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Sociology

The Sociology of Futurelessness

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Abstract

This article contributes to 'sociologies of the future' by discussing the concept of 'futurelessness'. I provide a conceptual elaboration of what is meant by 'futurelessness', beginning with its use in the psychological literature of the 1980s concerned with the effect of a constant threat of nuclear war. I argue that this concept is of value to ongoing sociological debates about the relationship between imagined futures, power and social change. I further discuss the extent to which 'futurelessness' is a particular mode of relating to and feeling about the future that is characteristic of contemporary European societies. I discuss how this 'futurelessness' must be understood in relation to political and cultural developments of the past 50 years and consider its significance for sociological debates about contemporary futurity.

Introduction

European sociology has had a complex relationship to 'the future' over the past two centuries: in the 1800s, some sociologists conceived of the future in terms of progress to a better state of being, while others expressed concern about the dystopian potential of social changes they observed (Connell, 1997; Manuel, 1962). With the founding of the UK's Social Science Research Council in 1965, its leaders established the Next Thirty Years Committee whose work included exploring the potential of social sciences to forecast and to plan for the future (Young, 1968). Despite these developments, Urry (2008) suggests that many social scientists became wary about engaging in predictions about the future, and saw 'visions of the future as ideologically serving the interests of specific social groups [and] utopias of alternative futures as dangerous and mistaken' (Urry, 2008: 261). Adam (2011: 592) argues for sociologists to engage positively with the study

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of futurity 'in a world where socio-scientific products and their effects extend into ever further futures while temporal perspectives and concerns continue to narrow'.

Since the start of the century, there has indeed been a resurgence of sociological interest in the future (Adam and Groves, 2007; Coleman and Tutton, 2017; Urry, 2016). We find that there is now a substantial literature that offers ways of theorising and examining how futures are imagined and felt by diverse groups, and which also expresses a long-standing sociological commitment that things could and should be otherwise. This is reflected by the ISA Forum on Sociology in 2016 that was held under the title 'The futures we want' and which sought to foreground 'forward-oriented sociology', while the 2021 BSA Conference invited participants to engage in 'Remaking the future'. As these titles suggest, while sociology has been engaged with 'looking at the future', as 'an analytical object' (Brown and Michael, 2003: 4), there is also a strong normative dimension to this interest. While not all scholars contributing to this literature would necessarily identify their work in this way, taken together these approaches represent what we might call contemporary 'sociologies of the future'. They offer sociological insights into how futurity is central to social and cultural life, with the contestation of visions of possible and desirable futures a key element of ongoing social struggles.

I contribute to these 'sociologies of the future' by considering claims that, since the start of the century, collective feelings about the future have changed, so that the 'future feels foreclosed, rather than open and expanding' (MacDonald, 2018: 57). Rather than trusting in the future to be a better time, many see it instead as an 'unavoidable catastrophe that we cannot oppose' (Berardi, 2011: 126). Psychologists argue that the zeitgeist of our time is one of 'doom and gloom', 'a powerful shared feeling that society is taking a turn for the worse' (Van der Bles and Van der Linden, 2017). Social movements from Extinction Rebellion to Juventud sin Futuro (Youth without a Future) have invoked the threat of not having a future to galvanise young people especially into urgent and radical action. Surveys indicate that the multiple and intersecting crises of the 21st century have left many feeling anxious and insecure about individual and collective prospects: the future no longer viewed as a hopeful elsewhen but imagined instead in terms of fear and doubt (Prince's Trust, 2020).

Such claims are not exclusive to the present moment by any means. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, philosophers such as Gunther Anders, Hannah Arendt and Lewis Mumford, shared a view that the future was 'lost' (Andersson, 2020: 31). The Holocaust seriously challenged philosophical belief in progress as a force for good. With the development of nuclear weapons and the threat of complete annihilation, Anders (1962) argued that humans were now living in the Time of the End, which could become at any moment the End of Time. Mumford (1947: 375) even speculated on what this would mean for social life, imagining that:

> the belief in continuity, the sense of future that holds promise, disappears: the certainty of sudden obliteration cuts across every long term plan, and every activity is more or less reduced to the time-span of a single day, on the assumption that it may be the last day.

