatile institutions—and a central theme of his work. Rationalization refers to a future-oriented mode of action [Weber 1921: 12f]: directed at either the achievement of instrumental goals (*Zweckrationalität*) or ensuring normative values without regard for immediate consequences (*Wertrationalität*)—but either way geared towards intentionally shaping forthcoming states of the world.

The idea of ends that orient rational action is, of course, also immanent to *rational choice theories* of both economic and sociological descent. Most of these accounts, however, see ends either as intrinsic to the actor or merely as post-hoc rationalizations and do not provide a substantial sociology of imagined futures. Their teleological approach is therefore opposed by *functionalist* perspectives which seek to explain expectations as social products that “function” to coordinate social action. In order to overcome what he criticizes as “utilitarian dilemma” [1968: 64], Parsons, for example, proposes a voluntaristic theory of action, in which “the concept of end always implies a future reference, to a state which is [...] not yet in existence” [1968: 45]. For Parsons these desired states that actors strive for—though involving an element of agency—are coordinated by social norms and values [cf. Münch 1981]. It is this alignment of individual expectations that allows for social order to emerge. The societal coordination of aspirations also features

<sup>7</sup> “[T]he organized will” reads “planvoll”, and thus refers not only to being organized but i.e. “relying on a plan” in the German original being oriented towards the future.

prominently in Robert Merton's empirical functionalism and his strain theory. To Merton, society shapes actors' individual goals by providing collectively shared values—but it also determines the means available to pursue them. Capitalist culture, he argues, fails at “coordinating the means-and-goals phases of the social structure” [Merton 1938: 682], because it is characterized by an inherent discrepancy between collective expectations (e.g. the American dream and the virtue of prosperity) and the capacity to live up to them (e.g. extended inequality, restricted upward mobility). This mismatch is then assumed to lead to deviant behavior—also framed as “innovation”—or frustrated actors altogether retreating from the belief in a shapeable future.

*Phenomenology* shares functionalism's interest in social norms that shape perceptions of the future. For Alfred Schütz [1982: 72ff], collective stocks of “recipes” define what future possibilities are perceived as practicable—or dismissed as illusory. However, unlike functionalist accounts, phenomenology emphasizes not the objective function but the subjective experience of anticipating and constructing the future. Schütz is interested in how actors make sense of their future in a given situation, and develops the seminal concept of “projecting”. In order to project, he argues, “I have to place myself in my phantasy at a future time when this action *will* already *have been* accomplished [...]. Only then may I reconstruct the single steps which will have brought forth this future” [Schütz 1982: 69]. It is only this anticipated retrospective that, guided by available typifications, enables actors to construct and assess different possible pathways to the future.

The perspective of Pierre Bourdieu is rooted in phenomenology, too, but particularly draws on ideas of *structuralism*. While Schütz ascribes the “taken for granted world” that inspires projection to a rather coherent society, Pierre Bourdieu emphasizes the social stratification of imagined futures. In line with his overall field theory, he understands aspirations as determined by interlocking structural forces, i.e. objective opportunities and dispositions incorporated through socialization [Bourdieu 1973: 83]. This holds similarly for the anticipation of the immediate future, i.e. “the feel for the game”, actors' more conscious “strategies of action”, and even general ideas of the future as such (e.g. the future as linear progress vs circular repetition). To Bourdieu, the futures that actors aspire to usually remain within the boundaries of their specific class- and status-related dispositions—thus ensuring the reproduction of social structure. Probably most explicitly in his seminal ethnographic study of colonial Algeria [1979] but prominent in many of his works, Bourdieu emphasizes how perceptions of the future are steeped in relations of

power and domination, and how actors' aspirations are interwoven with hegemonic ideologies.

In some respects, Bourdieu's emphasis on imagined futures being shaped by social structure readapts a classical Marxian perspective. Karl Marx considered actors' ideas and imaginations as "direct efflux", mere "echoes" [Marx & Engels 1970: 47] of material conditions and social position. Consequently, imagined futures do not feature prominently in his materialist account of historic development. But while Marx's work does not itself provide a theory of imagined futures, it does provide explicit and pronounced visions of the future. Particularly in his more political writings, Marx takes great care in depicting the coming collapse of capitalism, the emergence of a communist revolution and the bright future of a classless society. Even if sometimes implicitly, Marx therefore acknowledges the importance of future orientations for creating collective agency, class consciousness and bringing about change.

Most of the aforementioned theories relate the perception of the future to the past: it is seen as shaped by established norms, stocks of knowledge or dispositions. To *pragmatism*, in contrast, the present appears as the paramount time horizon. It is therefore the experience of the present situation that is assumed to condition actors' goals and expectations. Like the memories of the past, Georg Herbert Mead argues [Mead 1929, 1932; cf. Flaherty and Fine 2001] that anticipations of the future rely on an interpretation within the present. They change with every new experience. Therefore, actors cannot be striving for stable future utopias or ultimate ends, but only for what Dewey calls "ends-in-view" [2007: 228f].<sup>8</sup> Aspirations are constantly revised and can become the means for achieving new ends. It is in the process of deliberation, i.e. the "tentative trying-out of various courses of action" [*Ibid.*: 202] that actors make sense of and imagine the future. But, crucially, for pragmatists this process is not merely a reiteration of pre-existing frames: "What we can predict is always something less than that which happens" [Mead 1972: 413]. Perceiving the future involves an element of genuine creativity because, as Mead puts it, the future is "carrying with it the inevitable novelty which attaches to every event in experience" [1972: 420]. To pragmatism, social futures remain open to change.

