



# Between temporalities, imaginaries and imagination: A framework for analysing futures

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## Abstract

This article introduces a relational approach to studying imaginaries of the future, emphasising their significance in comprehending present realities and the ongoing processes that interweave our social fabric. It posits ‘imaginaries of the future’ as a pivotal sociological concept for understanding the reciprocal social influences and uneven structural dynamics shaping the present. This work engages in a theoretical discourse, spotlighting the role of the future in contemporary social landscapes, while endorsing the suitability of the concept of imaginaries to elucidate how we collectively interlace our present through implicit dialogues with latent, emergent futures and glimpses of radical imagination. In this article, we advocate for sociological research on ‘imaginaries’, discussing the concept’s relevance to sociological theory and research. In addition, we make a case for examining futures as a subject of sociological research. Finally, we propose a conceptual framework for analysing imaginaries of the future from a relational socio-logical perspective, fostering interdisciplinary dialogue.

## Keywords

Figures, forms, images, imagination, imaginaries of the future, materialities, protentions, social imaginaries, social scripts, temporal landscapes, trajectories

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## Introduction

Imaginaries of the future exert a profound influence on the present through an ongoing dialogue with interpretations of the past and projections of the future (Mische, 2009; Oomen et al., 2022; Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). However, it is essential to understand that researching these imaginaries does not provide privileged insights into the actual future, nor does it establish a direct, causal link between contemporary envisioning of the future and future outcomes. Instead, imaginaries of the future belong to the present moment and, furthermore, are a powerful way of interpreting this present as well as the past.<sup>1</sup>

As Mische cautioned, pinpointing the ‘real social effects’ of specific future imaginings can be a challenging and misleading endeavour (2009, p. 697). While connections do exist between current imaginaries of the future and future consequences, these connections are not straightforwardly traceable and necessitate an ongoing debate informed by materialities and latent futures as well as the inclusion of all the unintended and unexpected consequences of actions (Adam & Groves, 2007; Tutton, 2017). Michael (2017) has highlighted the significance of latent futures and materiality through his work on technology and public engagement with science and technology. He asserted that technologies can have unexpected and substantive effects on users, leading to unforeseen prospects. This assertion extends beyond technology to various realms of human existence.

Hence, although the future is also shaped by unexpected events and unintended consequences, we are continuously engaged with the future, progressively entwined with it through a dynamic interplay of practices, materialities and latent possibilities within our imaginaries. To address these complexities, we advocate for a relational approach to the sociology of the future and, specifically, to the sociology of our imaginaries of the future. In the following sections, we will elaborate on our conceptualisation of imaginaries and their applicability to the sociology of time, particularly the future. However, we first provide a brief introduction to our definition of imaginaries of the future to underscore the importance of the relational approach, acknowledging that certain aspects of our definition may require further refinement, which shall be provided in the following pages.

We conceptualise imaginaries of the future as a relational assemblage of images, of contents (the what of the imaginaries), as well as figures and forms (how these contents are shaped and moulded) that reciprocally articulate shared, taken-for-granted assumptions, expectations, anticipations, fears, plans and hopes regarding what the future may hold. This involves examining how particular constellations of topics (images) are deemed relevant in discussions about the future and how these topics are framed and evaluated (figures). Whether the images and figures mobilised within imaginaries of the future are framed as highly probable, improbable or even impossible, as desirable, liveable or horrendous, plays a significant role in shaping our present and reevaluating our past, while it furthermore gives narrative coherence to the assemblage of images and figures, embedding them in wider social imaginaries. We use the concept of forms to characterise this way of interweaving figures and images, giving them a wider context and a coherent narrative embedding.