Psychological studies of the 1960s appeared to substantiate many of Mumford's speculations: researchers showed that the constant threat of death and destruction by nuclear

war was eroding young people's 'hopes for a future' (Escalona, 1963; Schwebel, 1982: 610). In the 1980s, psychologists conducted further studies on how young people talked about the threat of nuclear conflict and claimed that they were living with a sense of futurelessness, which described 'either the futility of planning for the future (e.g. it's silly and useless), or the foreclosure of future opportunities (e.g. not getting to do things, not wanting to have a family, and the like)' (Hanley and Christie, 1988: 12). This feeling of futurelessness was accompanied by a sense of powerlessness to effect change, so young people focused on living in and for the present (Zuckerman and Beardslee, 1986). This work suggests that in a very literal sense young people felt that their future lives would not happen or could not be planned for because of the threat of nuclear war.

I consider the relevance of this notion of 'futurelessness' for understanding contemporary affectivities and relationships to the future. I argue that feelings of futurelessness reflect how actors are differently positioned to enact their own desired futures. Focusing therefore on 'futurelessness' serves to bring to the fore the relationship between imagined futures (and who imagines them), power relations and social change. I explore this aspect in the first part of the article, before exploring whether 'futurelessness' is a significant 'affective mode of feeling or orienting around the future' (Coleman, 2018: 38) in contemporary societies. To do so, I draw on the work of social theorists and others who contend that in European and other contexts, there is a prevailing feeling that the future has been and is being foreclosed. They argue that today people no longer believe or trust in that imagined future that originated in European modernity: a future that is 'open for the new and without limit' (Koselleck, 2004: 232), promising endless economic growth, human expansion and improving standards of living. Instead, they see the future as a disaster – not the sudden cataclysmic event of a nuclear attack – but the 'slow disaster' of climate change, mass extinction, ecosystem degradation and societal conflicts over dwindling resources (Knowles, 2020). I discuss how these claims must be understood as a response to political and cultural developments of the past 50 years and consider whether they can be substantiated. I conclude by outlining their significance for sociological debates about contemporary futurity.

Sociologies of the Future and No Future

Sociologists have developed different conceptualisations of the future. One notable contribution was made by Bell and Mau (1971: 11) on 'images of the future', which they argued 'orient social action' in the present by representing 'alternatives or possibilities for the future'. These 'images of the future' were 'expectation[s] about the state of things to come at some future time' (Bell and Mau, 1971: 23) and sociology could analyse who made them, how they circulate in society and how they were implicated in decision making. They imagine society functioning through a 'cybernetic-decisional model' in which beliefs about the past and present inform the kinds of images of the future that are made. These images inform decisions, which then produce actually lived futures and they feed back into the making of new images of the future. Bell and Mau's model represents a commitment to the idea that social change can and should be planned and arguably plays down the unequal nature of contestation and struggle over such 'images of the future'.

They leave largely unexamined questions about power relations and who is better positioned to see their images of the future incorporated into decision-making processes.

Scholars in fields cognate to sociology such as Science and Technology Studies (STS) have built on this work by introducing the idea of performativity to analyse 'expectation[s] about the state of things to come at some future time' (Bell and Mau, 1971: 23). Van Lente (1993), Brown and Michael (2003), among many others, have contributed to a sociology of expectations, understood not only 'as representations of something that does not (yet) exist, they do something: advising, showing direction, creating obligations' (Van Lente, 1993: 191). This work therefore borrows on JL Austin's formulation of performative speech acts as utterances that are 'part of the doing of an action' – expectations once uttered can be shared and taken up by others and play a role in 'defining roles and in building mutually binding obligations and agendas' (Borup et al., 2006: 289).

Therefore, research on expectations demonstrates the role that they play in developing relationships between groups of people, legitimising and mobilising resources around particular visions of the future and potentially excluding others. Although, as Hedgecoe and Martin (2003: 356) observe, actors must be 'won over' and if they cannot be persuaded by the vision then 'that vision will have great difficulty being successfully translated into material and social reality'. This points to the 'politics of expectations' and how diverging expectations may compete for attention and resources, and highlights the significance of 'inequities of power and authority in defining futures' (Borup et al., 2006: 295).