The indeterminacy of the future is also central for *theorists of late modernity*. But rather than conceptualizing it as a general social condition, scholars like Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck or Zygmunt Bauman

<sup>8</sup> For a critical assessment of Dewey's approach to utopias see also MISCHÉ 2022.

diagnose it as a problematic feature of current societies [cf. Tavory and Eliasoph 2013: 928]. As detraditionalization gains traction, the future appears no longer conditioned by the past but becomes a realm of plurality, overwhelming complexity and endless alternatives. Devoid of norms and structures that orient them, actors constantly have to make decisions and ponder their potential consequences. “The radicalization of modernity means being forced to live in a more reflexive way, facing a more open and problematic future” [Giddens and Pierson 1998: 116]. In contrast to first modernity, which Weber depicted as a rationalized exploitation of the future, late modernity is assumed to become paralyzed by increasingly uncertain futures. Fearing that the unstable future might even collapse into a continuous present, Bauman suggests that, for the individuals of late modernity, “speaking of directions, projects and fulfilments makes no sense” [Bauman 1992: 168; cf. also Tarkowska 2006]. The related concept of “risk society” [Beck 1986] highlights how societies are increasingly vulnerable to risks emanating from the unintended consequences of (technical and economic) modernization. These “manufactured risks” have uncertain, often unknown causes and consequences, and therefore can neither be rationally calculated nor insured against [cf. also Reith 2004]. The role of expertise, knowledge and forecasting is considered as ambivalent for navigating these risky futures. As Giddens argues, “the future becomes ever more absorbing, but at the same time opaque. There are few direct lines to it, only a plurality of ‘future scenarios’” [*in* Giddens and Pierson 1998: 211].

From Weber to Giddens, major sociological theories have taken account of perceptions of the future as an important element of the social: as an important factor perpetuating inequalities; as shaping identities of specific social eras and as being shaped by social norms and power relations; as crucial aspect of social action and agency; as being socially constructed and as facilitating coordination; as a driver for both social reproduction and innovation. Classical theorists have thus related expectations, aspirations and imagined futures to some of sociology’s most fundamental research interests. Yet, how has recent sociological scholarship engaged with, theoretically advanced and empirically adopted these perspectives?

### *Imagined futures and sociology’s fundamental research concerns*

Interest in expectations, aspirations and imagined futures is not new—neither in sociological theory nor in the discipline’s empirical



analyses. Early empirical contributions, like Pierre Bourdieu's study [1979] of Algerian peasants' future orientations, or Ely Chinoy's [1952, 1955] ethnographic analysis of how automotive workers' aspirations are related to the American dream, have become seminal precursors to the field. Moreover, a first empirical strand of sociological research engaged with imagined futures emerged in the 1960s and 1970s around scholars such as William H. Sewell, Archibald Haller and Alejandro Portes [1969]. This scholarship predominantly studied youth aspirations, which were assumed to be key in overcoming inequal educational opportunities. However, in the 1980s, a decade when in academia and beyond social utopias and notions of progress were challenged by postmodern doubts, the future was largely taken off the sociological agenda. With the shift to postmodernism, sociologists ceased to assess the role of future expectations and instead focused on the weight of the past for social realities of the present. It is only since the early 1990s that sociologists have recovered perceptions of the future as an object of investigation. In the last three decades, sociological interest in expectations, aspirations and imagined futures has not only increased significantly but also diversified [cf. Beckert and Suckert 2021]. Constructivist, interpretative and cultural turns within the discipline have stimulated new perspectives on future orientations. Accordingly, a variety of additional topics—from finance to migration—became related to the study of imagined futures. This review captures these last three decades by presenting books, chapters and research articles that have engaged with perceptions of the future since the 1990s.

The sociology of imagined futures is a vivid, diverse and still growing research field—but also one that is as yet hardly integrated. Within the presented work, we see a moderate level of cross citations and very few explicit references to the wider literature on future perceptions. Many scholars, it appears, are hardly aware of the broader field they are contributing to. The lack of integration and even self-awareness also becomes pertinent with regard to the field's theoretical orientations. In their engagement with the future, some scholars explicitly refer to pragmatist and phenomenological approaches, while others have started to further develop such frameworks [particularly Beckert 2013; 2016; Mische 2014, 2022; Tavory 2018; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013]. References to other classical perspectives of the future are, however, rare and the majority of works refrain from theorizing the future altogether. A clear theory of the future is not yet apparent. All of this makes it difficult to discern cumulative knowledge and identify the broader lines of research within the field. The provided overview is therefore not least

an attempt to inspire and advance processes of integration and “field-building”, i.e. to make the research field visible to both the outside and to the field itself.

As a “weak field”, the sociology of imagined futures is certainly not an autonomous sub-discipline that explores a specific social domain, but rather a research perspective applicable to diverse sociological research questions. Therefore, to depict this scattered yet promising research field, this review proceeds along *foundational sociological research concerns*. It indicates how turning “back to the future” advances some of sociologists’ most persisting research interests:<sup>9</sup> inequality and social stratification, social identities, the reflexivity of social action and agency, collective sense making and coordination, power and conflict, and the understanding of innovation and change. Along these lines the review shows how studying expectations, aspirations and imagined futures provides innovative perspectives to our sociological imagination.

The given selection of research concerns remains, obviously, subjective. Other scholars may easily consider different categories and questions more pertinent for their sociological imagination—like religion, alienation, life course or networks, to name just a few. But while this selection may be subjective, the research concerns that guide this review are not arbitrary. As the previous section recalls, classical theorists from Weber to Giddens have already related these very questions to perceptions of the future. Moreover, I find that it is in these research concerns that (for now) a distinctive imagined futures perspective and its explanatory potential become most apparent. The subsequent sections therefore contour the versatility of the research field and highlight some of its lacunae. What can a sociology of imagined futures contribute to the broader research interests of the discipline? How have scholars studied perceptions of the future? What innovative perspectives do they provide and what has been missed out? The overview starts from sociological research concerns that have already been comprehensively explored from an imagined future perspective and gradually proceeds to those that have only recently received scholarly attention but provide considerable potential.

<sup>9</sup> As always, the adopted categorization cannot do justice to the particulars of each individual case. Many of the works, particularly the monographs, speak to more than one

of these sociological concerns. They could just as well be mentioned in another or in multiple sections.

*Inequality and social stratification*

Scholarship interested in the nexus of social stratification and educational inequalities was among the first sociological strands of research to acknowledge the relevance of future orientations in its analyses. Mostly associated with the Wisconsin Longitudinal Survey, a veritable school of research already emerged in the 1960s [Sewell, Haller and Portes 1969; Sewell and Hauser 1975; Sewell and Shah 1968]. These analyses have focused on how educational attainment is facilitated or constrained by aspirations (i.e. what adolescents themselves hope to achieve) and expectations (i.e. what their environment envisions them achieving) [cf. Haller 1968].<sup>10</sup> Much of this research assumes that young people's perceptions of the future influence their chances of socio-economic success. Aspirations can either serve to reproduce inequality or, if optimism can be instilled, mitigate unfavorable conditions. However, when in the 1980s societies and governments started to doubt whether social progress can indeed be engineered through educational reforms, enthusiasm for this kind of research was severely dampened. It was only with the revival of interest in the sociology of education, manifested in large international research programs in the early 2000s, that the intersection of aspirations and socio-economic success was reconsidered.

