How can we understand the social impact of cognitions of a projected future, taking into account both the institutional determinants of hopes and their personal inventiveness? How can we document the repercussions, often contrary to intentions, "back from" such projected futures to the production and transformation of social structures? These are some of the questions to be addressed by a cultural sociology that attempts to look seriously at the effects of a projected future as a dynamic force undergirding social change. In this essay I discuss some of the reasons why the analysis of the future has been so neglected in sociological theory and research, and then sketch a possible framework for reincorporating it that specifies some of the cognitive dimensions of projectivity. In the process, I will show how a focus on future projections can help us make a link between cognition and action in a manner that has so far been neglected in the sociological literature.

KEY WORDS: action; aspiration; culture and cognition; projectivity; temporality; the future.

INTRODUCTION

In his introduction to The Sociology of Hope (1979), Henri Desroche describes the religious tradition of the miracle of the rope. In various cultural renditions of the story, a person throws a rope into the air and, instead of falling down, it supports him in his climb toward heaven. “Hope is a rope,” Desroche says, in that it, too, is founded on the unfounded, the imaginary, and yet “it holds”; it undergirds actions, it produces events. In this sense, hope is real or, rather, has real social effects, even if in “believing they are bringing heaven down to earth, they are only moving their ancient lands up towards new heavens.” Hope is both constituted and constitutive; it provides the emotional substratum, so to speak, of the dialectic between the old and the new, between the reproduction and the transformation of social structures as these figure in thinking and acting individuals. “[F]orces of pressure pose and define a question. But it is the forces of aspiration which formulate and offer an answer” (Desroche, 1979:3).
Although cultural analysis has seen a recent surge of interest in the “social imaginary,” sociologists have dealt only peripherally, when at all, with the impact of the imagined future on social events. Even when they have taken seriously the category of the imaginary, most have used it to understand how people represent their present reality (and how the categories of those representations change), or how people imaginatively reconstruct the past. A seeming exception is the rich tradition of utopian literature; Desroche’s book is in fact a study of the connection between religious millenarianisms, utopian movements, and revolutionary ideologies. Certainly, the study of such grand, totalizing hopes can teach us much about the mobilizing force of imagined futures. But what of the equally powerful (and not unrelated) force exerted by the less grand, less total aspirations of everyday lives, the future images that inform social practices from the mundane to the heroic? How can we understand the social impact of cognitions of a projected future, taking into account both the institutional determinants of hopes and their personal inventiveness? How can we document the repercussions, often contrary to intentions, “back from” such projected futures to the production and transformation of social structures?

These are some of the questions to be addressed by a cultural sociology that attempts to look seriously at the effects of a projected future as a dynamic force undergirding social change. In this essay I want to discuss some of the reasons why the analysis of the future has been so neglected in sociological theory and research, and then sketch a possible framework for reincorporating it that specifies some of the cognitive dimensions of projectivity. In the process, I hope to show that a focus on future projections can help us make a link between cognition and action in a manner that has so far been neglected in the sociological literature.

PROJECTIVITY AND A THEORY OF ACTION

One fruitful way to incorporate the future into sociological research is to revive the notion of projects, or projectivity, as a tool for social analysis. With roots in Heideggerian existentialism and the social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz (1967), the idea of projectivity captures an essential aspect of human agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). However, it has never been widely used in U.S. sociology, due in part to the historical division between structural-functionalism and the abstract voluntarism of rational choice. In his early action theory, Parsons was in fact highly attuned to the future-oriented dimension of action (whether normative or utilitarian), which he described as its “teleological” structure, that is, the fact that action always refers to a possible future state, “which would not come into existence if something were not done about it by the actor” (Parsons, 1968:45). However, by the end of his career, the integrative-systemic conception of structural functionalism had largely eclipsed the temporal dimension of his theory. As a result, concern with the
future was abandoned by culturally inclined normative theorists in most of U.S. social science. Unfortunately, it became almost the sole domain of rational choice theory, which reduced the future to posthoc rationalizations of action abstracted from the human experience of time.