Oomen et al (2022: 253) address this question about the politics of expectations by analysing why and how some imagined futures 'become performative and who has the capacity to render their visions performative'. To develop an understanding of how this is achieved in practice, they introduce the notion of 'futuring' 'that helps to view the future in terms of the imaginative work and practices that negotiate meanings and legitimacy, embed knowledge, engage publics and create relations of trust' (Oomen et al., 2022: 254). They adopt a dramaturgical approach that concerns the development and use of 'storylines' to present the future to various audiences, using techniques such as numerical projections or visualisations, the 'staging' of presented futures that shapes interactions between interested parties and privileges some voices over others, and the organisational or imaginary 'structure' in which futures are performed repeatedly over time. While this approach adds insight into how 'images of the future gain performative traction' in practice (Oomen et al., 2022: 254), there is scope to explore further how some social actors are better positioned than others in terms of political access or material or cultural resources necessary to engage in such practices.

Sand (2019) takes up some of these concerns in his work. Engaging with other scholars also interested in technological innovation such as McCray (2012) and Jasanoff (2016), Sand addresses 'inequalities in future making'. Sand (2019: 99) contrasts the significant attention given by media, politicians, and others to 'a small group of highly educated, male, well-off people from the Northern Hemisphere' and their desired visions of the future, with how other groups are not a part of policy debates about new technologies and their intended future uses and benefits. These other groups, he ventures, are those that 'don't have a future', which he explores in different ways.

On the one hand, he says that there are people who 'don't have a future' in the sense that, while they may have 'individual desires', they do not have a 'comprehensive vision of the future' (Sand, 2019: 103) comparable to those advanced by the likes of Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos. Consequently, Jasanoff (2016) argues that such actors are not well positioned to anticipate the future benefits and implications of technological innovation. She argues that they must therefore 'accept the promise of benevolent outsiders that their lives will be bettered through inventions designed elsewhere, by entrepreneurs closer to technology's moving frontiers' (Jasanoff, 2016: 255). In effect, they depend on others 'having a future' and must trust in them to secure their prospects. Further, Sand suggests that people may have a preferred future but it is not one that they can make heard (cf. Brown and Rappert, 2000). Lacking the social standing, resources and access required, they are unable to 'render their visions performative' (Oomen et al., 2022: 253). In this sense then, they 'don't have a future' that is included in debates and decisions about technological innovation.

Appadurai (2013) addresses similar issues when he argues that whether social groups are powerful enough to 'shape the future' is related to their position in society. In addition to material deprivation, the experience of precarity and loss of dignity, one further aspect to the experience of living in poverty is the incapacity to 'exercise voice, to debate, contest and oppose directions for collective social life' (Appadurai, 2013: 186). In contrast, Appadurai (2013: 188) contends that wealthier groups, who occupy more powerful positions with greater material and cultural resources, have more of a capacity 'to explore the future more frequently and more realistically, and to share this knowledge with one another more routinely then their poorer and weaker neighbours'. However, for the impoverished, 'the future presents itself as a luxury, a nightmare, a doubt, or a shrinking possibility' (Appadurai, 2013: 299). This account emphasises how one feels about the future and has opportunities to imagine and publicly share possible collective futures with others is related to one's position within existing social structures.

Sand (2019: 100) also reflects on the tensions between people who are facing poverty and economic insecurity and the visions of elite groups that direct attention away from their urgently felt concerns and whose 'advocacy [of that vision] indicates a value judgement suggesting that other problems such as unemployment can either be resolved by realisation of the vision [. . .] or simply as unimportant'. Therefore, some people may be left feeling their futures are being foreclosed while others in more privileged and secure positions are able to marshal resources for the futures they deem important and desirable. Such tensions are evident today between policy commitments to reduce carbon emissions and transition economic systems away from the use of fossil fuels, and the needs of impoverished local communities seeking economic security (Willis, 2021).

Lastly, Sand (2019: 102) also considers how those who have 'lost hope' can also be considered as 'not having a future' as they lack the 'firm conviction that their present desires will ever be fulfilled in the future'. Sociologists such as Mische (2009: 694) have identified the importance of hope as it provides the 'emotional substratum' of efforts to transform either everyday individual lives or social structures. As Anderson (2006: 734) observes, 'hope enacts the future as open to difference'; it has the capacity to 'open up a world beyond the given, beyond who "we" are' (Colebrook, 2010: 324). If this is so, then the lack of hope – whether this is felt in terms of individual or collective prospects – is

significant as it leaves desired futures appearing foreclosed. I should also acknowledge how Edelman (2004: 3), writing from a Queer theory perspective, addresses that 'not having a future' could also be a conscious political act that refuses 'the paramount value of futurity', and rejects 'reproductive futurism'. While an important and provocative argument, space does not permit me to explore this further in the current article.