Recent scholarship emphasizes unequal opportunity structures much more prominently than its precursors in the 1960s and 1970s. Still focusing predominantly on *educational and occupational aspirations*, this more recent research explores to what extent different perceptions of the future can be explained by structural features such as class, race or gender. Drawing mostly on surveys and quantitative analysis, a variety of studies relates aspirations of youths back to socio-demographic characteristics [Bandelj and Lanuza 2018; Bohon, Johnson and Gorman 2006; Schafer, Ferraro and Mustillo 2011]. In order to elucidate how social positions actually translate into divergent aspirations, scholars refer to significant others, especially the family and peer groups [Bozick *et al.* 2010; Engzell 2019; Goldsmith 2004; Raabe and Wolfer

<sup>10</sup> Parts of the literature interested in inequality and social stratification explicitly distinguish between aspirations vs expectations. Mostly, aspirations are considered as referring to one's own future, while the term expectation refers to ideas about how the future of others will or should unfold [cf. HALLER 1968]. Other scholars

[cf. MORGAN 2007] use these terms to distinguish idealistic goals of adolescents (described as "aspirations") from more realistic appraisals of opportunities (described as "expectations"). In conclusion, such distinctions are not systematically applied throughout the field—nor are they in this review.

2019]. Grace Kao's [2000] focus-group interviews of ethnic minority high school students demonstrate for instance that aspirations are shaped by racial stereotypes: while Black and Hispanic students try to avoid the negative future assigned to them by prevalent stereotypes, Asian students want to keep up with the positive expectations ascribed to them.

A related recent set of sociological literature concerned with the stratification of adolescent aspirations focuses more on the family, deviant behavior, and *future assessments in general* [Crissey 2005; Mortimer, Mont'Alvao and Aronson 2020; Trinitapoli and Yeatman 2011]. Julia Brannen and Ann Nilsen [2002] derive three ideal types of time horizons from their focus group discussions with young adults: while less qualified women in particular deferred the future and oriented themselves towards an extended present, more qualified participants were focused on the risks and opportunities of their medium-term future and how to adapt to the exigencies of employment and founding a family. Yet, for well-qualified young males, aiming for highly remunerated professions, even in the long distant future appeared safe and predictable. Similar to what Bourdieu [1979] found for colonial Algeria, the distant future appears to belong to the most privileged actors who can afford to make plans.

The basic, although sometimes implicit, premise of the aforementioned research remains that aspirations are positively *correlated with later attainment*. The capacity to aspire is assumed to explain behavior and thus future socio-economic status. While several studies explicitly question the underlying assumption of causality [Bozick *et al.* 2010; Domina, Conley and Farkas 2011; Fishman 2019], others seem to confirm the importance of aspirations for outcome. Harris, Duncan and Boisjoly [2002] for instance test the effect of expectations on the prevalence of risky behavior. Adolescents that take a "nothing to lose" attitude have an increased risk of engaging in early sexual intercourse, selling drugs, and using weapons. Marini and Fan [1997] show how differences in adolescents' occupational aspirations are the most important factor in explaining gender wage differences. Aspirations about the future, such studies maintain, can make a tangible difference.

Though this scholarship acknowledges future orientations as a major driver for human behavior and empirically assesses their social stratification, it hardly addresses these relations theoretically. If at all, classical theories of social action or social structure are only referred to superficially. Will Atkinson's [2013] study of perceptions of the future in the UK provides a notable exception. Explicitly building on a Bourdieusian approach, he argues that the recent era of recession and austerity is perceived differently across the social strata: whether the future is still

seen as controllable or not depends on resources associated with class differences.

While this scholarship provides valuable insights into how social inequality is reinforced or can be overcome by means of aspirations, it is largely limited to the sphere of young people. Empirical investigations geared at the stratification of imagined futures across the entire population might therefore enable sociologists to understand more broadly how perceptions of the future interrelate with the reproduction and change of social structures and inequality at large.

### *Identity and social roles*

It would be mistaken to attribute the renewed sociological interest in future orientations observable since the 1990s entirely to the revival of the sociology of education and its concern with youth aspirations. Rather, scholarship engaged with perceptions of the future has considerably diversified during the last three decades. Cultural, constructivist, interpretative and qualitative “turns” within the discipline have also shaped the expanding sociological interest in the future.

Relatively early, questions of identity and social roles have been related to perceptions of the future. While identities and social roles are traditionally considered the result of past experiences and past socialization within a specific community, a growing strand of scholarship adopts a more innovative perspective and considers how identities are also entangled with the future. What this strand shares with the literature on inequality and aspirations is its interest in imagined futures that differ across actor groups.

First, social actors’ identities and role expectations are seen as enabling and *constraining conceivable futures*. For example, Luis Ayuso [2019] compares European survey data and finds how the aspirations of couples living apart differ according to the prevalent norms for family and marriage within their respective countries. Similarly, Rebecca Coleman [2008] asked teenage girls to create collages of their future bodies using craft materials, thus enabling them to visualize their ideas about what might change or stay the same in the years to come. Introducing the notion of the future into feminist theories, she finds how gendered identities, self-perceptions and external perceptions shape imagined futures [also: Baas 2019; Elliott 2010]. On the level of collective futures, Daniel Shtob [2019] shows how coastal communities in the US draw on their local identities to discursively make sense of the predicted effects of climate change. He finds that identitarian emphasis on survival and

continuity may lead to underestimating potential environmental dangers.

