THE UTILITY OF SOCIOLOGY FOR FUTURISM

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I was a sociologist before I became interested in futurism. At first I did not think that the two fields would have much in common but now I see several links between them.

Before considering the specific utility of sociology, some general comments are in order. For one thing, the propensity for futurism is both a cultural and a psychological one. Its occurrence is not, therefore, independent of the social milieu.

1. Futurism is Related to the Nature of Society:

Futurism, as the antithesis of fatalism, reflects general social conditions and a certain measure of faith, hope, and confidence in life. These conditions are more prevalent in industrial than in pre-industrial societies. For, since the advent of industrialism individuals have ceased to feel as a matter of course that they are on earth simply to carry out a mandate from ancestors long dead—so that these may rest in peace or refrain from harming the living. Nor do they feel that they are on earth only as a stop-over point before going to the world beyond. These attitudes mirror another time and place, one with harsher realities and shorter life-spans, in which the reasons for living lie beyond life.

Increasingly, however, people feel that their lives have a meaning and a point on their own, that life can be enjoyable, and that societies can be improved by human effort. They thus have a
stake in the future they did not have before. More and more, they reap what they sow, and the sowers are the reapers.

Hence I suggest that a society, a culture, or a person will seek to anticipate the future if 1) they are sure they will have one; 2) if the future will be different from the present in ways that can be identified and 3) if intervention is possible—either by preparing one’s self for the anticipated events or by altering their course in a more desirable direction. Since these conditions are characteristic of industrial societies, futurism is linked to certain features of these societies.

Indeed much of present day society hinges on looking ahead and on planning for later—the next day, the next generation, the next century. This is the way my own interest was kindled, as a result of my work in the field of city and town planning. It did not take me very long to realize that planners and builders were constructing cities, highways, and superblocks—that is, structures that would endure—without taking pains to discover whether the needs and habits of the people for whom they were planning would be equally enduring. Thus the most ambitious physical plans often contained a most primitive notion of human nature and social institutions.

Today, especially, the saying that animals repeat but man anticipates, increasingly holds true. Increasingly, also, we must plan not only for innovations within a relatively constant society but for a society in rapid flux. As a result not only must futurists draw on the skills and insights of the social sciences but the social scientists must become more futuristic in their own work.
2. **Who takes to Futurism?**

Futurists come in various stripes. Unfortunately the different types do not mix well. In order to anticipate receptivity to innovation and change, we need to know how these types are generated and where in the social system they are likely to occur. The psychological distinctions that I have found useful on the basis of several years of teaching and lecturing in this field include some that are familiar and some that are new.

One basic distinction is that between the technologists and the humanists, the measurers versus the intuitives. They can barely tolerate each other—illustrating yet another manifestation of the two cultures problem.

Another explosive or incompatible mixture is that between optimists who see the future as brighter and pessimists who see it as worse than the present. This distinction, cutting across the first one, reflects a basic temperamental disposition towards boom or gloom. In some ways it is reminiscent of Mannheim's distinction between ideologists seeking to preserve the status quo at all costs and the utopians ever propelled towards change, with the pessimists closer to the ideologists and the optimists to the utopians.

The biggest surprise to me, however, was that the common sense division between youth as futuristic and non-youth as non-futuristic did not hold up in reality. Youth is no guarantee and age no deterrent of receptivity to alternative perspectives, yet another illustration of the sociological truth that chronology as such is a poor predictor of basic attitudes. Indeed judging from my own course on futurism, it was astonishing how conservative and resistant to
change many of the young actually were. Here they were—18-20 years old, young men in their prime of life, supposedly interested in broadening the mind and examining ideas, with the leisure, but not the responsibility, to explore alternative courses of action. Yet how few dared to anticipate fundamental change. Some could not do so at all while others were hesitant, timid, fearful, and ultimately hostile to the futuristic enterprise.

How often in the past few years have I thought of the phrase, tolerance, or rather intolerance, of ambiguity. For this turned out to be yet another divider between those who accept and those who reject futurism. In our time, futurism means above all to contemplate possibilities for change. This, many people, even very young people, are apparently unable or unwilling to do. Given an upbringing that stresses order, plan, sequence, and inviolate principle, the possibility of a new order and novel alternatives becomes an occasion for fear and trembling. For these individuals, autonomy, freedom, and openness are not invitations to thought experiments but signals of alarm and anxiety.

Hence some personality types and probably some cultures are more likely to want to look ahead and to do so more successfully than others. Among the qualities inhibiting such a venture are insecurity, a need for order, and an intolerance of ambiguity. Qualities facilitating it are open-mindedness, self-confidence, and a tolerance for ambiguity and indeterminacy.