Conceptualising Futurelessness

Informed by this literature, I propose to understand 'futurelessness' as describing a particular affective relationship to the future. When social actors say that they feel a sense of futurelessness it is because they see that the futures they value or desire are being foreclosed, which can leave them with the sense that they 'don't have a future'. Such feelings might be temporary or more enduring. Through this concept of futurelessness, sociology can combine focusing analytical efforts on those who can make, perform and stage futures, with investigating those who are less well positioned to do so and who experience a foreclosing of their imagined futures. In this way, 'futurelessness' provides one way to engage with Urry's (2016: 189) observation that 'power should be viewed as significantly a matter of uneven future-making'.

This observation invites us to take Foucault's lead to see how 'power is the ability to create social change' (Heller, 1996: 87), and that the 'exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome' (Foucault in Heller, 1996: 83). As I related above, sociologists have shown how certain groups exercise power through their ability to stage and engage publics with their preferred futures, 'winning over' others and influencing them to act in ways that aim to bring about these imagined futures (Hedgecoe and Martin, 2003). For Foucault, we are all in a system of power relations but some are in better strategic positions than others as a result of privilege, economic wealth or cultural and linguistic differences. As we have seen, some are better positioned to 'debate, contest and oppose directions for collective social life' (Appadurai, 2013: 186), while others are less able to do so. Mische (2009: 700) argues that it should be a task for sociology to investigate whether individuals feel powerful enough to shape the future, and whether they view the future as 'expanding or contracting' (Mische, 2009: 700).

Further, Foucault observed that some groups have 'the ability to exercise less power than their rivals' and their 'lesser form of power' (Heller, 1996: 99) he called resistance. Such groups would include those already mentioned in this article: children or those in economic hardship as among those who are often less able to create social change. They often find themselves living with the consequences of how more powerful groups have initiated social change, including, significantly, the unintended effects of that change. A case in point today is that of climate change. Evidence suggests that, as with the threat of nuclear war 40 years ago, young people are left feeling hopeless, fearful and anxious (Marks et al., 2020). However, feeling that one's future is being foreclosed by the actions of others can also produce other responses such as anger. Leading figures in the youth climate activism movement explicitly invoke the idea of 'not having a future' to call out the (in)actions of adult generations. By doing so, these young people are calling on more powerful others to recognise the consequences of the changes that they have set in train,

calling on them to pursue alternative futures. Greta Thunberg's speeches are examples of how actors can not only seek to make performative imagined futures they desire to real-ise, but also imagined 'no futures'. Of course, by bringing these into being the purpose is to mobilise resources and allies to challenge existing positions and policies and so to avoid their realisation.

The concept of 'futurelessness' therefore provides a way to recognise and analyse 'uneven future-making' (Urry, 2016: 189) in contemporary societies and to appreciate that there are groups who are not well positioned to 'render their visions performative' (Oomen et al., 2022: 253). Instead, they live with the feeling that their futures are being foreclosed, which might produce affective responses such as anxiety but can also form part of how less powerful groups frame their contentious politics. As such, futurelessness emphasises how relationships to the future are not only cognitive or rational but also involve non-conscious affective responses as well as feelings, which individuals tend to be aware of and reflect upon (see Ducey, 2007: 190–191 for a discussion of such differ-ences). Coleman (2018: 38) argues that there are 'different affective modes or regimes of feeling' that define how 'contemporary western societies are organized and experienced'. While her work focuses on anticipation and pre-emption, my aim is to examine whether futurelessness is also a significant 'regime of feeling' when it comes to understanding contemporary futurity in European societies. To do so, I engage with theorists who argue that there has been a change in prevailing feelings about the future in the past four decades.