The insight that identities and social roles shape imagined futures is complemented by a reciprocal perspective: scholars increasingly understand perceptions of the *future as a component of identities*: “who one is”, may just as much depend on “who one assumes one will become”. Bearman and Brückner’s study [2001] on virginity pledges in the US explores, for instance, how a particular form of future orientation, namely promises, can shape identities. Based on longitudinal survey data, they find that virginity pledges not only reduce the likelihood of premarital intercourse but also foster a new social identity. Adolescents gather in moral communities explicitly reserved for those who identify as “pledgers” and share a common vision about how their future love life is to unfold. This innovative perspective, which does not link identities to a shared understanding of the past but to common aspirations about the future, also serves to explore organizational identities. Sierk Ybema [2010] claims the importance of “nostalgic narratives” that address organizational futures. Observing editors of a major Dutch newspaper during their everyday meetings, lunches, and evening drinks, Ybema finds that instead of merely drawing on the traditions and continuity of the past, the organizational identity relies just as much on images of change and shapeable futures. Gonzales’ [2011] study on undocumented youths in the US explores, in contrast, how shattered future aspirations lead to profound crises of identity. As these teenagers “learn to be illegal” and come to realize the limitations imposed by their legal status, their projected futures—and thus their aspirational identities—vanish.

Finally, the *propensity to aspire to a positive future*, to believe in progress, can per se become a major issue for identity construction [cf. also Pagis 2016]. This is true for the Malawi girls in Margeret Frye’s analysis [2012, cf. also 2019] who, despite their unfavorable life chances, proudly consider themselves as “those who aspire”. Using semi-structured interviews and an analysis of education policies, Frye shows that within the dominant cultural model, optimistically believing in one’s future, however unrealistic, becomes a question of morality rather than probabilistic calculation. Similar (unfounded) optimism about the future has been attested for the identities of former foster youths [Smith 2017] as well as artists [Lois and Gregson 2019], creative workers [Alacovska 2019] and scientists [Knights and Clarke 2014] who face precarious working conditions and thus uncertain futures. The imperative to aspire serves as a general feature of modern cultures [on the American Dream

cf. Lamont 2019], but it seems to become most apparent in the identities of those who have the least resources to actually shape this very future.

Many of these empirical works also theorize how identities and social roles relate to perceptions of the future. However, they mostly refer to theories closer to their object of investigation like feminist or organizational theories. Complementing these perspectives with the insights of general social theories—which from Weber to Merton to Giddens have depicted an orientation towards future states of the world as an essential feature of the modern self—might further advance this scholarship and contribute to the integration of the research field.

### *Reflexivity of social action and agency*

Since the 1990s, scholars have also related the propensity to aspire and imagine the future to a major sociological controversy often framed as “structure vs agency”, i.e. the question whether human decisions are structurally predetermined or whether reflexive human action is possible. Sociologists like Dewey and Schütz, but also Parsons and Merton, have long considered perceptions of the future as a crucial component and condition of conscious human action and reflexivity. This line of argument is taken up in Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische’s [1998] treaty on agency, which they consider as a “temporally embedded process” that involves perceptions of the past and present but crucially necessitates the “projective” capacity to imagine alternative possibilities” [1998: 962]. Building on Hans Joas’ [1997: 167ff] reading of Mead, the authors claim that if action “becomes more self-reflective, the future dimension gains in salience” [1998: 985]. Agency, in other words, requires perceiving the future.

Consequently, numerous scholars interested in *empowerment*, i.e. the capacity to actively overcome structural constraints, have addressed the importance of hope and actors’ ability to imagine the future [Alacovska 2019; Anderson 2017; Coleman 2017; Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016; Drnovšek Zorko 2020; Kleist and Jansen 2016; Laughland-Booy, Mayall and Skrbis 2015; Miyazaki and Swedberg 2017; Smith 2017]. Many of these studies argue that only those who can imagine alternative futures are able to embark on bringing them about. Yet, sociological analyses have also shown that imagined futures may considerably vary in the extent to which they inspire agency or appear as predetermined destiny [Arnett 2000; Cook 2018; Hitlin and Elder 2007; Hitlin and Kirkpatrick Johnson 2015].

The perception of agency can, however, become reduced to an *illusion of agency*, if believing in the mastery of the future is significantly detached from objective life chances [Reynolds and Baird 2010]. In the aforementioned study of Malawi girls, for example, Margaret Frye [2012] shows how the extensive sense of individual agency expressed by her interviewees is contrasted by their extremely unfavorable conditions. For these girls, believing in their agency is not about rationally assessing their situation but a question of morality. In an entirely different setting, the counterfeit clothing market in Buenos Aires, Matias Dewey [2020] observes a similar attitude. Faced with dim chances of economic success, the entrepreneurial proponents of this illegal market enthusiastically hold on to their capacity to aspire and to “making it at any cost”. Scholars have revealed similar moral imperatives in other social contexts [McGee 2019; Snee and Devine 2018]. They find that, instead of being a source of empowerment, in some instances instilling a sense of agency can become a very subtle mode of domination. Perceived agency may prevent actors from challenging structural constraints and blaming others; it may encourage them to hold on and endure deprivation. Emanating from a Foucauldian perspective and drawing on ethnographic observation and interviews, Jana Costas and Christopher Grey [2014] show, for instance, that the power regimes within management consultancies are excessively directed towards the future. They involve an extreme belief in the ability to improve one’s future self. Resistance to this imperative is hardly possible—because it would itself require a neglect of agency, something which is not possible in this social context.

Building on the insight that agency depends on imagined futures, another important perspective explores how depriving actors of their capacity to project the future impairs their agency. The theme of lethargy and the *lack of agency* caused by the vanishing of future orientations is already explored in, for example, Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel’s seminal study [1975] on the long-term unemployed of Marienthal or Bourdieu’s work on French [2008] and Algerian [1979] peasants who grapple with the disappearance of their traditional ways of life. More recently it is particularly taken up by a strand of scholarship that focuses on *waiting*. Waiting refers to future oriented practices characterized by the very lack of agency. In his ethnographic study of a waiting room in a welfare office in Buenos Aires, Javier Auyero [2010] shows how the applicants’ future is put on hold. Being kept patient and uncertain about how long they will have to wait until their future can “begin”, the poor lose their capacity to project and are thus reduced to being passive subordinates. Looking at



diverse social groups such as prisoners [Kotova 2019], seafarers [Tang 2012], on agricultural workers [Griesbach 2020], asylum seekers [Rotter 2016], sociologists have depicted how being forced to wait makes it difficult, if not impossible, to imagine or coordinate the future. Sarah Sharma's study "In the meantime" [2014] confirms how making others wait (just like hurrying them) is a mode of domination. She then shows how for instance taxi drivers and frequent business travelers cope in their everyday practices with the imposed uncertainty of waiting, and use their available resources to reclaim agency over their future [cf. also Serafin 2019].

