



Debating futures: Global trends, alternative visions, and public discourse

International Sociology
2016, Vol. 31(1) 3–20
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0268580915612941
iss.sagepub.com
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Abstract

This article discusses the uneasy relationship between forward-oriented sociological research and public debate. It explores how implicit assumptions and explicit conceptualizations influence sociology's ability to address the future. It argues that the stakes are not merely theoretical but also practical because methodological pre-decisions shape sociology's relation to public debate and its abilities to tackle the emergent challenges of our time. Sociology was geared since its inception toward the collective reflection of not only present or past conditions of social existence but also of possibilities for change. While deterministic and expertocratic closures limited its potential, shifting epistemological, institutional, and social constellations allow the expansion, evasion, and re-emergence of open and contestable future orientations. Case studies related to climate change, globalization, social movements, values, and media are used to explore actual and potential contributions to public discourse.

Keywords

Future, history of sociology, imagination, knowledge, public, social change, sociological theory

The task of this article is to historically explore the uneasy relationship between forward-oriented sociology and public debate as implicit assumptions and explicit operationalizations of the future shift from determinism to contingency and contention. I argue that the stakes are not merely theoretical but also practical because methodological pre-decisions shape sociology's relation to public debate and thus the abilities for tackling the challenges of our time. Futures are imagined by corporate, administrative, and military

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think-tanks, branded by marketing departments, traded by hedge-funds, yet rather neglected by contemporary sociology. Courses on futures research are more likely to be offered in business schools than in sociology departments. Since futures research is not a standard field in many, if not most, national sociologies, I begin with basic definitions and a brief historical sketch of the field as a background. I then explore in more detail specific examples drawn from recent and current research on key issues, including environmental change, globalization, social movements, values, and the mediascapes that facilitate discourse. I use these examples to address actual and potential contributions for public debate as well as the obstacles.

Sociological approaches to the future

There are probably almost as many definitions of futures research as there are of sociology. Different schools of sociology have attempted to define sociology's subject as social behavior, social order, social change, or some combination thereof. It has become fashionable to give up on a definition altogether or to retreat to the operationalistic definition that sociology is what sociologists do. Apart from whatever sociologists do, sociology can be understood – this is the aspect that I wish to advocate here – as a collective reflection on the conditions of our social existence and the potentials for future change. An observer may describe sociology as a space in which society thinks about itself, its past, present, and future.

It probably goes uncontested to claim that the sociological study of the past or the present is much less controversial than the study of the future. I have met many sociologists who thought a sociology of the future would be something inherently misguided, futile, and either ideological or silly to do, as we simply cannot know the future. I should thus provide some clarifications of the sociological meanings of 'future' and the subjects of sociological futures research.

Much of the past centuries of reflection about the future had assumed the future to be predestined, predetermined, or at least progressing in a certain direction that would render it predictable. Early historical documents point to the important roles that oracles and prophecies had played in cultures around the globe. Sociology as a discipline emerged at a juncture in western history when religious beliefs in some future telos gave way to a positivist search for social laws, the knowledge of which was thought to be instrumental for managing, administering, or liberating society. The importance of sociology's formative period makes it pertinent to consider at least cursorily the works of some of its founding figures in influential scholarly traditions.

The French Auguste Comte brought the concept of 'sociology' to prominence in an effort to establish it as a 'positive science' that would overcome superstitious worldviews and point society in an orderly way toward a better future (1855/1830–1842).

Influenced to different degrees by Comte, Darwin, and Adam Smith, the British Herbert Spencer advanced an evolutionary approach to sociology. Like Smith, Spencer championed a market free of state regulation except when it came to the policing of property and contracts. Spencer was mostly happy with the status quo of society and thought that the state should interfere in the lives of individuals only minimally for their protection but otherwise allow unmitigated competition. There is a tension in Spencer's oeuvre between his methodological individualism and his recurrent use of organic metaphors and his idea that society's different parts have functions vis-a-vis one another and the larger system.

Using Comtean terms with a normative intention, Spencer defined ‘social statics’ as the study of ‘the equilibrium of a perfect society,’ while ‘social dynamics’ were about ‘the forces by which society is advanced toward perfection’ (1851: 409). Spencer’s evolutionary theory differed from Comte’s on several counts. Spencer rejected Comte’s Law of Three Stages as well as his focus on spiritual development. Steeped in wide-ranging historical comparisons, Spencer was aware that history would not follow any unilinear path. He postulated broad trends but also saw the constant possibility of reversals or regressions. Unlike Comte, Spencer did not assume that the ‘laws’ of history could be reduced to only a few, neatly symmetric propositions. Fundamental for Spencer was his observation that the increase in population size would yield increasing structural differentiation. The increase in size and structural differentiation he saw then as going hand in hand with a transition from militant to industrial societies. Whereas military conquest had helped to form larger social aggregates, it was to cease its functionality with the emergence of industry, which required cooperation and the moral bonds of a strong civil society. Spencer did not consider these trends as inevitable but recognized the continued recurrence of warfare.