Futurelessness: From Modernity to Neoliberalism

There has been a notable thread of social science writing about the 'end of the future, as we know it' (Battistoni, 2013) during the past decade. The theorists contributing to this work are giving renewed voice to a series of concerns that writers over the last 40 years or more have expressed about how political and cultural conceptions of the future with their roots in European modernity have waned (Leccardi, 1999; Lowenthal, 1992; Pomian, 1980). I begin with considering the work of Franco Berardi (2011, 2017). When Berardi (2011: 18) states that the 'future is over', he is referring precisely to one imaginary of the future that has its origins in European modernity. This was an 'open' future shaped by human agency, not predetermined by deities or cosmic forces, one without limits, which replaced the 'tra-ditional future [. . .] that was depressingly foreclosed' (Lowenthal, 1992: 24). Now the future was conceived not as simply more of what had gone before but as characterised by 'innovation, invention, discovery [. . .] the new, the never seen before' (Pomian, 1981 in Leccardi, 1999: 6). The future therefore became about 'constant renewal' and a sense of acceleration (Koselleck, 2004: 269) in a direction of constant improvement, known as 'progress'.

As Bury (1920: vii, 2) argues, by the early 20th century, progress had become the 'animating and controlling idea of western civilization', an overarching belief that 'civi-lization has moved, or is moving, and will move in a desirable direction'. Progress there-fore represented a historical process, consisting of 'irreversible changes in one direction only, and that this direction is towards improvement' (Pollard, 1968: v). However, there are different registers to narratives of progress: some were cast in terms of the growth in

knowledge or the 'moral and spiritual condition of humanity', or what is expected of the future in terms of the goal of 'ever-greater perfection of human nature' (Nisbet, 2009: 5). Others understand progress with reference to technological change, evidenced for example by continuous improvements to computing power. However, by the 1970s, writers on both the right and left appear to have lost their belief in progress in the wake of multiple political and economic crises, projections of 'limits to growth', and increasing knowledge of the long-term adverse effects of technological and industrial systems (Booker, 1980). As Nowotny (2005: 49) puts it: 'progress itself [. . .] aged'.

With this 'ageing of progress', Berardi (2011) : 18 argues that we witnessed the 'slow cancellation of the future' during the 1970s in European cultures, with collective imaginings of the future taking a dystopian turn. This 'cancellation of the future' was evident in accounts that scholars gave of the cultural shift from modernism to postmodernism, itself the product of the transition to 'late' or neoliberal capitalism during the crises of the 1970s. Fredric Jameson (1984: 85) observed that, instead of looking towards possible futures, postmodernism

> effectively abolishes any practical sense of the future and of the collective project, thereby abandoning the thinking of future change to fantasies of sheer catastrophe and inexplicable cataclysm – from visions of 'terrorism' on the social level to those of cancer on the personal.

This was the corollary of postmodernism's 'incredulity towards metanarratives', as Lyotard (1979 : 27) famously declared; the foremost of which was that of progress. The consequence of postmodernism, then, was that 'the future presents itself as foreclosed', as it becomes 'difficult to imagine and believe in the transition to an imagined better future' (Levitas, 1993: 258). For Levitas, this signals the retreat of the utopian imagination from animating collective action around desired social change to becoming forms of critique or escapism. In the place of utopian thinking, we find pervasive currents of anti-utopian or dystopian imagined futures in which catastrophe takes centre stage.

Habermas (1986 : 2), who distanced himself from what he calls the 'postmodern moment', nonetheless argues that there was a change in the *zeitgeist* of the 1980s – that the 'spirit of the age' had become dystopian: he conjectures 'it seems as if utopian energies have been used up and are exhausted'. Now, the future was viewed in wholly negative terms. In support, he lists the arms race, technological failures, ecological problems and structural impoverishments as occupying that negative space of the future. He suspects that this state was not a temporary one but 'reaches much deeper' (Habermas, 1986: 3) and could be traced to how, under sustained assault by neoliberal political forces, organised labour had lost its power, and 'the programme of the social welfare state, which still feeds on the utopian image of a labouring society, is losing its capacity to project future possibilities for a collectively better and less endangered way of life'.

The 'exhaustion of utopian energies' was not confined only to western societies either. Traverso (2017: 5) argues that the dramatic collapse of state socialism at the end of the 1980s also contributed to what he calls the 'eclipse of utopias', with the Velvet Revolutions of 1989 not 'projecting themselves into the futures', but instead becoming preoccupied with looking back and restoring the past before socialism. From this,

Traverso (2017: 7) concludes that 'utopia seems a category of the past – the future imagined in a bygone time'.