As the Thomas and Thomas theorem underscored (1928, p. 572), the positions, emotions and valuations through which we envision futures (figures of the future) and the content embodied in these visions (images of the future) interconnect, manifest and influence our imaginaries. Moreover, when we frame something as probable, impossible, desirable or a worst-case scenario (forms), the subsequent anticipation and projection of the future shapes our current actions, emotions and decisions, ultimately paving the path to our future experiences. When we refer to 'shared', we do not imply uniformity across all individuals within a social constellation. Instead, we suggest that these images and figures form a dynamic, interconnected field of imaginaries, characterised by varying degrees of hegemonic and marginal positions. Consequently, the domain of social imaginaries of the future continually evolves through shared experiences, negotiations and position-takings within the social structure, taking into account intersectional perspectives (as conceived by Anthias, 2008; Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992).

Images and figures coalesce in diverse combinations, forming a narrative that more or less consciously articulates, relates to and expresses our collective imaginaries of the future. From a sociological standpoint, it is vital to scrutinise the negotiation of these assumptions, expectations, fears and hopes in daily life, as they collectively shape the 'common places' that underpin discussions, paths and plans for the future.

## A sociology of the future

Until the turn of the twenty-first century, the future as such received relatively little explicit attention from sociology. However, in recent decades, there has been a remarkable surge in sociological literature focusing on the future(s). This shift leads us to two pertinent questions: First, was the future truly absent from early sociological theory, or was its presence implicit or subordinated? Second, what factors have driven the recent proliferation of sociological publications on the future?

Revisiting the past has been a recurrent theme in sociology since its inception as a discipline. Pioneering sociologists, from Weber and Durkheim to Simmel and Marx, all grappled with the past's influence on their contemporary social configurations. Although not explicitly addressed as such, the future played a pivotal role in the writings of sociology's founding figures too. The future was crucial for figures like Marx, Durkheim and Weber, yet it was conceived as social transformation or social change, and often framed under the hegemonic idea of progress, which by the end of Durkheim, Weber and Simmel's lives had already started to be consistently questioned. In Simmel's analysis of means and ends in *Philosophy of Money* (1989), the temporal scope for achieving one's goals extended further into the future in modern, monetary society, making future orientation increasingly significant for present actions and decisions. Simmel's exploration of the future can be taken a step further when we engage in a contemporary interpretation of his work, particularly focusing on his digression titled 'How is Society Possible?' (Cantó-Milà & Seebach, 2015; Simmel, 1992, pp. 42–61). In this digression, Simmel delves into the reciprocal relationship between individuals and society. He asserts that, from an individual perspective, society offers or should offer a place for everyone. Ideally, this place is not randomly assigned but is experienced *as if* it is specially tailored for each individual (Simmel, 1992, pp. 57–60). Simmel depicts this

place as a temporary position in the fluid process of position-takings that individuals more or less consciously engage in during their life courses, which existed before them and will carry on after them. Furthermore, Simmel's text provides the foundation for developing four sequential arguments that are pivotal to our relational and process-oriented approach to the sociology of the future:

Social structure is inherently dynamic, not static. It can only be comprehended as resulting from ongoing, relational processes. The temporal dimension and the dimension of durability are of paramount importance in both stabilising and questioning the relational processes of position-takings.

The 'place' or position that individuals come to occupy in society, along with the position-takings they find meaningful, varies in durability. These positions serve to stabilise each person as a full member of society. The longevity of one's place plays a significant role in shaping the meaning and stability of that place, as well as in binding individuals and fostering their identification with specific social constellations.

In contemporary social configurations, the temporal orientation of individuals in the search for their place in society is mainly directed towards the future. This is where the concept of social imaginaries, and particularly imaginaries of the future, assumes profound significance. The fact that our 'special place' resides in the future is deeply related with our general experience and conceptualisation of time, wherein this future place forms and configures (retrospectively from the perspective of that imagined future) one's place in the present, as well as in the past (Esposito, 2011). As our 'special place' is projected into the future, it shapes the path leading to it, as if the goal itself configures the journey.