Inspired by Charles Darwin’s notion of ‘natural selection’ (1859) Spencer coined the notion ‘survival of the fittest’ (1864), which Darwin brought later to prominence when he added it to his theory of the evolution of species (1869). Spencer took individuals as the units of society and thought of them as undergoing a natural process of selection that should be better not disturbed. He thought that nature would get by itself rid of ‘imbeciles and idlers’ and thus deliver over time populations with greater numbers of apt individuals (1874: Ch. XIV). He strongly opposed the provision of social welfare by either the state or charity on normative grounds rooted in his belief that it would only interfere with the natural process likely to yield an ever more refined society. ‘To aid the bad in multiplying,’ he argued, ‘is, in effect, the same as maliciously providing for our descendants a multitude of enemies’ (1874: Ch. XIV).

Émile Durkheim as the single-most influential French founding-figure of sociology shared with Comte assumptions of social evolution, a concern for morality, and the thought that sociological knowledge could be used to ‘manage’ or administrate society (1984 [1893]). Unlike Spencer, Durkheim had a less rosy view of the present. He was above all concerned about the crisis of morality as the root cause of the modern malaise. While Durkheim called for the study of ‘social facts,’ he did not share Comte’s rather naïve positivism (1982 [1895]). Although fully committed to empirical inquiry, Durkheim did not posit science as something absolute but regarded it as a secular religion, a part of the contemporary worldview that could also change as culture changes. He regarded ‘scientific thought (as) only a more perfected form of religious thought’ (1965 [1912]: 431). Durkheim’s goal was to reconcile positivism with morality in his project of a ‘science of morality’ (1965 [1912]). Although Durkheim tended to write as if he had a unilinear conception of history, he did not believe in any historical determinism. For him, neither changes in morality nor changes in society had any necessary direction. He saw morality as being formed, transformed, and maintained for reasons of an ‘experimental kind’ (1984 [1893]: xxvi). As Tocqueville (1990 [1835–1840]) before him, Durkheim (1965 [1912]) came to regard individualism as modern society’s central cult, as a modern religion. Durkheim had observed in his first study on *Division of Labor in Society* (1984

[1893]) that traditional mores and social bonds had been loosening but found in his subsequent diachronic and synchronic study of suicide rates in differently developed western countries that a new morality fit for the increasingly differentiated society had not arrived yet (1966 [1897]). Durkheim diagnosed the dominant trend of his time to be that of social differentiation. It caused him great concern to see social solidarity shifting from 'mechanical' to 'organic' without the emergence of an adequate unifying morality that could bind the now dissimilar individuals together as he postulated. His studies of morality and institutions were therefore aimed at identifying mechanisms by which individual mores were being shaped so that both morality and institutions could be reconfigured (1965 [1912], 1990). While being strongly committed to the investigation of normative integration, his approach is hindered by his relative neglect of phenomena such as interest, power, domination, or the impact of the capital accumulation process onto society. Although Durkheim failed to inquire more systematically into economic injustice and authoritarianism, he did favor an integrated society with a universalist morality (1965 [1912]: 493). His study of the *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* led him to see in the 'collective life,' especially in moments of 'collective effervescence,' the birth of the ideals that could create or recreate society (1965 [1912]).

Unlike Durkheim, Karl Marx saw in capitalism the problem of the time, the root cause of alienation and the suffering of the suppressed and exploited class (1978 [1844], 1978 [1857–1858]; Marx and Engels, 1978 [1848]). Yet, Marx projected optimism about the future. The antagonisms inherent to capitalism, he suggested, were to be resolved by a proletarian revolution that would bring a universally liberating social order built on the developed means of production. Being both a scientist and a passionate activist without strictly separating these roles, his whole work was driven by his ethical commitment for social justice and freedom. Yet his oeuvre also reflects tensions in how to conceptualize future. While Hegel, along with other idealist philosophers and later Comte, had conceived of history as a learning process toward ever greater enlightenment, Marx thought to put him with a materialist turn from his head back to his feet, yet he kept Hegel's dialectic method and basic tenets of his philosophy of history (1978 [1843], 1978 [1845–1846]). Marx studied closely the writings of the Scottish moralist and political economist Adam Smith (2003 [1776]), yet rejected his fundamental assumption that the 'invisible hand' of the market would be a positive force (1978 [1867]).