In a much neglected criticism of Parsons's early action theory, Schutz (1967, 1978) developed the concept of the “project” as the “primary and fundamental meaning of action.” Schutz was concerned with understanding action from the subjective perspective of the temporally embedded actor, insisting that the teleological structure of action appears very different to the observer who sees the act as a completed, past event capable of objective interpretation, than it does to the actor who sees it as a yet-to-be-realized future possibility. Human action, as Schutz observed, is constructed within an imaginative horizon of multiple plans and possibilities; actors engage in a retrospective/prospective process by which they draw on previously collected “stocks of knowledge,” or “typifications,” of possible paths of actions, while “fantasizing” in relation to the developing act in progress. Such an imaginative process differs from that of choosing among clearly defined possibilities, as instrumentalist theories propose; rather, it entails focusing “rays of attention” on a plurality of possible states until one or more alternatives detach themselves “like overripe fruit” and appear before the reflective consciousness as possible objects of choice (Schutz, 1967:67–68).

One implication of this conception is that one only knows with clarity what the choice is after it has been taken, through what Garfinkel (1984) calls “post-hoc accounting practices.” For Garfinkel, as for “practice theorists” such as Bourdieu and Giddens, engagement of the future clearly plays second fiddle to the deeper layers of the “taken-for-granted” practical consciousness underlying conscious choice-making. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and Giddens’s structuration theory provide useful correctives to an overly voluntaristic conception of future orientations by linking action to the recursive relationship between received structures and situated practices. In this view, aspirations are strongly conditioned by one’s position in a social field, which in turn is determined by the objective structure of social relations as well as by the dispositions and competences internalized during one’s early experiences.

Yet there is a danger here: in basing an analysis of future possibility on the “objective” structure of fields of action, we risk losing precisely the forward-looking element that Schutz warned Parsons not to neglect. I argue that we should refocus attention on the open, indeterminate, “polythetic” perception of the field from the point of view of the actor surveying the future in terms of multiple possibilities, as opposed to the “monothetic” view of the actor (or observer) who interprets the decision after it has already been taken. For this reason, Bourdieu provides us with a theory of “strategies” and “expectations,” but not, in Schutz’s sense, of projects. And neither Bourdieu nor Giddens—nor Schutz himself, for that matter—offers an adequate theorization of how such projects can be restructured through imaginative human practice. Taking a step beyond all these theorists, I suggest that we view the
process of projectivity as composed of creative as well as willful foresight. During the ongoing procedure of motivated, selective “protention,” as Schutz calls it, received categories of thought and action may be put together in new ways through a process of imaginative experimentation with projected courses of action.

In rethinking the link between future cognitions and social action, I draw not only on the social phenomenology of Schutz, but also on the pragmatist theories of Mead and Dewey. Mead (1932) addresses the development of temporal horizons as a form of “distance experience” that takes us out of our immediate sensory engagement and allows us to imaginatively engage the past and the future. Our multiple levels of social embeddedness (which he calls “sociality”) also embed us in multiple temporal horizons. The problems posed by such complex sociotemporal relationships give rise to what he calls “deliberative attitude,” that is, the capacity to “get hold of the conditions of future conduct as these are found in the organized responses we have formed, and so construct our pasts in anticipation of that future” (Mead, 1932:76). Dewey argues that the reflective capacity to “read future results in present on-goings” is at the heart of democratic participation; “[e]xperience in its vital form is experimental, an effort to change the given; it is characterized by projection, by reaching forward into the unknown; connection with the future is its salient trait” (Dewey, 1981:69, 61).

RESEARCHING FUTURE PROJECTIONS

If hope is a rope, as Desroche suggests, which is cast into an uncertain and shifting future horizon, how then do we study it? Perhaps we are justified in backing away when it comes to the tenuous, hard to see (or verify) effects of future projections on social action. Within sociology, studies of future projections have mostly been carried out by demographers and life-course researchers, who have used survey and interview research to show the association between goals, aspirations, or expectations and outcomes such as fertility, social class, educational or occupational attainment, retirement planning, life satisfaction, and mental health. Longitudinal surveys have examined whether future orientations at Time 1 can be associated with particular outcomes at Time 2; interesting work in this area has tracked shifts in aspirations over the lifecourse (Jacobs et al., 1991), as well as the ways gaps between aspiration and subsequent achievement affect psychological well-being later in life (Carr, 1999). There may, of course, be confounding variables; perhaps the same social conditions that “cause” the particular future perspective also underlie the outcomes in question. Locating the “real social effects” of a particular way of imagining the future is a slippery task at best.