The location of one's 'place' in the future is a product of the current social context and historical moment. The shift from conceiving this 'place' as a guide from the past towards a 'place' awaiting us in the future transpired between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>2</sup> This transition is crucial because the orientation towards the future is no longer merely a matter of choice but has become a compulsory orientation for fully participating in relevant societal processes throughout modernity.

In the past two decades, the future has taken centre stage in social analysis. This shift is driven by the fact that the future, as a horizon of meaning, a promise and a goal, has become increasingly key to the discourse and practices of both institutions and individuals. Whether it's mortgages, career paths, strategic planning, development policies, ecological concerns or global health risks, the future has evolved into the temporal horizon that demands planning and anticipation. It's no longer something we can take for granted; instead, it's a goal that must be actively pursued.

The growing prominence of risks and emergencies further underscores the importance of considering the future in the study of society. Scholars like Beck (1992a, 1992b) and Giddens (1999) have placed the analysis of risks at the core of sociological examination. In the midst of a 'global optimism' that marked the nineties after the Cold War with utopian views of a borderless world (Urry, 2016), Beck and Giddens pointed out how modern views of society with their relentless pursuit of development and growth into an open future inherently give rise to new risks. Forced migrations, warfare, displacements, asylum seekers, terrorist attacks, environmental catastrophes, pandemics, financial crises and various other emergencies have

contributed to what Urry (2016, p. 91) describes as a ‘new catastrophism’ in social thought. This new perspective necessarily directs attention towards the future as a dimension in which catastrophe could become a reality or be averted.

On an experiential and practical level, the future has not only become the arena for the realisation of numerous goals and plans but also a domain heavily ‘impressed’ by emotions (Ahmed, 2013). Emotions such as hope, fear, anxiety, nostalgia or doubt, considered as epistemic emotions (Candiotti, 2017, 2019; Terpe, 2016), shape the ways in which we approach the future. While Illouz (1997) once argued for an elective affinity between romantic love and capitalism, we could similarly assert a parallel between the future and capitalism. This analogy also holds true for the forms of state-led communism that characterised the twentieth century, with their strategies of planned economies – distinct yet remarkably similar in their orientation towards the future, contrasting with their capitalist counterparts.

As a result, particularly in Western social contexts (though increasingly less confined to them), the future has evolved into a central pillar in the construction of the social. Consequently, over the past few decades, the future (or futures), which has historically already been of interest as a concept or orientation among other significant dimensions of social analysis, has emerged as an indispensable dimension of social analysis in its own right. It must be engaged with as a crucial condition of our involvement in the present.

In the following pages, we aim at presenting a processual, relational approach to a sociological analysis of the future, which explores the relevance of social imaginaries and imagination, in dialogue with latent futures, or futures in the making (i.e. combining materialities with different temporalities).

## **A theoretical approach to social imaginaries**

Charles Taylor, building on Anderson’s concept of ‘imagined communities’ ((1983) 2017), defines social imaginaries as the ways in which people envision their social existence, how they perceive their interactions with others, the dynamics that occur between individuals and their peers, the expectations they typically encounter and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). Social imaginaries are rooted in the often unexamined assumptions that form the bedrock of society, becoming particularly salient when everyday life is disrupted by emergencies or crises.

This definition underscores that social imaginaries, according to Taylor, have little to do with imagination. While imagination may be seen as an unbridled creative force that broadens the boundaries of the conceivable, social imaginaries encompass the widely shared and taken-for-granted beliefs about what is and what should be. To distinguish between social imaginaries and imagination, we can draw upon the works of Cornelius Castoriadis.

Castoriadis (2005) delves into the concept of social imaginary, emphasising its fundamental role in the constitution of society. His perspective, however, extends beyond Taylor’s view of social imaginaries. Castoriadis introduces the notion of the radical imaginary, which goes beyond the ‘already imagined’ (actual imaginaries) and delves into the realm of ‘radical imagination’ (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2010; Ross, 2018).

