

“Thinking intelligently about the future has never been more important. Too often, however, it is dominated by the failed futurisms of prediction and probability. This book brings together in one place a host of new insights into how social futures are being made today – from the relationship between pasts and futures and conflicting temporalities, to the role of narratives, new technologies, migration and planetary change. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the study of social futures and, in particular, for all of those interested in creating better futures. The book has the potential to set out a new, practice based, contextual and situated approach to the study of futures that locates ‘the social’ at the heart of futures studies, creating a new interdisciplinary dialogue that will enrich the field.”

— Keri Facer, Professor of Educational and Social Futures,
University of Bristol, Editor in Chief Futures

“We are experiencing the end of a certain type of epoch. And with that end comes a broad range of alternative options. This Handbook makes an important contribution to the need for re-assessing diverse aspects of our social, built and natural environments and of the logics we use to understand what needs to be done. With this collection, the editors Carlos López Galviz and Emily Spiers give us one of the most distinctive analytics for an alternative set of options. The oucditorMan alnvdirpaaontn and p(n i)-32 th mith this



Routledge Handbook of Social Futures

Featuring chapters from an international range of leading and emerging scholars, this Handbook provides a collection of cutting-edge, interdisciplinary research that sheds new light on contemporary futures studies. Engaging with key defining questions of the early twenty-first century such as climate change, big data, AI, the future of economics, education, mental health, cities and more, the Handbook provides a review and synthesis of futures scholarship, highlighting the role that societies can and should play in their making. While the various chapters demonstrate how futures emerge and take shape in particular places at particular times, the distinctive insight provided by the volume overall is that futures thinking today must be social and contextual.

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Contents

List of tables and figures	x
Editors	xii
List of contributors	xiii
Acknowledgements	xxi
Introduction: Why social futures? Carlos López Galviz and Emily Spiers	1
1 A beginning: A critical history of scenarios Andrew Curry	19
2 Agency: Futures literacy and Generation Z Emily Spiers	38
3 AI: The social future of intelligence Richard H.R. Harper	52
4 Anticipation: Flourishing for the future Christopher Groves	59
5 BioFutures: Where futurists and biologists meet Derek Gatherer	69
6 Borders: Retravelling Nickelsdorf Michael Hieslmair and Michael Zinganel	79
7 Climate change: Transformational adaptation in Bangladesh	93

Contents

9 Data: The futures of personal data Deborah Lupton	117
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24	Queering: Liberation futures with Afrofuturism Lonny J Avi Brooks, Jason Tester, Eli Kosminsky and Anthony D. Weeks	260
25	Smart cities: Policy without polity Paul Graham Raven	275
26	Urbanism: Creating urban futures Cecilia Dinardi	284
27	Utopia: Futurity, realism and the social Lisa Garforth	292
28	Visible cities: Envisioning social futures Nick Dunn	304

Tables and Figures

Tables

- 4.1 Nussbaum's list of core capabilities (from Nussbaum, 2003) 62

Figures

- 1.1 Making the future visible 29
- 2.1 A table listing (1) Things I take for granted, (2) Things I fear happening in the future and (3) Things I hope for 42
- 2.2 The journal entry of Macy Hawkins 45
- 2.3 The smart-house surveillance box 45
- 2.4 The turtle poem as an acrostic 46
- 6.1 Hieslmair and Zinganel, 2016. Vienna at the centre of a network of international bus connections. Most notable are the many stops in east- and south-east Europe. The map is redrawn from the timetable data on bus connections and estimated passenger numbers provided by the management of Vienna International Bus Terminal. However, many smaller bus lines depart from, and arrive at, other often quite informal coach stops around the city 81
- 6.2 Hieslmair and Zinganel, 2016. Cross-sectional diagram of a tour coach operated by the Bulgarian company Air Kona connecting Vienna and So a: For many, buses are the preferred means of transport, not only because of the reasonable ticket prices but moreover because a bus can take them much closer to their source and target destinations. Buses are also able to transport goods of significant size – which is important for small suitcase traders and those wishing to send gifts to family and friends 83
- 6.3 Hieslmair and Zinganel, 2016. Reactivation of border infrastructure: From July to October 2015, thousands of refugees assembled at the Austria-Hungary border checkpoint of Nickelsdorf every day. Within a few hours, auxiliary structures had been provided by emergency aid NGOs and event industries for first aid and onward transport coordination 84
- 6.4 Hieslmair and Zinganel, Gerhard Zap , 2016. This drawing is a preliminary stage to Figure 6.3 and is based on conversations with Gerhard Zap , mayor of the border village of Nickelsdorf, who was in charge of managing the flows of forced migration and first aid for migrants arriving at the station. In fact, the map was revised in several stages, each time the mayor found important elements missing 86