Cultural analysis can help us address these limitations by providing richer insight into the form and process of future projections as they play out in particular social contexts. We need to know something about the character of the
rope itself: how long or short it is; its thickness, strength, and flexibility; whether it consists of a single cord or multiple interwoven strands; whether it is cast upward to one imagined target or to several targets at once. And as rope climbing is a temporal process, we also must be aware that the shape and feel of the rope change over time, as do the winds buffeting the climber and the latter’s own sense of capacity to bridge the sociotemporal distance the rope represents. Moreover, just as climbers sometimes climb in teams—backing each other up and putting each other at risk—the process of project formation entails the capacity to interpret and coordinate one’s actions in accordance with the motives and projects of other actors.

In other words, we need to study the cognitive contours as well as the relational dynamics of project formation. Some aspects of future projections have been studied in interesting ways by cognitive and social psychologists. This tradition goes back to Lewin’s early studies of the role of time perspective in morale and the construction of “life space” (1939, 1942), which contributed to a flourishing of related studies in the 1970s and 1980s (Cottle and Klineberg, 1974; Gorman and Wessman, 1977). Recently, there has been a resurgence of experimental and clinical work on temporality, examining, among other things, transitions between optimism and pessimism; variation in consideration of future consequences; and the realization of “fantasies” about the future (Sanna and Chang, 2006). There is also a tradition of psychological research on the dimensions, determinants, and consequences of hope (Snyder, 1994; Stotland, 1969). In addition, some psychologists have addressed the relational dimension of future projections by studying communication between past, present, and future selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Pronin and Ross, 2006; Zimbardo and Boyd, 2008).

As sociologists, we can extend this relational vision to include a projective dialogue not only with future selves, but also with other people who inhabit the imagined future. In fact, by incorporating a future perspective into Mead’s idea of “sociality,” along with Simmel’s (1955) theory of relational intersections, we can conceptualize social networks as extending into the imagined future, requiring cognitive work as people sort through the projected relational consequences of different actions and involvements. For example, researchers might study how people imagine their future interactions with romantic partners, growing children, teachers and colleagues, business associates, or leaders and authorities. We can examine whether they anticipate—or naïvely fail to anticipate—tensions between intersecting social worlds, for example, in predicting the difficulty or ease with which they expect to resolve work-family conflicts (Blair-Loy, 2005; Gerson, 1986). Alternatively, we might look at how people juggle multiple timeframes as they seek to link their personal projects with those of the various collectivities to which they belong (Mische, 2001).

Of course, a focus on future projections risks a naïve teleology in which by documenting what people hope, expect, or aspire to, we think we have a handle on what they actually choose, achieve, or experience. In fact, recent work in experimental psychology warns us that future projections tend to be
limited and faulty, often failing to adequately predict future experiences and emotional states, due to cognitive limitations and contextual shifts (Gilbert, 2007). The same point is made by behavioral economists in their critique of the rational choice grounding of neoclassical economic models (Ariely, 2008; Kahneman and Tverksy, 2000). People often make decisions based on analyses of the future that involve limited information, routinized decision-making heuristics, and exaggerated discounting mechanisms that strongly limit their ability to make accurate predictions, leading to seemingly irrational behaviors. Likewise, sociologists have studied the difficulty of predicting “worst-case” scenarios, given the cultural and institutional grounding of our future cognitions (Cerulo, 2006; Clarke, 2005).

