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## Trajectories

## Anticipation: What about turning the human and social sciences upside down?



Roberto Poli\*

Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento, 26, Verdi Street, 38122 Trento, Italy

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Available online 18 October 2014

## Keywords:

Anticipation  
Human and social sciences  
Futures studies

## ABSTRACT

Human and social scientists are asking themselves whether they should turn their sciences upside down and reshape them from primarily past-oriented sciences to primarily future-oriented ones. This essay presents the recent contributions Seligman et al. (2013), Beckert (2013b), Appadurai (2013) and (Wright, 2010).

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Human and social scientists are asking themselves whether they should turn their sciences upside down and reshape them from primarily past-oriented sciences to primarily future-oriented ones. To mention but a few *recent* developments, Seligman, Railton, Baumeister, and Sripada (2013), Beckert (2013b), Appadurai (2013) and Wright (2010) deserve especial mention.<sup>1</sup>

Past President of the American Psychological Association, Seligman's recently proposed "incipient science of prospection" aims at changing psychology by overturning the entire discipline from a primarily past-oriented field to a primarily future-oriented one. Seligman's paper has the nature of a paradigm shift, and it will likely provoke heated discussion. While prospection is a ubiquitous feature of the human mind, much psychological theory and practice has understood human action as determined by the past. According to mainstream psychology, anticipation is "a violation of natural law because the future cannot act on the present" (Seligman et al., 2013). However, "prospection involves no backward causation; rather, it is guidance not by the future itself but by present, evaluative representations of possible future states" (Seligman et al., 2013). While "viewing behavior as driven by the past was a powerful framework that helped create scientific psychology, ... accumulating evidence in a wide range of areas of research suggests a shift in framework, in which navigation into the future is seen as a core organising principle of animal and human behavior" (Seligman et al., 2013). If the future indeed becomes a core organising principle of the mind, the past will have to recede from being a force driving needs and goals to a resource from which agents "selectively extract information about the prospects they face. These prospects can include not only possibilities that have occurred before but also possibilities that have never occurred" (Seligman et al., 2013, p. 119). Moreover, "the success or failure of an act in living up to its prospect will lead not simply to satisfaction or frustration but to maintaining or revising the evaluative representation that will guide the next act" (Seligman et al., 2013, p. 120).

\* Tel.: +39 0461281403.

E-mail address: [roberto.poli@unitn.it](mailto:roberto.poli@unitn.it)

<sup>1</sup> Apart from contributions from the human and social sciences, it is worth noting that physicists have recently raised the question of why the representation of time as a parameter codified by real numbers is such a poor representation of time – and they are considering whether it could be advisable to add a structural component corresponding to what psychologists call the "now" (i.e. "moment now" or "specious present") (Editor, 2014; Mermin, 2014, pp. 221–222).

By shifting the focus from the past to the future, the entire conceptual framework of psychology has to change, since “at any given moment, an organism’s ability to improve its chances for survival and reproduction lies in the future, not the past ... learning and memory, too, should be designed for action. These capacities actively orient the organism toward what might lie ahead and what information is most vital for estimating this” (Seligman et al., 2013, p. 120). Moreover, the focus on expectations helps in reconsidering the role of past experience, which ceases to be seen as a force directly molding behavior and becomes information about possible futures. “Choice now makes sense ... stretching well beyond actual experience and enabling them [the rats in the paper’s exemplification, but I see no obstruction toward understanding the claim generically] to improvise opportunistically on the spot” (Seligman et al., 2013, p. 124). There is more than opportunistic improvisation, however, namely the “active, selective *seeking* of information (‘exploration’)” (Seligman et al., 2013, p. 124). Furthermore, there is no need to see expectations as limited to conscious processes alone. Indeed, “generating simulations of the future can be conscious, but it is typically an implicit process ... often not accessible to introspection, and apparently occurring spontaneously and continuously” (Seligman et al., 2013, p. 126).