Marx, along with his collaborator Engels, suggested in the *Communist Manifesto* (1978 [1848]) that the laws of history would point to a necessary triumph of the oppressed proletariat over the bourgeoisie. Rejecting the utopian socialism of Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and others, Marx spent little time on elaborating what a future communist society would be like beyond the idea that it would end alienation, along with exploitation and the state, and provide freedom for all. In accordance with his model that ideas reflect underlying structures, Marx thought that the time for more concrete visions was simply not yet ripe and could only come at a later historical stage. Marx thought, like Hegel, that the present contained already the seed for the future from which it would dialectically unfold (1978 [1843]). Whether such a seed would develop in a predetermined way or with a broad spectrum of possibilities, is open to different interpretations. The suggestion about the inevitability of socialism in Marx's activist writings could be dismissed as mere rhetoric meant to encourage the struggle against oppression. In his more empirically oriented historical writings, he pointed out very clearly that there were

no historical automatisms but plenty of maneuvering room for contingent action (1978 [1852], 1978 [1871]).

Marx argued in his 11th thesis on Feuerbach that 'philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it' (1978 [1845]). Marx criticized idealist philosophy for only thinking about the world in a contemplative way without recognizing its role in the world or trying to orient it toward change. Marx as activist believed in the power of creative action but he also recognized that larger structures and the weight of the past hold their sway. He famously noted that 'men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please' (1978 [1852]: 595).

Especially in his political activist writings, Marx embraced a rather schematic historical determinism (Marx and Engels, 1978 [1848]; cf. 1978 [1859], 1978 [1867]). Social change appeared as the necessary result of the inner logic of the capital accumulation process. Social contradictions would polarize up to the point when the revolutionary uprising of the hitherto suppressed class and the overthrow of the old order would become inevitable. There is a tension between the model of historical determinism and Marx's more empirically oriented historical writings (1978 [1852], 1978 [1871]) though the latter can be read as both, as void of determinism and as an effort to prove how action results from interests determined by class position.

Conducting wide-ranging historical studies with systematic diachronic and synchronic comparisons, Max Weber developed a rather complex model of social change. He assumed a plurality of historical paths, each the outcome of a multitude of interfering factors (1923, 1978, 1991 [1905]). One of the transformative forces that he emphasized in his *Protestant Ethic* (1991 [1905]), are religious ideas – a proposition materialist theorists most fervently attacked. Weber however did not intend to replace materialism with what he considered would be an equally one-sided idealism but meant to model historical processes rather in terms of an interplay between ideational and material forces, between actions and institutions. Yet, apart from his theory of charisma, a rather uncommon phenomenon, Weber failed to provide a more systematic treatment of social change producing action (1958, 1978; Joas, 1992).

Like Marx, Weber recognized the reversion of the means–ends relation as the cause for profound alienation. Yet, unlike Marx, he regarded capitalism as quasi-universal while reserving the notion of 'rational capitalism' for its specific modern mode (1923). Free from historical determinism as a metaphysical guarantor but yet lacking a model for rational norm producing action, Weber had become rather pessimistic about the future. He saw rationalization as the threat that would ultimately stifle free, responsible creative action. In his view, western culture was to produce 'specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart' (1991 [1905]: 182), western rationality was to become an individual conduct confining 'stahlhartes Gehäuse,' 'a steel-hard shell', or an 'iron cage' in Talcott Parsons's famous translation (1991 [1905]).

While Weber propagated the strict separation of scientific and political commitment, this prevented him neither from accepting that values inform the very choice of questions pursued in academic research nor from embracing the particular values of liberal nationalism in his roles as a public intellectual and politician (1991 [1904], 1991 [1917]). Fearing an ever more stifling bureaucratization, Weber favored in his time a plebiscitarian leader-democracy, which he hoped would allow principles and realities balancing leaders to creatively shape futures (1958: 129; Mommsen, 1963).

Despite the fundamental differences in their theoretical apparatuses and assumptions as well as in their specific time-diagnoses and future expectations, the most prominent founding figures of sociology shared a strong future orientation and an audacious readiness to engage with the normative questions about preferable futures. As sociology developed into an academic discipline with its own departments at universities around the world, it purged not only the speculative excesses of the formative period but it also marginalized explicit normative engagements, and with it, the explicit future orientation. Yet, the shedding of deterministic assumptions opened new possibilities for a renaissance of a future-oriented sociology with a critical edge.

The belief in an open future is the hallmark of our contemporary consciousness of time. As the historian Reinhart Koselleck (1989) argued, in modernity the 'space of experience' and the 'horizon of expectation' are increasingly disassociated. This fundamental contingency opens the horizon of the possible for social and political creation. What is could have been different. The existing reality could have been differently shaped through non-determined human action, in more or less reflexive as well as in more or less conflictive or cooperative ways. This consciousness of contingency is reflected within sociology in an increasing emphasis on 'human agency' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) and the 'creativity of action' (Joas, 1992).