After these events, today adherents of neoliberalism from a position of global hegemony, have been able to declare that no other society is possible. Imagined futures that offer an alternative to neoliberalism struggle to be performative, to 'win over' others because, as Fisher (2009: 8) suggests, 'capitalism occupies the horizons of the thinkable'. This is a crucial point for Fisher (2009) whose work on capitalist realism contends with the weary resignation that the prospect of a different kind of society in the future has disappeared (Levitas, 1993). Fisher (2009: 17) observes that we live with 'a far more pervasive sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility. In the 80s, "Really Existing Socialism" still persisted, albeit in its final phase of collapse.' He contends that 'for most people under twenty in Europe and North America, the lack of alternatives to capitalism is no longer even an issue. Capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable' (Fisher, 2009: 8). Wright (2010: 1) observes that once both 'critics and defenders of capitalism believed that "another world was possible", that there was a distinctive alternative way to organize economic and social life'. Today, he asserts, 'most people in the world, especially in its economically developed regions, no longer believe in this possibility. Capitalism seems to them part of the natural order of things' (Wright, 2010: 1).

For the political left, this sense of loss of once imagined futures forms part of what Traverso (2017) calls 'left wing melancholia'. For example, Berardi (2011, 2017) reflects on how the foreclosing of alternative futures produces a prevailing mood of impotence, hopelessness and depression among those who wish for things to be otherwise. Even when discussing recent movements that have emerged to oppose neoliberalism, such as the World Social Forum (WSF), Horvat (2019: 29–30) seems pessimistic that they will ever realise their promise that 'another world is possible'. He concludes that there is no global movement that seriously rivals the prevailing neoliberal order. Battistoni (2013) also draws attention to the deficiencies of the Occupy Movement, suggesting that it ultimately lacked a vision of an alternative achievable future. Berardi (2011: 158) reaches the conclusion that there is no prospect of 'emancipatory forms in the foreseeable future'. Given the feeling of impotence at how to change things for the better, the future 'no longer appears as a choice or a collective conscious action, but is a kind of unavoidable catastrophe that we cannot oppose in any way' (Berardi, 2011: 126).

Horvat (2019) contends that it is not only those on the left who experience this: he claims that the feeling that there is no future, once the prevailing feeling and reality of the global poor, is now also 'the anxious dinner-table talk of a middle class that is losing ground across the globe' (Horvat, 2019: 49). It has even extended to the global rich who are investing in ever more elaborate means of escape from this 'unavoidable catastrophe' (Berardi, 2011: 126; see also Tutton, 2020). For Horvat, this feeling is an increasingly pervasive condition experienced by the rich and the poor, by people living in the Global North and the Global South, despite their very different economic and social circumstances. The catastrophe they fear is not that of nuclear war necessarily but the 'slow disasters' of climate change, ecosystem degradation and environmental pollution (Knowles, 2020). Therefore, there is more at stake here than simply the fate of the left.

With the global hegemony of neoliberalism and the apparent exhaustion of utopian imaginaries of the future, the prospect of alternative societies fades and the future feels foreclosed. It appears as an 'unavoidable catastrophe' unless there is a radical change away from the extractive and excessive consumption economies so characteristic of contemporary capitalism. Horvat (2019) posits neoliberalism as an obstacle to preventing an existential threat to 'our civilisation'. Underpinning some of this work is a concern with civilisational threats and a sense that, although writing primarily from a European perspective, the effects of neoliberalism are global in nature and feelings that there is 'no future' are not confined only to citizens of Europe. Horvat for one is committed to building a global movement, not one limited to a single continent.

In these accounts, I read the emergence of a 'regime of feeling' of 'futurelessness' as a response to the political struggles between neoliberalism and social democracy, and the cultural changes associated with postmodernism in the 1970s and 1980s. Put simply, some left-wing intellectuals and activists feel that that the futures they value and desire have been and are being foreclosed and so feel that they 'don't have a future' any more. While such futures might be imaginable, they no longer trust in them to be achievable (Levitas, 1993). Instead, faced with the future as catastrophe – due in the main to climate change – and an inability of citizens to mobilise to seriously challenge existing power structures, societies exist in what Traverso (2017: 8) calls 'a suspended time between an unmasterable past and a denied future', or what Nowotny (2005: 52) describes as the 'extended present'.