Overall, studies concerned with future perceptions offer a much more nuanced understanding of sociology's prominent "structure vs agency" controversy. Instead of preferring one of these alternatives, they demonstrate how agency is interrelated with actors' structural capacity to envision the future. Acknowledging aspirations, expectations and imagined futures thus appears crucial for understanding what motivates, enables or inhibits reflexive social action.

### *Collective sense making and social coordination*

How do individual perceptions, interests and actions become aligned? How is social coordination possible? Scholars increasingly address these most fundamental sociological concerns with reference to the role of future orientations.

To begin with, coordinated social interaction requires what Husserl famously termed "protention", i.e. actors' capacity to anticipate what will happen next and how others will react. Emanating from this basic phenomenological assumption, scholars maintain that social coordination requires—if not a mutually shared—then at least a reciprocally aligned perception of the future. In order to coordinate, actors need to form robust expectations about how others see and intend to shape the future.

A first line of research therefore explores *how perceptions of the future become aligned*. Often drawing on pragmatist and phenomenological foundations and their basic interest in how actors make sense of the future, these studies elucidate how artefacts and routinized practices but also cultural norms and institutions serve to harmonize expectations and establish a collective understanding of what is to come. Beynon-Jones *et al.* [2021] consider, for instance, how expectations become aligned as they are "built" into architecture. Their study of building designs for residential care facilities demonstrates how different

assumptions about what elderly people ought to expect from later life become materialized. For different domains scholars show that *material objects* and artefacts can serve to align futures, as they incorporate and suggest specific expectations about how the future will unfold [Cross 1998; Tellmann 2020]. Referring to broader *cultural frames and institutions*, in “Never Saw It Coming”, Karen Cerulo [2006] depicts how a profound disregard for worst-case scenarios is inscribed into American culture. Across different case studies, she explains how formal and informal institutions in the US foster naïve optimism about the future, and prevent citizens and policy-makers from collectively preparing for future calamities. Similarly, Callahan shows how both the American Dream and the Chinese Dream serve as cultural norms that invite individual aspirations but align and tie potential imaginaries of the future to the nation and the benchmark of the past [Callahan 2017]. With a similar perspective but closer to the research interests of new economic sociology, scholars have explored how economic institutions such as money [Esposito 2011], debt [Adkins 2017], working arrangements [Snyder 2016] or organizations more broadly [Beckert 2021; Wenzel *et al.* 2020] shape and orient perceptions of the future. It is not least this alignment of expectations by economic institutions that serves to smoothen economic coordination. Partly inspired by Max Weber, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai [2013: 285ff] therefore concludes that social scientists need to take account of “the future as a cultural fact”, i.e. exploring how the capacity to aspire, hope and expect is a crucial but varying element inscribed into any society’s cultural institutions.

Modern societies, in particular, have established one institutionalized technique explicitly dedicated to the purpose of making sense of the future: *forecasting*. A growing strand of research investigates how such forecasts—i.e. predictions, scenarios and prognoses—are produced. How are multiple, divergent versions of the future consolidated into a credible forecast? The overall claim of this literature is that forecasting is hardly ever the result of individual prediction but the product of social processes of narration. Daipha’s [2015] ethnographic observations of the practices at an office of the American National Weather Service reveals for instance that weather forecasting is just as much a craft as it is a scientific procedure. An embodied “feeling” for what the future holds as well as deliberation within the group play an important role in decision-making. In an entirely different domain, the realm of central banking, predictions appear to be constructed in a similar manner. Based on an in-depth analysis of verbatim transcripts, Abolafia [2010] explores how the

American Federal Reserve defines monetary policy for the period ahead. He shows that central banking is not merely about calculation but about finding plausible and culturally approved narratives regarding the future and its relation to the present [see also Holmes 2013]. The observation that, even in the supposedly rational, calculating sphere of the economy, forecasts are substantially based on a conjoint search for plausible narratives has been confirmed by various recent studies [Evans 2002; Leins 2018; Pilmis 2018; Reichmann 2013].

A second line of research links the capacity of imagined futures to actually coordinate action to the concept of *performativity*: a particular vision of the future may turn out to become reality, simply because a broad set of actors believe it to be probable and orient their present behavior towards the same imagined future “as if” it were already real. To depict the salience of shared expectations, Jasanoff and Kim [2009, 2015] have introduced the concept of “sociotechnical imaginaries”, i.e. visions of how a specific technology is to be employed and can serve the national interest. These imaginaries, often propelled by governments, mobilize and coordinate political and business efforts that advance respective technologies. Indeed, assessing the performativity of imagined futures and their salience for coordination is a crucial concern for the “*sociology of expectations*”. This strand of research has emerged around authors such as Harro van Lente and Nik Brown [Borup *et al.* 2006; Brown and Michael 2003; Van Lente 2012] and is closely related to the more encompassing science and technology studies. It investigates how future expectations are central to understanding how technological innovations and the coalitions that support them emerge. In their analysis of the biomedical technology sector in Australia, Petersen and Krisjansen [2015] demonstrate for instance how promissory discourses helped to coordinate, among others, venture capital and research funding. Similarly, Birch, Levidow and Papaioannou [2014] show that favorable visions of the knowledge-based bio-economy become self-fulfilling. These visions coordinate EU regulations and research policies that enable the sector to actually realize its potential. One of the core insights of this strand of research is therefore that processes of sociotechnical development are not only saturated with formal and informal anticipations, but these anticipations also become performative as they orient and coordinate decisions in the present [cf. Van Lente 2012].