How can the future be studied sociologically when it is now regarded as inherently contingent and unpredictable? Here is a general definition that may serve as a starting point: Futures research can be understood as that part of sociology that is focused on the dynamics of future making and imagination, current trends, likely and possible scenarios, and their social implications. One can distinguish within current futures studies four major approaches: (1) specific *forecasts*, such as projections of current demographic trends or so-called Delphi-Interviews with experts about their expectations in research and development (pioneered by Gordon and Helmer, 1964; for a more recent application see e.g. Beck et al., 2000); (2) *scenario building* or *simulations* of alternative futures that seem possible or probable (for a pioneering work see Meadows et al., 1972; for more recent examples, Schulz, 1999, 2001b); (3) studies of *social imagination* and *future making*, that is empirical research of past or present images of futures (cf. Bell, 1997a; Masini, 1983; Slaughter, 2002; Wright, 2010) as well as the processes by which such visions are constructed and by which they may or may not gain efficacy (cf. Beilharz, 2009; Castoriadis, 1991; Mannheim, 1936; Melucci, 1996; Wright, 2010); and (4) *normative* and *norm-analytical* research about preferable futures (Bell, 1997b), including research on the relationship between values and futures (see Bachika and Schulz, 2011). The ideal-typical distinction between these approaches may serve as an illustration of the scope of sociological futures research. Of course, these approaches do not need to be isolated from one another but can be mutually informing, and in empirical practice, many projects draw from more than one approach.

Futures research and public debate: Moving beyond expertocratic positivism

How does, or how can, sociological futures research relate to public debate? Applying Michael Burawoy's (2005) much discussed terminology, I would argue that studies

using any of these four approaches can be geared toward 'academic' and 'extra-academic' audiences and conducted in an 'instrumental' or a 'reflexive' mode, i.e. they can be conducted as, what he calls, 'professional' or 'policy' sociologies just as much as 'critical' or 'public' sociologies. Admittedly, there has been a greater affinity between forecasts and policy as well as between studies of the imaginary and critique. Yet, despite these affinities, public debate can be served through all of these four approaches. Specific forecasts can serve publics as warnings about what might happen if no countermeasures are being taken. Scenario building adds to this specific vision and extrapolations of alternative paths. Studies of the imaginary bring in notions of power and can relate to subaltern social actors with counter-hegemonic projects. And research on values can help to spell out the value choices that are often only implicit in alternative futures.

Historically, the relation between futures research and publics appears to have developed through different modes and phases. Conventional futures studies have been frequently oriented at elite policy-makers and their allied think-tanks, most explicitly in the 1950s, more implicitly today. Government agencies, institutes and foundations aligned to political parties, and business corporations were most often those who commissioned and paid for specific futures studies. It is thus no wonder that a large part of futures studies were addressed to political or business elites. In cases in which future studies were commissioned by business corporations the findings remained often secret or their access restricted by high fees. Quite commonly, the tone of such contract studies, as well as of studies prepared in academic settings, was to deliver 'expert' opinions and 'facts' about the future so that 'decision-makers' or so-called 'appropriate authorities' could then make their informed choices. To be sure, these elite players are most powerful and relevant actors and the ability to address them does offer substantial influence. Yet, this elitist orientation rests on a very restricted notion of democracy, of the kind propagated by Schumpeter (1975 [1950]) and others, in which the subjects of government elect their rulers every couple of years without any further say. Such an elitist orientation is wrong on at least two counts: empirically and normatively. It neglects the initiatives of ordinary citizens, social movements, and subaltern networks – grassroots actors with less formal standing and less institutional power but nevertheless with moral standing, imaginative voices, and potential impact.

The relation between futures research and publics changed during the boom years of futures research in the late 1960s. A flurry of popular books appeared about the future of the then very distant year 2000, including those by Daniel Bell (1968), Robert Jungk and Johan Galtung (1969), and Herman Kahn and Anthony Wiener (1967). Many of the more popular publications based great optimism on technological progress and were often focused on the benefits of space age technologies and mass consumer goods (cf. overview in Bell, 1997a). This optimism was reinforced by experiences in daily life. Technological breakthroughs, such as the landing of an Apollo rocket and the first steps of a man on the moon, were televised to a global audience. Mass-produced technology, including automobiles and an increasing plethora of household electronics, had become affordable to ever wider circles throughout the wealthier countries. It was hoped that the Green Revolution would feed the Third World, and technology, it was believed, would trickle down to all people on the planet.