Despite these diagnoses of the present, it is also the case that the technological utopianism of capitalism remains largely undimmed. The denizens of Silicon Valley for example, have not given up on progress and consider that their endeavours in artificial intelligence, anti-ageing medicine, self-driving cars or human spaceflight will produce social goods (Klaffle, 2015). There are some on the left who also see great potential in harnessing technologies to transform society for the better (Srnicek and Williams, 2015). The future tense is very much a part of everyday cultural expression, with the language of innovation, breakthroughs or revolution a constant feature of how technological developments are presented to consumers. Although, it is worth observing that from both the left and right there is some disappointment with the futures that technologies have delivered. The libertarian entrepreneur Peter Thiel once declaimed: 'We wanted flying cars, instead we got 140 characters' (Weisfield, 2013; cf. Graeber, 2015).

In assessing the insights of the literature above, it is imperative to keep in mind who feels that their valued and desired futures are being foreclosed and whose experiences they claim to represent. Therefore, in the final part, I explore what attending to futurelessness might mean for 'sociologies of the future'. These are preliminary thoughts intended to open a space for further debate with other scholars concerned with 'futurity' working in sociology and cognate fields.

Outlining an Agenda for Studying Futurelessness

Above I engaged with a set of claims made by theorists and political activists about how alternative futures to neoliberalism – the futures they evidently value and desire – have been and continue to be foreclosed. Further, their claims do not merely express the views

of those on the political left, they diagnose these feelings as being widely shared in society.

While informed by their observations of the social worlds in which they live, and readings of cultural developments, they offer little empirical evidence that such feelings are experienced by groups of people in their everyday lives. Indeed, demonstrating that there are feelings or affective responses shared by a group or groups, and how these have changed over time, is fraught with conceptual and methodological difficulties.

To assess evidence to support or challenge claims that one 'regime of feeling' about the future has become more dominant than another, sociologists need to consider insights from different fields of research. For instance, the field of youth studies presents a complex empirical picture of some young people having a secure view of their futures and personal goals, while others navigate emerging opportunities with no clear plan (Bryant and Ellard, 2015). Some young people – most notably those living in poverty – feel that their futures are foreclosed and do not feel powerful enough to shape them as they would like (Carabelli and Lyon, 2016; Mische, 2009). They then find themselves living more for the present and expressing reluctance to imagine and plan for futures that they feel are not likely to be realised (Leccardi, 1999). Given this, there is potential to investigate and better understand the extent to which this affective mode of futurelessness is indeed a feature of individuals' everyday lives, who experiences it and when and with respect to which imagined (no) futures? How well does it correlate with patterns of entrenched social and economic inequalities in societies? How do imagined individual futures compare to those imagined for the societies in which those people live? Such questions could be explored through investigating accounts that diverse groups give of their hopes and anxieties about the future through interviews, focus groups or other 'art-based' forms of research (Carabelli and Lyon, 2016). Beyond young people, such research could also extend to other groups as well, including people in older groups (see https://reimagining-thefutureinolderage.stir.ac.uk/).

Sociologists also need to recognise the cultural and social specificities of affective futurities, including futurelessness. Any claims that this regime of feeling is one experienced across diverse societies should be regarded with caution. While there is a temptation to consider that people everywhere experience the same sense of 'no future', Mitchell and Chaudhury's (2020) critique of 'new catastrophist' (Urry, 2016) writing reminds us that affective futurities are a part of larger cultural and historical formations. Their reading of this literature shows that while the focus is on future catastrophes that could bring about civilisational collapse, for many Black, Indigenous and Peoples of Colour, the catastrophe is not in the future but has already unfolded over the past five centuries. For many such groups, their futures were foreclosed by the actions of white settlers and colonisers in pursuit of their own desired futures. After all, the imagined futures of European modernity told through stories of progress and utopia were inextricably linked to imperial conquests. While ostensibly addressing the fate of humanity in its entirety, (Mitchell and Chaudhury (2020: 319) argue that this 'new catastrophist' literature consists of 'white apocalyptic narratives' primarily concerned with preserving European ways of life and commitments to Eurocentric notions of progress. As Savransky (2021: 4) observes: 'the End of the World is always the end of *some* world *in* this world [. . .] the Euro-American extractive mode of living through which "civilization developed," is not the end of everything as such'.