Within futurist ranks there is, of course, a further division between benign and gloomy prophets. The first sees the world move towards the light, the second towards darkness. At this stage each is useful as a counterbalance to any extremist perspective.
3. What Futurists Anticipate:

Before we can specify the utility of Sociology for futurism more precisely, we need to consider what it is that futurists try to anticipate. Though the existing literature does not permit an easy summarization, a few prominent themes seem to recur frequently. These include the following:

1) Anticipation of volumes, distributions, and rates—involving people, activities, wealth, work, consumerism, and lifestyles;

2) The organization of collective life—institutional arrangements in the economy, polity, academy; patterns of religious and familial life; urbanization and leisure;

3) Social movements—or unorganized patterns of collective life—travel, mobility, rebellion, experimentation, and breakdowns of various sorts.

4) Objective and subjective human needs—as registered in expert opinion or in subjective reactions—moving, voting, demanding;

5) Innovations—telecommunications, new communities, computers.

We may note that all of these are areas in which sociologists are also interested though not from a futurist perspective. In a sense, futurism tries to anticipate what sociologists attempt to analyze in the present—the system and its performance and neglects. The two fields also share a desire to ask and frame questions rather than to find specific answers, and a penchant for critical thinking, though this is always easier said than done. And the difference between prophesy and futurism applies to sociology also. Prophets and seers concentrate on conclusions and keep their methods secret. They thrive on mystery and intuition. Futurism and sociology, on
the other hand, pay attention to methods and modes of inference, endeavoring to systematize and demystify the "art of foreseeing the unforeseeable." (De Jouvenel)

One area in which sociologists are ahead of futurists, in my view, concerns their appreciation of the importance of comprehensive patterns at the macroscale. They do not, however, typically emphasize a futurist component. Indeed their predictions, more often than not, are extrapolations from the present. Hence I disagree with Daniel Bell's suggestion that "it is easier to make sociological predictions than any other kind" because they deal with such constants of collective life as distributions of income, education, urban trends, health, and mobility. If this were true then how do we account for the failure of sociologists—or anyone else for that matter—to predict the most significant events of the 60's including the major social revolutions of the decade?

It seems, then, that futurists have the advantage of perspective and a sense of direction in their work but they lack the sociologists' conceptual stock in trade—the notion of system, of patterned interconnections, of collective movements, and of social structure and social disorganization. Thus the two fields have much to give to each other. Unfortunately, their paths cross all too rarely for them to do so effectively.

5. Some major deficiencies of futurist prognoses:

In the following section I will list some of the more common errors committed by futurists which sociology could help prevent.
There are first of all some methodological problems—not simply those usually discussed, involving the problem of turning projection and extrapolation into prediction, but still more fundamental ones. Much of futurism, for example, rests on the assessment of trends in morals and manners without really coming to terms with Ogburn's question, raised some 15 years ago, as to what is a trend. How much time is required to call a movement a trend -- 5, 10, 15 years? (Social Trends, Bobbs Merrill, 212 William F. Ogburn) Some trends can be perceived but not measured and these tend to be ignored in the quantitative projections. Also, it is easy to mistake fluctuations around a trend for the trend itself. Futurists have not paid enough attention to these matters.

Then there is evident too great an emphasis on facts and too little on processes and mechanisms. But we do not really learn from facts. To forecast properly means to link facts to a direction or a course of action. This means fewer assertions and more probing for reasons. Thinkers like Marx or Freud were often wrong on the facts but they changed the course of history by the arguments that informed their conclusions. To assert that in the future there will be more divorces, fewer suicides, more bicycle riders, or more homosexuals is a trivial—that is, an uninteresting statement, unless we buttress it with why these estimates are expected, and what difference they will make.

Another methodological problem concerns sampling: futurists seem to be either ignorant or indifferent to an area sociologists are quite knowledgeable about, namely as to whose opinions to trust as indicators of future developments—psychotics, children, generals, or criminals—and how many must feel or act a certain way so as to be taken seriously for any prognoses.
In general, futurists need better knowledge of social institutions and the organization of collective life. They could further benefit from the methods worked out by sociologists for the study of large-scale patterns and interconnections. Sociologists do not always practice what they preach, and much of their work remains disconnected and piecemeal, but they do make a serious effort to deal with system-interdependence.