In recent years, a complementary line of research has emerged, not only interested in the coordination of different actor groups, but rather the *coordination of different life spheres and time horizons*. Iddo Tavory and

Nina Eliasoph's [2013] treaty on "coordinating futures" constitutes an important theoretical contribution to this strand. The authors distinguish between three levels of imagining the future: protentions, i.e. perceptions about the immediate next moment; trajectories, i.e. intentional projects and narratives about how the future should unfold; and temporal landscapes, i.e. broader taken-for-granted ideas about long-term futures. While these levels can align and reinforce each other, coordination can also be restricted to one of them only: actors may work towards the same project but disagree on what should be the next move or how it figures in their broader life plans. Understanding coordination between actors therefore requires an exploration of how the different levels of anticipation are themselves coordinated. Related studies often emanate from a phenomenological understanding of the future but also adopt sociology of time perspectives and consider imagined futures in the wider context of temporality [Ylijoki and Mäntylä 2003]. In his work on (non-)response to climate change, John Hall [2016] finds for instance that different domains like science and policy analysis, geopolitical security and environmental movements all rely on different temporalities and different approaches to futurity. This mismatch makes it difficult to establish a common understanding of climate futures and adequate responses to them. Similarly, by drawing on his study of the Warsaw taxi market, Marcin Serafin [2019] develops the concept of "linking ecologies" to better understand the coordination of divergent temporalities and futures. He considers linking ecologies as infrastructures that serve to connect—and thus coordinate—various fields and life spheres, for instance by driving a politician from a parliamentary debate to a theater show or a family dinner. Those linking ecologies, Serafin argues, need to adapt to, anticipate and synchronize the various temporalities of the fields they connect. Consequently, accurate predictions, e.g. estimating when and where to "catch" the next fare, become extremely difficult.<sup>11</sup>

As these exemplary studies show, the interplay, layering or alignment of divergent assessments of the future is at the heart of social coordination. Coordinating present action requires the coordination of imagined futures. Acknowledging the salience of the future for such processes might therefore enable social scientists to better understand why human interaction operates smoothly in some situations while in other instances coordination seems hardly possible.

<sup>11</sup> On ecologies of the future see also MICHAEL 2017.

*Power and conflict*

Much of the aforementioned research concerned with imagined futures implicitly builds on the assumption that the capacity to conceive and aspire the future serves as a crucial resource for personal empowerment. Being in control of one's own (imagined) future appears to make its bearer more powerful. It is therefore surprising that perceptions of the future have only reluctantly been explored as a tool to *dominate others*. Power, as one of sociology's most crucial research interests, is mostly addressed indirectly. Though a more comprehensive analysis of the interrelation between power and future expectations is still due, this section presents a number of studies that have emerged since the turn of the century and could guide the way. It is no coincidence that most of this work investigates those domains in which power struggles and competition are most obvious: politics, business, and the economy. The perspective adopted may nevertheless also be instructive for other social domains.

As particular visions of the future can bolster or challenge power positions and authority, imagined futures are studied as a contested sphere, subject to fierce power struggles. Scholars interested in what has been labeled the "*politics of expectations*" [Beckert 2016: 121f] explore how social actors promote divergent visions of the future that align with their interests and impose them on social groups [Brown, Rappert and Webster 2000; Mallard 2018]. In the domain of politics, Jenny Andersson and Anne-Greet Keizer [2014] explore, for instance, how the "long term" future was historically integrated into the political systems of Sweden and the Netherlands. They find that the idea of predicting the national future was highly contested, and differing beliefs about expertise and democratic participation resulted in two different applications of scenario technologies: technocratically foretelling and thus determining the future vs the opening up of alternatives for a participatory process. Both foster different power distributions between political experts and civil society. Similarly, but for the domain of central banking, Benjamin Braun [2015] sheds light on how influencing private sector expectations became a crucial tool and explicit instrument for the European Central Bank. As the ECB's newly created communicative apparatus provides credible public assessment of the future, it aligns expectations and facilitates policies such as quantitative easing. The economy is thus governed by governing the future. The future, several studies show, can then also serve to legitimate actions of repression. Dunmire [2005], for instance, analyzes the public deliberations of

George W. Bush in the lead up to the war on Iraq and finds that the President used different modalities for the future. While his preferred vision, leading to war, appeared as a certain outcome, other options were vilified as mere possibilities. In a similar vein, Yilmaz [2012] shows how European far right political movements took advantage of future narratives to successfully intervene in recent immigration debates. By presenting Muslim migration not as a problem for the present but as a threat to the future of European culture and population, they instilled hostility towards migrants. As this example shows, promoting a particular image of the future often also involves statements about who is a legitimate part of the future, who “owns” it [cf. also Urry 2016] and who should be excluded from the future altogether.

The related question of *how expectations become “hegemonic”* [Laclau and Mouffe 2001] is addressed by scholars looking in detail at the *discursive construction* of future perceptions. In his research on the Cuban missile crisis, David Gibson [2011, 2012] reconstructs how President Kennedy’s decision for a blockade resulted from debates within the Executive Committee of the National Security Council. Using audio recordings of the deliberations, he shows that committee members started from several future scenarios. During the discourse, particular stories and the respective future consequences were progressively suppressed. He finds that the shifting preferences within the group, from an immediate air strike towards a blockade intended as a warning to Khrushchev, can be explained by conjoined efforts to produce a convincing narrative of the future. In the narrower context of an equipment manufacturer affected by an economic crisis, Kaplan and Orlikowski [2013] observe that different organizational groups promote opposing projections of the future. The authors show how dominating the discourse is not so much dependent on accurate forecasts but on the capacity to provide narratives that link the possible future consistently to the present and the past.

Often drawing on a science and technology perspective, scholars also explore how *devices and technologies* are employed to impose particular visions of the future. For example, De Ville and Siles-Brügge’s [2015] analysis of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations reveals how computable general equilibrium models and visualization techniques were used by the European Commission to promote the agreement. Though the potential economic impact of the agreement was highly contested, the presented figures and statistics served as powerful devices to reinforce a particular, neoliberal version of the future. Similarly, Mateusz Halawa and Marta Olcoń-Kubicka

[2018] explore how couples in Warsaw employ homemade accounting spreadsheets in their everyday struggle to make sense of their conjoint financial and family futures—and how this technical device in turn affects their power relations.

These perspectives suggest that authority and power are affirmed by imposing specific visions of the future on others. Those who can control the imagined future can defend or acquire power positions in the present. However, scholars like Linsey McGoeey [2012a; b] maintain that *ignorance about the future*—i.e. “not wanting to know” about future consequences—can just as much be strategically employed to bolster power positions. Brice *et al.* [2020] show how food businesses actively limit their knowledge about their supply chains and potential risks, because they cannot be held accountable for what remains unforeseeable. In the context of the European refugee crisis Mica *et al.* [2021] analyze how certain topics were emphasized or omitted within dominant narratives in Poland, Hungary and Romania, affecting power positions within these countries but also within the EU at large. Contributing to the puzzle of why recent crises have hardly fostered any substantial change, the authors propose to consider how authorities both project and ignore the future.