Accordingly, sociologists should understand that futurelessness is always the fore-closing of some futures among other possible futures in this world, and we need always to ask for whom are those futures foreclosing and how is this made to matter. I have addressed a particular European (or perhaps Euro-North American) kind of futureless-ness expressed by writers on the political left. But, as Mitchell and Chaudhury (2020: 322) show, there are other futures available, which they explore through Afrofuturist, Desi-futures and myriad other non-European futurisms that 'open space for futures beyond (the) apocalypse (of whiteness)'.

Battistoni (2013) asks how scholars and activists can translate the 'urgency and out-rage of the "no future" sensibility' to something more than what Horvat (2019: 55) calls ''fetishist apocalypticism' . If we have arrived, as she argues, at the end of the future inherited from modernity, the challenge is to build a 'new present' out of the 'wreckage of old futures', reimagining what we mean by progress and that the kinds of utopia pos-sible that are no longer 'lands of endless plenty' (Battistoni, 2013). Only by addressing the 'urgencies of now', do societies stand a chance of working towards 'new futures' that could avoid or better face up to the coming catastrophes. This opens space for engaging with 'counterfutures' (Eshun, 2003: 288) of the kind Mitchell and Chaudhury (2020) discuss in their work. Such 'counterfutures' attest to how Black, Indigenous and Peoples of Colour are living with the 'wreckage of old futures' (Battistoni, 2013) and open new and different ways of imagining possible futures. As Battistoni (2013) observes, climate change is the unintended outcome of a 'brighter future' that generations in Europe and North America and more recently elsewhere invested in to bring them and their children better lives. Now it appears that there is no future in this future any more, what new sto-ries can and must be told?

To find new stories about the future, Horvat (2019: 130) seeks inspiration from Marx, when he argues that we must call on 'poetry from the future' that does not entail looking back at the past to find solutions. As with Battistoni, his focus is on changing the condi-tions of the present to create a future that avoids catastrophe, which means recognising that the 'future is now': the catastrophic events witnessed in different parts of the world offer potential openings for acting to bring into being a truly global community that would regard and respond to such events as part of a whole. He concludes that only by seeking to build that global community can we prevent worse catastrophes.

The focus on futurelessness therefore creates space for thinking with and past this 'regime of feeling' about the future. Even as sociologists might study futurelessness, to better understand who is better or less well positioned to imagine and plan for futures, they should also remain committed to finding new ways of enacting 'the future as open to difference' (Anderson, 2006: 734). Feelings of futurelessness are socially produced and can be undone. While surveys of young people convey their sense of anxiety about the future, they also report that these same young people feel very opti-mistic that their generation can change the future for the better (Prince's Trust, 2020). The challenge for sociology as a discipline practised in universities around the world and communicated through multiple channels into the lives of young people is how to foster and inform that optimism. As Gidley (2017) observes, education plays an impor-tant role, providing insight but also empowering young people to imagine and to bring into being alternative futures. The field of sociology is well placed to both provide

analytical tools to understand power relationships and 'uneven future-making' and to advance accounts of possible social change (see Wright, 2010).

Conclusion

In this article, I have contributed to existing 'sociologies of the future' by elaborating on the concept of 'futurelessness' and its relevance for understanding contemporary affectivities and relationships to the future. Beginning with its original articulation in psychological research of the 1980s, I have advanced an argument for how we can understand futurelessness sociologically and why it matters. As well as focusing analytical efforts on those who can make, perform and stage futures, sociology should pay attention to those who are less well positioned to do so and who experience not the opening up but the potential foreclosing of their imagined or expected futures.

Further, I explored claims that would support the idea that futurelessness has become a significant mode of feeling about the future, one which of course exists in conjunction and tension with other modes. However, whether it has become pervasive, and what the consequences of that might be, warrants critical scrutiny and further investigation. In any event, futurelessness adds a distinctive element to ongoing sociological engagements with futurity and the field's commitment to the prospect that there are more possible futures than are dreamt of by those in positions of power and privilege today.

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