**DIMENSIONS OF PROJECTIVITY**

Nevertheless, regardless of whether future projections “actually” predict the future, they do have an influence on action. As W. I. Thomas said, they are “real in their consequences” even if those consequences are quite different than the imagined future that motivated the action. As Zimbardo and Boyd argue: “Beliefs and expectations of the future in part determine what happens in the present by contributing to how people think, feel, and behave” (2008:137). Even if our predictions prove faulty, they affect what we do, and thus influence the course of events, sometimes in self-fulfilling or unanticipated ways (Merton, 1968). For this reason we need to play close attention to the form and content of future projections, seeking patterns in how particular cognitive structures lead people to act (or not act) in particular ways. Here are a few cognitive dimensions of future projections that bear exploring from a sociological perspective.

Reach: the degree of extension that imagined futures have into the short, middle, and long term, along with the future scenarios imagined at each stage. Some actors may stay focused on the immediate future and “discount” the distant future, as behavioral economists have suggested; others may focus on middle-range tactical planning; and still others may focus on long-term objectives (strategically or idealistically conceived). Social psychological research has suggested that time horizons may vary by socioeconomic class background (O’Rand and Ellis, 1974), with middle-class families more likely than those who are poor or working class to engage in long-term planning and scenario building. Projective reach may also be rooted in institutional, subcultural, or political orientation; for example, utopian social movement activists may be inspired and fortified by the promise of long-term transformations (Voss, 1998), while pragmatic politicians focus on short-term bargaining and negotiations.

Breadth: the range of possibilities considered at different points in time. Some actors may see the future as having only a single possible trajectory and outcome, while others may see it as multipronged, with a wide range of alternative outcomes, possibly branching off into multiple directions. This may
vary by timeframe; for example, some actors may have a broad repertoire of possible short-term actions, but still have a straight and narrow vision of where the future is heading in the long term. I saw this, for example, among some leftist groups that I studied in my social movement research who were tactically flexible while keeping their ideological sights fixed on the socialist goal (Mische, 2007). Others may see the long term as having many different possible outcomes, but try to reduce complexity and regain control by becoming rigid and single-minded in the short term.

**Clarity:** the degree of detail and clarity with which the future is imagined. Although this may be related to breadth, it is not the same thing; a single-pronged future may be imagined in quite elaborate detail, while a multipronged future may be vague and impressionistic. Socialization plays a role here; we may develop greater clarity about possible futures that are modeled around us, and have trouble visualizing the “roads less traveled.” This may vary by timeframe; a long-term scenario can be richly imagined (as in utopian or dystopian visions) (Hall, 1978), while short-term contingencies and intermediary steps are glossed over, or vice versa. For example, the ideologues of the Iraq War may have been so fixated on their long-term vision of regional stability and democratization that they neglected to consider the complex short- and medium-term challenges involved in occupation and nation building.

**Contingency:** the degree to which future trajectories are imagined as fixed and predetermined versus flexible, uncertain, and dependent on local circumstances. Some ideological narratives of future transformations offer fixed-stage theories of how the future will progress from one point to the next; however, dramatic events may make the future appear more uncertain and malleable, strongly responsive to local context and sequencing (Wagner-Pacifici, 2000). Likewise, some career paths develop according to predictable, well-ordered “cultural models,” while other careers have a higher degree of uncertainty and flux (Abbott and Hrycak, 1990; Blair-Loy, 2005). Prediction in conditions of extreme uncertainty—such as weather forecasting (Daipha, 2007; Fine, 2007)—may require institutional legitimation as a safeguard against the havoc such contingencies can wreak with future projections.