Yet, this technological optimism was soon to give way to a more pessimistic perspective. A variety of heterogeneous factors led to this shift. The oil crisis of the early 1970s led to a worldwide recession. The consequences of this abrupt stoppage of growth were felt not only by motorists but by consumers worldwide. The welfare states of the First World ran into a crisis of legitimacy. The historical compromise between capital and labor was put to a test as the pie for redistribution had slowed or even reversed its growth (Offe, 1987). The Report for the Club of Rome by Dennis Meadows and his collaborators (Meadows et al., 1972) expressed a strong warning about the *Limits to Growth* and became famous as it touched a chord of concern. An environmental movement began to emerge in an increasing number of industrialized countries criticizing the abuse of planetary resources. Other critics warned about the specter of a Third World War. The growing arsenals of nuclear weapons had resulted in thousand-fold overkill capacities. Technology became seen as an imminent threat by the Cold War's peace movement. The Third World developed the Dependency School (Amin, 1976; Cardoso and Faletto, 1979; Frank, 1967), which argued that modernization theories and trickle-down assumptions of development were naïve and that the Third World was positioned in a system of unequal terms of trade that did not allow any betterment for very systemic reasons. This situation led to what Jürgen Habermas (1985) called the 'exhaustion of utopian energies' and dampened the previous boom of future-oriented studies.

During the 1980s and 1990s, academic futures research fought an uphill battle for professional respectability and made great strides in refining its methodological toolbox and expanded its substantial scope. Much credit goes to the work of Wendell Bell (1997a, 1997b), Elise and Kenneth Boulding (1995), and Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2000). Yet, as sociology responded to institutional pressures with a positivistic hardening, the overall leverage for an engagement with the future was still shrinking. Neoliberal doctrines from economics came to dominate policy and public debate about the future since the Reagan–Thatcher era and especially after the end of the Cold War. The current push for public sociology within the American and the International Sociological Associations might provide an opening for sociology to assert itself, and to feed and inspire the discourse about the future.

This broad historical sketch may now serve as a background for a more detailed reflection on the relation between current futures research and public debates by exploring specific examples with contrasting approaches.

Forecasts and scenario building: The impact of climate change

The first example is an interdisciplinary research project on climate change, called KLIMU. This large-scale project was funded by different agencies of the German federal and state governments and focused on the long-term impact on the Weser Estuary region in coastal northwest Germany (cf. Schuchardt and Schirmer, 2005). Dozens of researchers from disciplines such as climatology, oceanography, soil science, agriculture, business, economics, and sociology worked together and developed a regional econometric model to generate path-specific forecasts up to the years 2020 and 2050. The three scenarios included: (1) a simple extrapolation of current trends, (2) an abandonment of

current trends and countermeasures starting in 2020, and (3) a more active path with countermeasures taken right away. As sole sociologist on the project, I developed a set of social change indicators that we then operationalized and integrated into the econometric model (Schulz, 1999, 2001b). The model allowed comparisons between the costs of abandoning flood-prone areas and of constructing gigantic levees as well as what taxpayers could save if the greenhouse effect with its resulting climate change were avoided. Although a popular exhibition of the cost issue was originally envisioned, it did not receive the necessary funding. This pilot project was focused on the German coastal region but allowed comparison with other regions, including those likely to be effected by climate change even more strongly.

Tackling the causes of climate change requires global cooperation of national governments. Yet the governments of the most industrialized or rapidly industrializing countries are rather reluctant players in this as the consequences are not immediately identifiable within one legislation period. For governments to become more willing actors and negotiators of climate change mitigation treaties, public pressures are needed that can come only from forward-oriented debates about long-term futures.

The general public in Germany and most of Western Europe is largely convinced that the greenhouse effect leads to global warming, a rise in the sea-level, and a change in climate patterns. The environmental movement is particularly strong in Germany. Since the mid-1980s, its Green Party had even entered government coalitions on the state and federal levels. Companies that developed and produced technologies for the use of renewable energy were subsidized and became over time an economic force.

This is a very different situation from the USA, the by far greatest per-capita polluter where the Bush White House had been in denial and prevented scientists of its own agencies from speaking out about the issue (Revkin, 2004; Shulman, 2006). Strong oil and coal lobbies prevented most countermeasures that were advocated by a relatively weak environmental movement (Jacques et al., 2008; McCright and Dunlap, 2003; Perrow, 2010). The tide in public opinion has shifted only recently, with much of the credit being attributed to Al Gore's highly visible multi-media campaign. Using his national prominence as former Vice-President and presidential candidate, Gore went on an extensive lecture tour, wrote a popular book (Gore, 2006), and had an even more popular film made (*An Inconvenient Truth*, directed by Davis Guggenheim, 2006). The 2007 Noble Prize was then a reward for Gore, shared with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and, beyond that, a reinforcement of his case. We have here an instance in which there is an overwhelming consensus among scientists about a dangerous future scenario but where the knowledge about it entered the public debate only upon the concerted effort of a media-savvy campaign with celebrity appeal.

Comparing the constellations in Germany and the US, we can argue that political and economic forces can facilitate or impede the flow of information from academia, and if they prevent public debate, it can then depend on playing by the rules of the media as the crucial gatekeepers. Available knowledge can acquire efficacy only when it is also allowed to enter broader discourses.