These studies can only provide first ideas of how imagined futures are employed to secure and challenge power positions, a conceptual relation still in need of more systematic scrutiny. For now, this rather recent strand of sociological research concerned with the future is neither linked to classical sociological theories of the future nor to structural analyses of power, i.e. to the question of which social groups are able to enforce their visions on societies and who has less of a say in matters of the future. The presented research, however, shows that power is not merely a relict of once acquired resources, but power is also inherently oriented towards the future. The perpetuation of power positions may not least be ascribed to the “ownership” of the future.

### *Innovation and change*

Sociological research concerned with imagined futures often appears skeptical about the openness of the future. Many of the studies presented in this review either qualify the basic openness by emphasizing the salience of pre-existing structures; or they problematize the uncertainty of the future as something actors struggle to cope with and need to reduce. However, a recent and growing body of research explicitly engages with the indeterminacy of the future to explain dynamic

processes. Often drawing on pragmatist reasoning, the propensity of actors to creatively imagine alternative futures is explored as a driver for change and innovation—particularly in the economic and political realm.

In this sense, Jens Beckert [2013, 2016] proposes to consider *capitalist dynamics* from the vantage point of imagined futures. He introduces the concept of “*fictional expectations*” to emphasize that, under conditions of uncertainty, economic decisions can never be probabilistic assessments but are based on contingent imaginaries of desired trajectories to the future. While also employed to explain for instance economic cooperation, Beckert’s concept particularly points to the openness of the future and ongoing processes of creative imagination [cf. also Bronk 2009]. It is through fictional (as opposed to rational) expectations that economic actors can explore radical departures from established practices and make modern capitalism a system of continuous change [cf. also Sewell Jr 2008]. In this vein, exploring the role of uncertain futures for capitalist dynamics has become a crucial concern for economic sociology [Beckert and Bronk 2018; 2021; Ergen 2018; Esposito 2013; Suckert 2021; Tellmann 2016; Wenzel *et al.* 2020; cf. also Beckert and Ergen 2021].

Similarly, much of the aforementioned “*sociology of expectations*” addresses the openness of the future in order to understand the emergence of technological innovations. For instance, Bakker, van Lente and Meeus [2011] explore how technological expectations around innovative hydrogen storage applications emerged. They use interviews with researchers, a review of the scientific literature, and hydrogen-vision reports to show that, in pre-market phases, expectations are constructed as two groups of actors interact: those who provide new variations of technological visions and those who assess and select those visions. The authors argue that the interaction in “arenas of expectations” is crucial to understanding processes of innovation. In the domain of banking, Sophie Mützel [2021] shows how sociotechnical imaginaries of digital payment foster a restructuration of financial services and payment experience but also play into broader economic transformations of datafied capitalism.

The indeterminacy of the future and actors’ capacity to imagine new possibilities is also inherent to research that traces the role of expectations for *social change* and respective movements. Ann Mische [2009, 2014] for instance shows how the capacity to project alternative futures fuels collective action concerned with sustainable development. In an empirical study, she depicts the 2012 UN Conference and the People’s Summit in Rio as “sites of hyperprojectivity”, i.e. discursive arenas with



heightened future-oriented debates about possible futures. Drawing on a conceptual framework that distinguishes various “dimensions of projectivity”, she proposes to explore sites of hyperprojectivity in order to understand how competing futures are prospected, how genuinely new possibilities emerge and how they mobilize social movements. Indeed, several articles address the importance of future perceptions for the emergence and vigor of social movements that aspire to bring about change [Jaster 2019]. They show how alternative futures motivate political action, for example within the movements for environmental protection and sustainability [Adloff and Neckel 2019; Brown 2016; Schulz 2016] or against the deprivation of minorities [Jeffrey and Dyson 2016]. Moreover, and complementing the aforementioned research on capitalist futures, scholars have also explored the historical role of expectations and utopias for the development and appeal of socialism [Arnason 2005; Hölscher 2016; Mendelsohn and Nowotny 1984].

These studies consider the propensity of societies to creatively imagine alternative futures as a crucial element to explain processes of change, innovation and thus progress. However, lately scholars have also taken up a theme already prominent with theorists of late modernity and warn against the *exhaustion of imagined futures*. They fear that the propensity to perceive the future as progress may be endangered [Wagner 2016; Suckert 2022]. Paradoxically, it is the contemporary variant of capitalism—a system that is fundamentally dependent on actors’ willingness to aspire—that is mostly blamed for the foreclosure of future horizons and the rise of narratives of dystopia and apocalypse.<sup>12</sup> Disappointed promises of neoliberalism [Beckert 2020], capitalist alienation and individualization [Bauman 2017] are assumed to contribute to the exhaustion of imagined futures.

### Conclusion

This article has provided an overview of a diverse and growing but still scattered field of sociological research concerned with expectations, aspirations, and imagined futures. Especially since the 1990s, the sociology of imagined futures has developed innovative perspectives on the discipline’s most fundamental research concerns. It appears in many

<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed but also more ambivalent account of dystopia and apocalypse see e.g. HALL 2009 or CLAISSE and DELVENNE 2015.

regards that the future is, as Cantó-Milà and Seebach [2015] argue, “an apriority for society to be possible”. As this assessment may be especially appropriate for the modern capitalist societies we live in, it invites sociologists to indeed turn “back to the future” in order to understand and explain social reality.

Thus, what are the most promising research avenues to study the salience of imagined futures? What perspectives have not yet been explored or merit further attention? Along the way, this review has indicated some of the field’s lacunae where a more systematic adoption of future-oriented perspectives is still due. This appears particularly the case for the analysis of power and broader institutional setups. With a few exceptions mentioned above, scholars have hardly explored how future orientations are intertwined with structural positions of power, nor with legal and political systems, welfare states, national cultures or economic regimes.

The reluctance to address such macro-structures is surely not independent from the theoretical anchoring of the research field. While recently there have been some important advances in systematically linking imagined futures to broader social theory [e.g. Appadurai 2013; Beckert 2013, 2016; Mische 2014, 2022; Tavory 2018; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013], such attempts at theorizing the future still remain exceptional. Moreover, the scholars that have referred their empirical investigations back to classical theoretical perspectives mostly draw on pragmatic and phenomenological approaches but largely ignore other potentially relevant traditions. More comprehensive advancements towards a social theory of the (imagined) future, as well as a more explicit theoretical integration of the research field could be promising avenues and allow for more cumulative knowledge. This review is not least an attempt to promote such processes of “field-building”.