**Expandability:** the degree to which future possibilities are seen as expanding or contracting. Sometimes, possibilities for the future are perceived as increasing and opening up (such as in youth, the start of a new career, a budding romance, or an economic boom); sometimes, they are seen as declining or approaching closure (in the case of old age, a terminal illness, an impending divorce, or an economic downturn). Recent research suggests that those who have expanding temporal horizons focus on gaining information and exploring new areas, while those with constrained or closing horizons focus on emotional well-being and relational satisfaction (Carstensen, 2006). Moreover, in situations in which future horizons seem to be contracting, people may rescale their goals toward more a feasible range, in contrast to tenacious goal pursuit in more expansive periods (Boroditsky and Ranscar, 2002).
Volition: the relation of motion or influence that the actor holds in regard to the impending future. Sometimes, the future is imagined as coming toward us, while at other times we see ourselves as moving toward the future (Boroditsky and Ramscar, 2002). This sense of volition as movement is closely linked to the idea of volition as will and purpose. We may take passive, receptive stances toward an approaching future over which we have little control; or we may assume active, purposeful orientations toward a future that we are striding into, and that we presume we can control and design. Sometimes, we may overestimate our capacity to control future events (Langer, 1975); this sense of control over actions can change over the lifecourse, and may vary with social class and educational background (Mirowsky and Ross, 2007).

Sociality: the degree to which future projections are “peopled” with others whose actions and reactions are seen as intertwined with our own. Not only do we engage in conversations with our imagined future selves, but we also imagine those future selves conversing and interacting with others. Thinking through future relationships is an important part of considering the consequences of action, and some people may do this more clearly, and with more imagined interaction, than others. While some cultural groups envision the future as resulting primarily from the independent actions of individuals, others foresee their futures as strongly socially embedded (Markus and Kitayama, 2003). Likewise, some people may compartmentalize imagined interactions in their diverse networks, while others anticipate intersections between different relational worlds.

Connectivity: the imagined logic of connection between temporal elements. This relates to what narrative scholars call “principles of linkage” (Polletta, 2006) between actions and events; it often implies differing models of causality, agency, and influence (Markus and Kitayama, 2003). The relationship between tactic and strategy in military or social movement planning is an example of one such connection (Jasper, 2006); divine or magical intervention might appear at the opposite extreme. Sometimes, these “links from here to there” might be made explicit in future projections, as when people lay out step-by-step plans to reach a goal (Little, 1983) or develop elaborate scenarios of social transformation. Other times they might remain vague and ambiguous, leaving transitional moments subject to ad hoc improvisational solutions (Cohen et al., 1972).

Genre: the recognizable discursive “mode” in which future projections are elaborated. Future projections often take a narrative form that ties into familiar modes of storytelling (Polletta, 2006) or social drama (Wagner-Pacifici, 1987), which serve as templates for future action. For example, the future may be envisioned as comedy, tragedy, or melodrama, elaborated in the future or conditional tense. Other genres that are especially relevant to social movements and collective actors might include utopian, instrumental, pragmatic, or oppositional orientations toward future scenarios. These genres express culturally embedded (and often socially contested) models of how social change is envisioned to occur.
The challenge for research on projectivity is not simply to document variation along the dimensions I’ve described, but also to understand its genesis and effects. We need to look both at what Maria Islas-Lopez (2008) calls the “production of the future” and the “productive future,” that is, the different social forces that shape variation along these dimensions, as well as the ways that particular “modes of projectivity” affect people’s decisions, practices, and relations. Ricoeur (1991) describes this as the movement “from text to action,” that is, the ways that cognitions and narratives affect what we do, how we do it, and (I would add) with whom we do it. The time is ripe for sociologists to turn the same sort of rich attention to future projections as we have directed to collective memories. To date, our understanding of future imagining has been thin and static, perhaps in reaction against the perceived distortions of rational choice perspectives. The focus on routine practices has largely trumped future orientations in recent cultural and institutionalist theories, truncating our understanding of temporal embedding. Yet this is precisely where sociology can make its greatest contribution to the somewhat disjointed research areas described above. As sociologists we can focus attention on the cultural, institutional, and relational grounding of future projections, elements that have been addressed in a fragmentary way, when at all, in the psychology and economics literatures.

On a more general level, this discussion points toward a “sociology of the future” by examining how future projections—often tenuous and uncertain—shape and are shaped by social processes. To examine future projections is not to assume that they come true, but to explore the ways they deeply infuse social interaction, albeit in possibly contradictory and surprising ways. I would argue that it is high time that cultural sociologists reclaim the analysis of the future and turn our attention to the nature of the “rope” and what makes it hold.

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