That the detailed econometric long-term modeling of climate change impact was started on the northwest German coast was not a coincidence but related to institutional capacities and the availability of sufficient resources for research. In contrast, funding

had been lacking for comparable studies in the Global South, although it was already anticipated that low-lying areas in tropical and subtropical countries face the gravest risks to flooding and severe winds while the agricultural sectors of poorer countries are particularly exposed to devastating harvest failures as weather patterns diverge from expectations (IPCC, 2014).

Alternative futures: Imagination, movements, and subaltern voices

While the first set of examples emphasized the role of researchers as knowledge providers and agenda setters, the next set highlight the opposite: researchers in the role of listeners. Materialist epistemology has since long argued that knowledge is always rooted in concrete material conditions. Marxist class theory pointed out that the experience of specific social positions enables insights that may not be readily available to others. Future-oriented sociologists recognized the ability of movements to create critical knowledge, visions, and projects. Orlando Fals Borda (1987) developed 'participatory action research' as a method for 'breaking the monopoly' of dominant knowledge. Alain Touraine (1981) characterized social movements as the 'eye' and 'voice' of society. Alberto Melucci (1996) called them 'prophets' in the sense that they speak out what is yet to come, that they name problems and formulate future visions. Teams of researchers collaborate in these approaches with activists and dissenting publics in diagnosing the conditions of the present and discussing goals, strategies, and tactics for change. A classic example for such a 'sociological intervention' is the influential engagement of Touraine's team with the Polish Solidarnosc movement in the 1980s (cf. Touraine et al., 1983).

More current examples can be drawn from the famous case of the Zapatista movement. The Zapatistas rose up in arms in the southeastern Mexican state of Chiapas in 1994, on the day that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect. The insurgent indigenous peasants denounced NAFTA and demanded land reform, indigenous rights, and democratic participation. Social scientists were involved on various levels and in different roles. On the national level, a great number of Mexican sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, historians, and economists engaged with the Zapatistas in a dialogue about national reforms, got actively involved as advisers to the rebels during the complicated negotiation process with the Mexican federal government, and served as prominent commentators in major national newspapers. Likewise, international sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists went to Mexico to study the local and national dimensions of the conflict as well as the expanding transnational movement; scholar-activists, such as Yvon LeBot in France, Ulrich Brand in Germany, and David Holloway in the UK, took the Zapatistas' project seriously and as an inspiration for their analyses of globalization. The Zapatistas' spokesperson, Subcomandante Marcos, was trained in sociology and media studies. His university thesis and his later communiqués show the influence of critical thinkers such as Paolo Freire, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, and Michel Foucault. In a sense, public sociology has become practical.

The initially very small local insurgency from the Global South inspired a transnational network. The Zapatistas convened intercontinental meetings of grassroots activists

and intellectuals and called for a network 'Against Neoliberalism and for Humanity.' The indigenous Mayan peasants who revolted were not a 'backward' people but the catalyst for a challenge to the dominant mode of globalization. Taking cues from the Zapatistas, a new generation of activists began to protest the neoliberal mode of globalization and its most visible institutions such as the World Bank, IMF, WTO, and the G8 during their summits in Prague, Seattle, Washington, and Genoa. The Zapatista research shows how a supposedly 'weak' subaltern actor can challenge an entrenched national regime and the hegemonic mode of globalization. The Zapatistas' struggle for dignity helped to open spaces for dissent and for the imagination of alternative futures (Schulz, 1998, 2007). On the other hand, the limitations are just as clear, especially when considering how easily the post-9/11 'War on Terror' has sidelined international attention to this movement.

Values and preferable futures

Normative and norm-analytical futures research is concerned with the social implications of prospective futures. In which direction do we want to develop our world? Which scenarios are preferable? How can preferences be justified? In addressing such questions, recent futures research has directed much attention to the question of values (Bachika and Schulz, 2011; Bell, 1997b, 2009). While sociologists have shown that the recurring lament about a perceived decline of moral values is largely a worry about myths (e.g. Boudon, 2002), there remains yet a deep disagreement about how to conceptualize the relation between value differences and future visions. To put it pointedly, is humankind condemned to fight over values, or could common values guide to a more peaceful and harmonious future?

Samuel Huntington (1996) gained much notoriety with his view of a future marked by irreconcilable values and an unavoidable 'clash of civilizations.' Huntington's thesis has been rightly criticized for its blatant ethnocentric bias and neglect of historical changes and relations (cf. e.g. Casanova, 2011). Yet, the prevalence with which cultural clashes are described in the public sphere as 'unavoidable' can make this a self-fulfilling prophecy. Cultural warriors promote sharp distinctions between 'friends' and 'foes' and employ fear of the other to dig the trenches deeper.