Jens Beckert, Director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, suggests including fictions in the architecture of economics and calls attention to the need to reconsider the way in which economics looks at the future. While economic activities that are pursued or avoided are established by expectations, “under conditions of fundamental uncertainty, expectations cannot be understood as being determined through calculation of optimal choices taking into account all available information, but rather are based on contingent interpretations of the situation in the context of prevailing institutional structures, cultural templates, and social networks” (Beckert, 2013a, p. 325). Here is where Beckert introduces the concept of fictional expectation – referring to “present imaginaries of future situations that provide orientation in decision making *despite* the incalculability of outcomes” (Beckert, 2013a, p. 325). This means that fictional expectations are more imaginations about the future than forecasts. As Beckert explicitly declares, “the notion of fictional expectations is directed against the concept of ‘rational expectations’ constituting the micro-foundation of much of modern macro-economics” (Beckert, 2013a, p. 325; 2013b, p. 221). The reason is clear: according to rational expectations theory aggregate predictions are correct because individual errors are random. Therefore predicted outcomes do not diverge systematically from the resulting market equilibrium. As a consequence, the uncertainty of the future becomes a predictable forecast, paving the way for the rational calculation of optimal choices. On the other hand, the true openness of the future makes it impossible to explain decisions as calculations of optimal choice (Beckert, 2013b, p. 221). Better to clarify his concept of fictional expectation, Beckert openly claims that “it is the future that shapes the present – or, to be more specific: it is the images of the future that shape present decisions” (Beckert, 2013b, p. 221). The fact is that actors must develop expectations “among other things, with regard to technological development, consumer preferences, prices, availability of raw materials, the strategies of competitors, the demand of labor, the trustworthiness of promises, the state of the natural environment, political regulations, and the interdependencies among these factors”, despite the true unknowability of the future (Beckert, 2013b, pp. 221–222). Expectations then are real fictions – it is not possible to see them in terms of the opposition between truth and falsehood; eventually, the proper opposition will be based on the difference between convincing as opposed to unconvincing expectations.

Arjun Appadurai, one of the most distinguished contemporary anthropologists, proposes reshaping anthropology and beginning to ask how societies – past and recent – construe the future as a cultural fact (Appadurai, 2013). After acknowledging that “the intellectual infrastructure of anthropology ... remains substantially shaped by the lens of pastness”, Appadurai notes that “the subjects of anthropology have increasingly been those of the present and of the world we live in: ethnographies of science, technology, state, law, markets, and finance” (Appadurai, 2013, p. 285). In order to develop “a general point of view about humans as future-makers and of futures as cultural facts” – continues Appadurai – “we need to construct an understanding of the future by examining the interactions between three notable human preoccupations that shape the future as a cultural fact, (namely) ... imagination, anticipation and aspiration”, even if “we have not yet found ways to articulate how anticipation, imagination, and aspiration come together in the work of future-making” (Appadurai, 2013, p. 298).

Moreover, however extraordinarily successful the bourgeoisie has been, the institutions that it has invented are only two centuries old. Are we sure there are no other institutional frameworks and configurations of social relationships able further to advance democracy, freedom and respect for individual and social rights? The Real Utopias project carried forward by Erik O. Wright, past President of the American Sociological Association, addresses these questions (Wright, 2010, p. 4). Indeed, one cannot rule out that at least some of the problems being faced and in the pipeline are directly or indirectly connected to the form that political institutions have historically taken in the West. To imagine new institutional frameworks may be of assistance in dealing with some of these issues. Clearly, it would not be sufficient simply to carry out purely abstract thought experiments on institutional changes. As social scientists we can and must also assess whether the newly-proposed frameworks would be desirable (for instance in the sense of mitigating the adverse consequences in question), viable (i.e. capable of withstanding the test of time), and achievable (Wright, 2010, pp. 13–14). A framework that induced unbearable unintended negative effects, that proved unsustainable in the long run, or that could not be set up in practice would not constitute an acceptable outcome. Identifying the ways in which existing social institutions and social structures impose harms on people is a natural starting point. Complementarily, a better understanding of the variety of human flourishing clarifies the capacities that any institutional framework should respect, protect and improve.

Under different denominations, all the above-mentioned scholars recognise the importance of and need for an anticipatory attitude. The summaries above show that different human and social sciences (including psychology, economy,

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