6.5 Hieslmair and Zinganel, Bus Stop Nickelsdorf, 2016. Video stills from an

Carlos López Galviz

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Contributors

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Contributors

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In memoriam John Urry

Social futures: A manifesto

each with its own geography and history, we give context to techniques – forecasting, back-casting, scenario planning, co-production and more – with which specific versions and tra-

future at the centre of research in the social sciences and urged us to consider what theories and methods might aid us in interrogating and better understanding the future (see Urry, 2016). Grounded in an ongoing interdisciplinary conversation spanning across the arts, humanities and the social, environmental, materials, health and computational sciences, the ISF encourages future-forming research collaborations across disciplines with the aim of helping understand and better shape futures where the social is key.

After six years of engaging in this work at the ISF, we have assembled a collection of contributions to this Handbook that capture three important ways in which futures thinking can be made social: (1) Sustaining an open and critical understanding of the relationship between the past and the future, enabling, among other things, a move beyond probabilistic techniques such as forecasts; (2) Entertaining a range of timescales, human and otherwise, in the process of shaping the futures we want and need; and (3) Paying attention to the

part of what forecasts do is to establish the authority with which actions can be turned into policy:

Forecasting should be considered as an instrument for the construction of fictional expectations. Forecasts are imaginaries of a future state of the world [that] do not need to be correct to set actors' minds at ease or to help them make decisions – they merely need to be convincing. The credible claim for correctness is a substitute for actual accuracy.
(Beckert, 2016, p. 231)

The very significant resources, including money, spent by governments, companies and institutions in inaccurate predictions of what the economic and technological future will bring should give us pause for thought. 'A century of econometric forecasting of macroeconomic indicators and the development of many quantitative and qualitative techniques to predict technological progress', Beckert goes on to argue, 'has not brought us any closer to predicting the future' (2016, pp. 241–242). Yet 'the failure of prediction is rarely taken as an opportunity to reflect upon whether or not it is actually possible [to predict the future], but instead as a justification for building even more sophisticated models' (2016, p. 244).

Much of the thinking underpinning forecasting and similar probabilistic techniques is based on a key character, *homo economicus*

and regress, we can repeat and re-enact in meaningful ways, returning to the wealth of what has come before, in imitation of the natural world and even the cosmos itself. Thinking of social futures with the tools of a distinctively modern belief in endless progress and growth and twentieth-century economics runs into the risks of cognitive bias. It also reproduces the kind of doctrinal thinking that with similar insistence and tone places faith in free markets, or in particular readings of the nature of God's presence in the world (Guyer, 2007). Engaging with the process of understanding and helping shape the social futures we seek to create requires a bigger, richer and more varied set of approaches than that which has become dominant since at least the second half of the twentieth century. One way of enhancing the repertoire of techniques is by considering a range of timescales.

The scales, scapes and spans of time

Considering the interdependence of different timescales is central to devising how we can resist overly parsimonious understandings of how individuals and societies envision, shape and enact their futures. In every rendering and rendition of the future, we can find overlapping timescales, timelines and time frames being reproduced. Barbara Adam (2021, pp. 120–121) cites at least five 'irreducible features of time', namely, timeframes, temporality, tempo, timing and 'the temporal modalities of past, present and future', that is, the multiple ways in which the three modes of time familiar to most of us interact with and shape one another. The openness of these interactions is key. By contrast, one way of characterizing our contemporary consumer and services society, as Marc Augé (2015, pp. 63–64) has remarked, is as a 'society that would still care about its immediate future, but would no longer need to look further ahead'. This is a stark reminder of the risks of an overriding presentism.

The relationship between immediate needs and how far into the future we place ourselves is contingent upon time and place and is determined in large part by the politics of the aspirations foregrounded on our behalf by governments, companies, institutions and individuals. Foregrounding aspirations implies, by extension, ignoring and side-lining those aspirations that do not match the picture that is celebrated. Ideas such as progress and innovation underpin the immediacy and framing of our needs in relation to consumption rather than, say, citizenship or the environment. Building on the work of Bertrand de Jouvenel, Adam and Groves (2007, p. 33) argue that

our knowledge of the future is inversely proportional to the rate of progress [...] in contexts of accelerating innovation, knowledge of the future is moved progressively closer to the present and knowledgeable extension into the long-term future recedes ever further out of reach.