A contrary position of universal values as future basis has been strongly advocated by Wendell Bell (1997b). Bell pointed to numerous anthropological and sociological studies that produced lists of common values and, in a second step, built on Keekok Lee's (1985) philosophical method of 'epistemic implication' as a way to assess value statements objectively. This is not the occasion to engage with the details of these arguments but at least two issues need to be raised. First, efforts to define lists of universal core values are plagued by empirical counter-claims or charges that they avoid empirical scrutiny only through overly high abstractness and inclusion of concepts that have competing, if not conflictive meanings for different actors. For example, the prohibition to kill comes close to being a universal but numerous controversial exceptions such as related to war, self-defense, capital punishment, honor, unborn fetuses, animals, and suicide show that its exact meaning unfolds only in specific contexts. Bell (2009) points to the complex contextuality of all 'ought' claims. Loyalty-related values such as patriotism can probably be found universally as they are important for group cohesion but they exclude others

and have thus opposed meanings. Such contradictions are not merely contradictions in appearance but result from social constructions vis-a-vis opposed 'others.' Second, it is not clear whether Lee's method can motivate anyone outside a shared episteme. The rationalistic assumptions of this approach led scholars such as Reimon Bachika (2011) to search for common values beneath layers of symbolism. In a similar vein, the theologian Hans Küng (1999) has proposed the project of a global ethic through ecumenical dialogue. Yet, the same questions appear again, i.e. whether common values can be definitely identified and whether anyone not attuned to ecumenist assumptions would have motivation to subscribe to the project. In yet more stark terms, José Casanova (2011) argued that the cosmopolitan project of a common future based on modern western values is theoretically and empirically mistaken in its assumptions about universal patterns of development and secularization, and misguided by implicit western expansionism. Casanova warns that hegemonic demands to emulate western patterns, such as pressing Islam to become a 'private' religion, might produce only more violent responses. Whether Shmuel Eisenstadt's (2002) increasingly popular notion of 'multiple modernities' can provide a way out of this dilemma, or whether it is necessary to move beyond the entire modernity discourse, is to be debated. An open vision of global democracy needs to recognize cultural diversity and keep the procedures for dialogue flexible.

Wolfgang Welsch's (1996) philosophical work on 'transversal reason' can supply here a useful conceptual tool precisely because it centers reason on relating and communicating while it stays clear of essentializations. A transversal notion of reason requires ongoing dialogue; values are not reified but discussed in specific situations and relations. The notion of dialogue can help to avoid value dogmatism. Value preferences and future visions cannot just be assumed but must be worked out in public dialogues.

Creating publics

The question remains, where are the spaces for publics to conduct grassroots dialogues not only at local or national but also at transnational and global levels (cf. Calhoun, 1992; Cohen and Arato, 1992; Dewey, 1927; Emirbayer and Sheller, 1999; Habermas, 1992 [1962] on the notion of the public sphere)? While much hope for global peace and harmony had been projected on railways, radio, and television when these were still new inventions, the emerging media technologies related to the Internet have given rise to a revival of these hopes. The new media technologies are not only accelerating the globalization of markets and production but they provide also new venues for global debate. Marshall McLuhan's (1964) notion of a 'global village,' originally coined in the context of the earlier electronic mass media, experienced a renaissance. Scholarly articles and books announced the rise of a 'global civil society' and celebrated the Internet as a means for global reconciliation. Yet, these high hopes for globally equitable dialogue are already being displaced by mounting skepticism and increasingly dystopian fears vis-a-vis intensifying commercialization, unequal access, the hollowing of cultural commons, and new surveillance mechanisms.

Although a substantial part of current futures research is directed toward the new media, their technological development is often framed as a progress moved forward by experts without much room for value choices or political debate. The normative intention

of a different approach is to point to the stakes of current developments and to unmask the value choices that are available in the social shaping of the new media technologies before they become entrenched (Schulz, 2001a, 2004, 2011). The creation of what Robert Latham and Saskia Sassen (2005) call the new 'digital formations' does not only entail technological issues narrowly conceived but rather a mixture of technical and legal matters. These are all inherently political. They include questions of how to distribute access and skills, how to protect privacy, and how to prevent 'big brother' governments or corporations from appropriating communicative commons.

The shape of publics is an outcome of more or less contentious struggles and, as such, in constant flux. On the one hand, corporate interests are typically better equipped with resources and have better access to lawmakers and international treaty negotiators. On the other hand, new media users and civil society initiatives can enlarge their leverage through their creative imagination and efforts to make otherwise implicit value decisions part of the political debate.

Futures research about alternative trajectories in the development of the new global mediascapes can indicate the stakes and values choices available. This is an eminently important research task precisely because it is about the preconditions of future global dialogue. A democratic world society can hardly be build without democratic conditions for global communication.