In addition to this theoretical observation, I particularly see two empirical lacunae that seem promising for future research. First, it appears remarkable how most studies focus on particular “critical” moments. They either focus on initial stages, like young people, emerging organizations, new products, just-married couples; or they consider moments of disruption like illness, political crises, catastrophes, migration, imprisonment. This appears plausible, because it is in such beginnings and transitions that routines are challenged or have not yet been established and the future becomes problematized as “critical” [cf. Ergen and Suckert 2021]. In such instances, actors become more aware of expectations, are forced to reflect upon possible futures and often make

them explicit. The future thus becomes more accessible for sociological inquiry in critical moments.

While such an approach covers many instances in which imagined futures are decisive, it neglects the role of everyday and more habitual, taken-for-granted modes of anticipation [Lahire 2011: 125ff; Mandich 2020]. To address these, sociology might on the one hand take inspiration from anthropological research that sets out to capture the salience of the future not only for critical moments but the mundane everyday practices of anticipation as well as incorporated attitudes towards the future [e.g. Fischer 2014; Salazar, Irving and Sjöberg 2017]. On the other hand, and more on a macro level, comparative research approaches that investigate how broader future orientations vary across countries and across time may help to explore what Tavory and Eliasoph [2013] call “temporal landscapes”: taken-for-granted and often unreflected assumptions about how the long-term future unfolds, usually inscribed into institutional setups. Learning from political economy [Hall and Soskice 2001], such research might explore “varieties of imagined futures” as underlying aspirational infrastructures that shape actors’ anticipation beyond critical moments.

Second, (digital) technology has until now only played a marginal role in the sociological analysis of imagined futures. Mostly within the sociology of expectations, scholars have studied how narratives about the future play into technological innovation and how particular devices inform related forecasts and predictions. However, the increasing digitalization of many life spheres makes it necessary to extend these STS-perspectives and study the interplay of technology and future orientations more broadly. How do actors navigate the future if, due to big data and a variety of apps, forecasts and point-predictions become widely available for many decisions in life? How do actors perceive and make sense of their own futurity in a digital world? Sociologists could explore how societal perception of the future changes with algorithms increasingly promising to make it (at least probabilistically) foreknowable. Does the future become less uncertain? Or less open [cf. Appadurai 2021]? And: Do actors’ aspirations still matter in an age of technocratic governance and cybernetic models? Further research could assess to what extent digital devices affect, enable or constrain actors’ capacity to perceive agency and creatively imagine alternative futures.

Moreover, the issue of digital technologies makes the investigation of how imagined futures are entangled with power relations even more pertinent. The basic insight that representations of the future are steeped with interests becomes even more crucial in an era in which the life

chances of many people, e.g. their financial liquidity, educational opportunities, verdicts, potential partners or medical treatment, depend on how digital devices assess and judge their futures [O'Neil 2016; Rona-Tas 2020]. Whose visions of the future are built into the underlying models, who controls them and what social groups are capable of “gaming the system”? Exploring the construction and application of such “neutral” algorithmic predictions, scholars may analyze whether and how they reiterate social prejudice and inequality by triggering self-fulfilling prophecies and path-decencies.

As well as indicating the lacunae, this review shows that a sociology of imagined futures offers new perspectives on established sociological research concerns. It bears potential to reconsider the discipline's most relevant questions from innovative vantage points. Though this research field appears still scattered and would benefit from further theoretical and empirical integration, the underlying reorientation of sociological research “back to the future” seems a promising way forward.

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BACK TO THE FUTURE

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## Résumé

Depuis les années 1990, la sociologie a redécouvert un thème déjà présent dans les théories fondatrices de la discipline : la saillance des perceptions futures de l'action sociale. Cet article dresse un panorama de « la sociologie des futurs imaginés », un champ de recherches divers mais encore épars, qui est explicitement engagé sur les attentes, les aspirations et les orientations futures. Un examen de la recherche récente met l'accent sur la façon dont une perspective future imaginée est liée à un large éventail de sujets et permet des points de vue innovants sur les préoccupations persistantes de la recherche sociologique, telles que les inégalités, les identités sociales, l'agency, la coordination, le pouvoir ou la compréhension de l'innovation et du changement. En mettant systématiquement en évidence ces apports, mais aussi en pointant des lacunes et des perspectives qui méritent d'être développées, cet article montre en quoi une réorientation de la recherche sociologique « retour vers le futur » apparaît comme une voie prometteuse.

*Mots-clés* : Futur ; Temporalité ; Théorie sociale ; Attentes ; Aspirations ; Sociologie du temps.

## Zusammenfassung

Seit den 1990er Jahren hat die Soziologie ein Thema wiederentdeckt, das bereits in den grundlegenden Theorien des Fachs präsent war: die Bedeutung von Zukunftsvorstellungen für soziales Handeln. Dieser Artikel gibt einen Überblick über die „Soziologie der imaginierten Zukunft“, ein vielfältiges, aber immer noch verstreutes Forschungsfeld, das sich explizit mit Erwartungen, Hoffnungen und Zukunftsorientierungen beschäftigt. Ein Überblick über die jüngste Forschung zeigt, wie eine Perspektive der imaginierten Zukunft mit einem breiten Spektrum von Themen in Verbindung steht und innovative Blickwinkel auf anhaltende soziologische Forschungsprobleme wie Ungleichheit, soziale Identitäten, Handlungsfähigkeit, Koordination, Macht oder das Verständnis von Innovation und Wandel ermöglicht. Durch die systematische Hervorhebung dieser Beiträge, aber auch durch den Hinweis auf vielversprechende Lücken und Perspektiven, die eine Weiterentwicklung verdienen, zeigt dieser Artikel, wie eine Neuausrichtung der soziologischen Forschung „zurück in die Zukunft“ ein vielversprechender Weg nach vorn zu sein scheint.

*Schlüsselwörter*: Zukunft; Zeitlichkeit; Sozialtheorie; Erwartungen; Aspirationen; Zeitsoziologie