Is the future a political economy? Functional analysis of three leading foresight and futures studies journals

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ABSTRACT

This article tests whether the field of foresight and futures studies shows significant variable selection biases in the modelling of the future in general and the impact of function systems in particular. We performed a word frequency analysis to measure the relative importance of the political system, the economy, science, art, religion, law, sport, health, education, and the mass media to three pertinent journals in the field of futures studies and foresight. The results show that *Futures*, *Long Range Planning*, and *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* have different and changing preferences for the above function systems, an information which authors may find helpful in supporting decisions on where to submit. Our results also show that all journals feature a highly significant bias to the triple helix systems – the political system, the economy, and science. While the latter bias may be adequate to scientific journals, the dominant focus on the political system and the economy as well as the corresponding neglect of the other systems points at implicit presumptions about the importance of the individual systems that may not be in line with their importance to the larger society.

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1. Introduction. The key variables of foresight and futures studies

Research in futures is often advised to start with the identification of key variables likely to influence these futures. Anxious "to find the factors and trends that are really important" (Godet & Roubelat, 1996, p. 164), foresight and futures studies has therefore been most concerned with economic, political, technological, and ecological developments (Bretschneider & Gorr, 1992). This focus has early been criticized, for example, as being ethnocentric (Goonatilake, 1992; Sardar, 1993, 2010). Claims for a more systematic consideration of social or socio-cultural factors have not been unheard of (Bell, 2011; Rubin & Kaivo-oja, 1999; Sardar, 2010), and "socio-cultural developments" (van Notten, Jan, van Asselt , & Rothman, 2003) or "social variables" (Soyer & Hogarth, 2012) are meanwhile included in a certain number of foresight and futures studies. Yet, the focus on the traditional key variables and factors remains strong (Sardar, 2010; Slaughter, 2008a, 2008b), while the question of how key variables are actually identified and weighted has still not received much scientific

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[1] There are also considerable risks that political agendas are biased because of this third-order risk. In many foresight studies a key research idea is to construct future-oriented political decision-making agendas (Rikkonen et al., 2006, van Asselt et al., 2010).

attention. Many accurate forecasts therefore might remain contingent on preconceived sets of variables, thus running the third-order risk of giving the right answers to the wrong questions (Godet, 1986).[1]

The right question may wish to ask is therefore how contemporary foresight and futures research critical variables are actually selected. This question is critical not only for theorizing in foresight and futures research (Kaivo-oja, 2015; Keenan, Loveridge, Miles, & Kaivo-oja, 2003; Öner, 2010; Piirainen & Gonzalez, 2015; Son, 2015), but also because all tools applied in the field involve a concentration on certain factors and the neglect of others; and it appears even more critical when we assume that processes of the identification of key factors and trends might follow trends themselves. Notably such fashionable biases in the selection of supposed key factors would hence considerably jeopardize the accurateness, scope, and impact of research in foresight and futures studies.

The aim of the present article is to test the assumption that the field of foresight and futures research features significant observational and variable selections biases when it comes to the analysis and modelling of "soft systems such as national and local government, politics, international relations, demographics, economics, justice, crime, sociology, culture, media and religion" (Samet, 2011, p. 835). To this end, we first draw on theories of social differentiation so as to unfold a map of differences that make a difference (Bateson, 1972) in social sciences. Against the background of this map, we will then show that modern societies are distinguished by the distinction of autonomous function systems such as the political system, the economy, science, art, religion, law, sport, health, education, and the mass media system.[2] In a next step, we will analyze the extend to which three prominent journals in the field, *Futures*, *Long Range Planning*, and *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, have actually been referring to these function systems from their first issue on to March 2015. As the results display significantly skewed distributions of the attention devoted to the different function systems, which also deviate from word frequency distributions as found in a reference corpus, we finally suggest that, in the future, foresight and futures research be more concerned with its key factors and key variables selection strategies.

2. Social differentiation. Toward a map of function systems

This research is motivated by the impression that the future in forecast and futures research is most often about political and economic factors. This, still supposed, political-economic bias took us by surprise because we tended to conceive of futures and futures studies also as spaces for the exploration of alternatives and not only as mere extrapolations of perceived status quos. That said, this text is not simply a call for more factors and variables to be taken into account in future foresight and futures research. Rather, we understand that "because the possibilities in any given situation are far too numerous to do exhaustive searching, futures researchers generally apply various 'rules of thumb' to do the initial narrowing" (Amara, 1991, p. 646). We hence agree with the idea that highly instructive models even of the entire world can be built using only a very small number of variables. Our only concern is that, in the overall majority of the cases, the world is naturally reduced to a very small set of *economic* and *political* variables, just as if there was nothing more natural than claiming that our future depends more on political and economic than on religious or sportive categories. In fact, the idea of a world model focused mainly on artistic factors appears amusing rather than informative. And this contrast between economic and artistic world models is exactly where the surprise and the questions come in: Why do our bellies tell us that artistic or sportive facts are not hard enough to enter or even dominate world models? What actually make us buy the idea that economic policies are more important to our future than religious education? Why is it that we single out economic and political variables and leave the rest in the *social* or *culture* container,[3] thus also implying that economies or politics are neither social phenomena nor forms of culture themselves?

It is against the background of these questions that we suggest engaging in an interaction of foresight and futures studies on the one hand and social differentiation theory on the other, which is even more crucial as the, probably justified, prominence of the economic and the political system can be observed only against the background of a rather recent form of social differentiation.

Maps are models. Our basic model of social differentiation therefore starts from a blank sheet of paper that might make a good map sheet. We find that the concept of an unmarked space (Luhmann, 1993, 1995a; Spencer Brown, 1979) is close to this ideal of a blank sheet on which the distinctions drawn appear as differences that make a difference (Bateson, 1972). This sheet of paper becomes a map (and not a cartoon) only after the first lines have been drawn. It is thus the distinctions drawn that make the map in which they exist.

In mapping social differentiation, the first distinction we need to draw is the distinction of similar and dissimilar social systems.[4] In a second step, we add the distinction of equal and unequal systems. The cross tabling of these two distinctions already provides systematic insights into the core concepts of fundamental works on social differentiation (Durkheim, 1933; Marx, 1867; Spencer, 1895; Tönnies, 1887). In fact, all canonical trend statements on the shifts from mechanic to organic solidarity, from association to organization, from homogeneity to heterogeneity, from natural states to forms of alienation, or from community to society, base on arguments that follow or cross the lines between dissimilarity and similarity. Dissent

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[2] See Roth and Schütz (2015) for a detailed derivation of the above list of ten function systems.

[3] This is the case whenever foresight is classically defined as "the process involved in systematically attempting to look into the longer-term future of science, technology, the economy *and society*" (Martin, 1995, p. 140; emphasis added)

[4] In this context, social systems are sufficiently well defined as position markers of social realities (Luhmann, 1995b, p. 12).