Conclusion

The relation between sociological futures research and public debate is complex, changing over time, and differing between national and substantive contexts. Without pretending to attempt a summary of their relation, some tentative conclusions may be drawn from the preceding explorations to serve as starting points for further discussion. Futures research does not only bring into public debate forward-oriented knowledge, it also intervenes in an agenda-changing way by pointing to alternative futures and to the stakes of competing scenarios. And yet, intervention into existing publics is not enough. There is also a need to work on the constituting of new publics. The notion of the universally open public sphere has its normative force but seen empirically, publics have limits, sometimes visible, often invisible. Among the key assumptions of critically engaged futures research is the rootedness of knowledge, values, and imagination in lived social experience. This is why it is crucial not only to listen to elite actors but also to the grassroots, the marginalized and oppressed, and not only to voices from the Global North but also from the South. It remains a crucial task to create publics in which the aspirations, dreams, and hopes of the otherwise disavowed are no longer excluded.

Sociology's relation to public debate can benefit from a future-oriented perspective that does not shy away from tackling the great challenges of our time. The future is not just happening but it is made, and there are choices. Inquiries into the social shaping of futures can make sociology more relevant. Futures research investigates current trends of possible and probable futures, and, by assessing their social implications, helps to discern preferable futures. Futures research has long abandoned teleological or deterministic assumptions and embraced the notion of historic contingency, an open future, and leverage for human agency. Futures research can provide public debates with important

information about current trends, warn about impending perils, and help to push neglected issues onto the agenda. Futures research does not exist in a social void. Vested economic and political interests shape it through money and power, through funding and administrative decisions. Futures are being sold and re-sold several times over in the hypertrophied derivative markets before publics get a chance to even think about their implications. The commodification of futures produces recurrent financial and economic crises that provoke discontent, but a futureless sociology is too limited to engage publics in debates about alternatives. Like anyone else, futures researchers have a responsibility for whose interests their work serves, whether their questions are framed to serve hegemonic interests or help to unmask the political value choices available for a more democratically inclusive making of the future.

Acknowledgements

This is a revised version of a paper originally prepared for an invited talk at the first ISA Forum of Sociology. Many thanks for encouragement, inspiration and helpful suggestions go to Andrew Arato, Reimon Bachika, Wendell Bell, Michael Burawoy, José Casanova, David Hoffman, Dustin Kidd, Charles Lemert, Daniel Levy, Eleonora Masini, Arturo Morato Rodriguez, Jan Nederveen Pieterse, Charles Perrow, Saskia Sassen, Elisa Reis, Yulia Rozanova, David Wilson, Erik Olin Wright, the anonymous reviewers, and the students of my seminar on Imagining Futures. Any shortcomings are solely mine.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit realm.

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Résumé

Cet article porte sur les rapports complexes qui existent entre une recherche sociologique tournée vers l’avenir et le débat public. Il s’agit d’examiner dans quelle mesure postulats implicites et conceptualisations explicites exercent une influence sur la capacité de la sociologie à aborder l’avenir. Les enjeux ne sont pas seulement théoriques mais aussi pratiques, car les décisions préalables sur le plan méthodologique déterminent la relation de la sociologie avec le débat public ainsi que sa capacité à influencer sur les nouveaux défis de notre temps. Depuis ses débuts, la sociologie a été conçue pour rendre compte au niveau collectif non seulement des circonstances présentes et passées de la vie en société mais aussi des possibilités de changement. Si les enfermements déterministes et expertocratiques ont limité son potentiel, en revanche l’évolution dans une multiplicité de domaines – épistémologique, institutionnel et social – permet aujourd’hui l’expansion et la réémergence d’orientations libres et ouvertes sur l’avenir.

Mots-clés

avenir, histoire de la sociologie, imagination, public, théorie sociologique

Resumen

Este artículo aborda la difícil relación entre una investigación sociológica orientada hacia el futuro y el debate público. En él se explora cómo los supuestos implícitos y las conceptualizaciones explícitas influyen en la capacidad de la sociología para abordar el futuro. Se argumenta que lo que está en juego no es algo meramente teórico, sino también práctico debido a que las decisiones metodológicas previas afectan a la relación de la sociología con el debate público y su capacidad para hacer frente a los desafíos emergentes de nuestro tiempo. La sociología se orientó desde sus inicios hacia la reflexión colectiva, no sólo sobre las condiciones actuales o pasadas de la existencia social, sino también sobre sus posibilidades de cambio. Los cerramientos deterministas y expertocráticos han limitado su potencial, mientras que un cambio en las dimensiones epistemológicas, institucionales y sociales permite la expansión y reemergencia de orientaciones futuras abiertas y discutibles.

Palabras clave

Futuro, historia de la sociología, imaginación, público, teoría sociológica