This leads directly into one of the more common errors of futurists—namely, their tendency to personify or reify large-scale developments and aggregate phenomena. This tendency ignores certain basic properties of societies as we know them as to the nature of organization, the ways of coordinating people and activities, and the need to impose some system of collective rules and priorities if there is to be some social order. When reading of the projected future as one that will release and fulfill individual potential and aspirations—a noble enough aim—one is at a loss to see which social conditions will make this possible. At this stage of history, societies organize general obligations, mobilize collective states, and subordinate individuality to the collective. Individual creativity apart from societal rules and rewards is still confined to the fortunate or driven few. As a mass phenomenon far more would have to change than the futurists appear to realize.

Where Sociologists Can Help

1. In avoiding the Robinson Crusoe bias—e.g., "man needs" etc.
2. In single-cause or single key anticipations instead of patterned multiplicities.
3. In sociological concepts and information concerned with collectivities and social structures that help us to characterize gross aggregates and their modes of relating to environments.

4. In methods and measures of central tendencies.

5. In methods and measures of atypical, minority, and deviant phenomena.

6. In avoiding projection from the given to eternity—if social scientists tend to speak as if there were an eternal past, futurists do likewise with the future.

7. In creating awareness of ethnocentrism: research has shown how difficult it is for individuals even when trained and intent on being unbiased, to succeed in this. Ethnocentrism marks investigations of preliterate societies, studies of the third world, and discussions of the woman question, among others. Each is seen through the special lens of males, or whites, or certain nationals. There is no reason to suppose that this will not be the case in futurism, unless they make a special effort to prevent this.

8. The ways of change: many changes in art, science, and living habits, are being forecast by futurists. Few, however, pay attention to the phasing or sequence of change or by what steps and mechanisms these will be introduced. Nor do they link these changes to the ways in which social movements are generated. But we already know something about these phenomena. As regards the diffusion of innovations, for example, from a small group of innovators, new values or practices spread to a larger group of imitators and finally, much more gradually, to a large mass of followers. The adoption of new ideas and inventions initially depends on a small number of pioneers and guinea pigs.
This means that any projected change has to be worked through some sequence of plausible adoption and its implications for different parts of the social system. This sequence is missing from a good deal of futurist writing today. Typically we find either the leap to a happening, a novelty or a proposed change as if it is going to occur in one fell swoop or we are treated to a heroic myth of the collectivity acting as if it were a single person. Both avoid the important steps in between, the knotty dialectic between proposal and resistance, reservation and reform.

Change takes time. To take a simple example, it took U.S. public schools fifty years to adopt the idea of the kindergarten (Rogers and Shoemaker, p. 16). And many inventions have been around long before their adoption—a mysterious process with many unknowns. In this connection it may be useful to know that early adopters of an innovation are likely to have better education, higher social status, more experience with upward social mobility, and a special type of personality in being more open to experimentation and change.

The adoption of new ideas and practices by a population is known as diffusion. And here we also know a few things from past social research. There is class diffusion, usually but not always from the top down; generational diffusion, from old to young and recently from young to old; there is diffusion via direct instruction; and there is diffusion from leaders to followers, and from experts to laymen.

Innovators are special kinds of people and we will need a great many in the decades ahead. Hence their social origins, personal incentives and interpersonal networks are not without interest to futurists.
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There are many other points of possible connection between sociology and futurism; these too should be explored but for now the main point has, I think, been established.

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention to a major omission in most futurist work—namely, the social and cultural leadership, or elites in the future. Such elites are either assumed or ignored. And yet their nature and recruitment would seem to be instrumental for any prospects of change and innovation. No organized society seems as yet to be able to do without such elites, though they are neither as uniform nor as coherent in their outlook as some would have it. The difference between a society that runs down and a society that reorganizes and changes itself is precisely that between widespread and goalless dissatisfaction among the many and organized enterprise and purpose among a leading few. The nature of future elites and their capacity and desire for different kinds of change seems to me to be a question of the first order. The old society will be transformed—rather than destroyed—because some of its elites will become convinced that it must be transformed and assume responsibility for doing so. It takes decades to create societal leadership, -- itself a futurist project, and one which could unite many disciplines. Of all the many urgent tasks ahead, few would seem to me to equal that of bringing forth the poets, scientists, moralists, and politicians, who will create the world in their image. They are, in a very fundamental sense, the fulcrums of social change and the future is thus in their hands.

Thus you see that there are many possible links between two important fields of inquiry and concern. If I have stressed the utility of sociology for futurism, it is not because I see their interplay as a one-way street. On the contrary, futurism has a lot to offer sociology—a topic I would hope to explore at another time.