Is this inverse relation between immediate progress and distant futures an inevitable conundrum? What does it take for our imaginations to span decades, centuries and millennia; to delve into the past with those timelines so that we position ourselves to help shape better social futures? How long is long ago? How soon is the here and now?

In the mid-nineteenth century, William Thomson, later Lord Kelvin, estimated that the age of the earth was finite and close to 20 million years. Over 150 years later, geologists posit that the earth is around 4.5 billion years old (England, Monar and Richter, 2007). Between four and five billion years from now, the sun will begin to cease being the supporting bright star holding together the solar system of which the earth is part. The cluster of islands that make up Tuvalu in Polynesia has been submerging as sea levels in the Pacific continue to rise.

Recent estimates predict that most of the archipelago will have disappeared by 2050, a trend also affecting large cities such as Shanghai, Jakarta, Bangkok, Kolkata and Dhaka (Kulp and Strauss, 2019). Global warming has intensified since the 1960s with a rapidity the existing historical and geological record suggests is unprecedented. Since 1960, the trend of increasing greenhouse emissions dating back to the beginnings of the industrial revolution (circa 1750) has been called the Great Acceleration (Steen et al., 2015). That acceleration is the speeding up of a human-made process centuries in the making, prompting reactions from the earth and its ecosystems that have taken over millennia, millions of years to be what they are in the early part of the twenty-first century.

The longevity of the earth, the life expectancy of the solar system, the immediacy of ash floods and islands or coastlines gradually submerged by rising sea levels, as well as the relatively new yet significant rise in global temperatures, might at first seem unrelated to our capacity to envision different worlds. They all operate at different timescales. Each, in turn, has a model, including the assumptions on which that model is based, allowing scientists, experts and others to calculate if the consequences to humans, societies and the environment are observable and by what point the crossing of a certain threshold becomes irreversible.

What the contrast between different timescales suggests is twofold. It highlights the significant dissonance between timescales and measurements that we struggle to grasp and which, frankly, play little or no part in the everyday decision-making concerning our future, however distant or near that future might be. This, of course, is not the case for the 11,000 or so inhabitants of Tuvalu for whom favourite spots in their homeland have disappeared in recent years (Roy, 2019). The contrast is also a means of recovering what deep time, time measured in millions or billions of years, has to offer to the human imagination. This is an exercise in unthinking the thinkable, in other words, relearning the process of what times and which timescales we consider when imagining new social futures, which complements calls by Herman Kahn, Amitav Ghosh and others to think the unthinkable and, in the process, reconfigure the rules of how we normally think the future. Moreover, the contrast of timescales allows us to explore the extent to which our ideas and visions of a collective

III report, stated that: 'In an urbanized world, in which global urban population will reach 70 per cent in 2050, urbanization becomes the key element of global development' (UN-Habitat III, 2017, p. 42). Despite their limitations, and the instrumentalism that accompanies them (Kaika, 2017), institutions and governments see the UN Sustainable Development Goals as a force for good. To supplement and critique the kind of thinking that normalizes urbanization as a global trend, we must think of qualities like creativity; deploy critique to counter the onset of companies that see cities as the most profitable of markets; interrogate

who engages with what kinds of future, what agendas these futures advocate and when, and which motivations we can reveal in them. Casting a net wide enough so that futures beyond the technological make it into the archive of visions that policymakers can see is a means of highlighting other important issues such as ecological concerns, nomadic lifestyles and the integration of urban and rural spaces.

A similar kind of visibility to which academic work can contribute is that of the plurality of eventualities and actors who make the informal cities of the so-called Global South. The futures that the residents of informal settlements can envision are significantly different from the visions filling the catalogues and books recording the work of well-known architects. The qualities their futures offer us are different. Theirs is an orientation towards the future that is unsettled, informal, provisional, riddled with dispossessions, evictions and precarity. Residents of places like Tanah Tinggi in Jakarta, Indonesia, Simone tells us, have 'little conviction in any linear progression toward a better a future' and have instead a cornucopia of 'blu ng, coaxing, luring, and blustering' that may or may not translate into the money, resources and opportunities to make their lives more liveable. Recognizing that, through the distinctiveness of their lives, residents of informal settlements weave and make unique forms of infrastructure (Simone, 2015) is also a means of capturing the human labour, including the values underpinning it, that goes into shaping the lives and livelihoods of one in every four urban residents worldwide, or one billion people as recorded in 2016 (UN, 2020,

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