In contrast to Taylor's conceptualisation, Castoriadis' radical imaginary is future-oriented and characterised by unleashed creativity. This unbounded, creative imagination can be described as a psychic process of producing and creating meaning, allowing individuals to perceive 'in a thing what it is not, to see it other than it is' (2005, p. 127). Actual imaginaries and radical imagination, also termed as institutionalised and instituting imaginaries in Castoriadis' work, introduce both stability and change into the imaginary institution of society. Castoriadis describes the social imaginary as a kind of 'magma' (2005, p. 369), a concept that emphasises a dynamic understanding of imaginaries as constantly evolving and relational constructs, yet not restricting them to the already institutionalised (yet ever-changing) imaginaries but opening them up to include radical imagination. In our own account of the imaginaries of the future, radical imagination has to be acknowledged in its transformative and creative potential. Yet, we will begin by considering the imaginaries of the future as social imaginaries; that is, as the 'actual imaginary' following Castoriadis' terms.

Throughout our socialisation, we acquire the habit of viewing our lives with an eye towards the future, seeking a sense of fulfilment and a destination in what is yet to come, in who we are yet to become. The future is envisioned as the ultimate goal of the journey. The various ways individuals perceive this future as their destination and the potential pathways leading to it are not arbitrary but deeply anchored in social imaginaries of the future. These institutionalised imaginaries become incorporated into who we are, into our worldviews, and result in personalised narratives that may foreground our actions. The coherence between our personal narratives and the wider social imaginaries makes the communication (and exchange) of our life stories an act of sociability.

It is important to clarify that these social imaginaries are not rigid 'social facts' that impose themselves upon individuals. As discussed earlier, social imaginaries are ongoing processes in which we all participate, yet not in equal terms. They are shaped by our reciprocal actions and effects which, as highlighted by Simmel, may reside in the most fleeting encounters or in the most institutionalised organisations: whether it's through a simple gaze, a handshake, a written letter or the act of preparing and presenting ourselves when we meet others (1992, p. 33), or in being exposed to and partaking in the same media system, using the same means of transportation or sharing a passport. Thus, it's through these relational threads that bind us together that both society and the individual come into existence. And they may come to existence in many different forms and ways, relating in innumerable manners to time, and to the future specifically.

Imaginaries of the future play a substantial role in connecting individual and social life as we understand it. They give rise to, inform and sustain shared, taken-for-granted assumptions and narratives, both major and minor, about the nature of our individual lives and our collective existence. In some cases, the relationship to the future may be narrated and experienced in the first person of the plural, in the first person of the singular, or as closed to humans to partake in. Within the context of the European modern path we were referring to in a previous section, the future is often experienced, narrated and assessed as a personal, individual one (Cantó-Milà et al., 2020). This individualistic perspective is particularly pronounced in neoliberal social contexts, where we are evaluated, and we evaluate ourselves, based on our individual futures. As our lives unfold, we are judged by the

futures we have already reached or failed to achieve (Bröckling, 2013; Foucault, 2008; Lemke, 2001). In our roles as self-entrepreneurs, we strive to envision ourselves as the architects of our choices and destinations, and we, in turn, assess ourselves and others accordingly. And, although these imaginaries are primarily experienced on an individual level, they possess the invisible yet potent capacity to bind us together.

## **Operationalising the analysis of imaginaries of the future**

An interesting approach to studying imaginaries of the future within the context of sociological research finds precedent in Ann Mische's work on projects and projectivity as components of a sociology of the future, centred around the perspective of action or inaction. In addition, Tavory and Eliasoph's concept of 'Coordinating Futures' introduces distinctions in the way we engage with and envision the future(s) (Mische, 2009; Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013).

In her concluding remarks in the article 'Researching futures in action', Mische emphasises the importance of examining future projections, acknowledging their tenuous and uncertain nature. She highlights how these projections deeply influence social interactions, often in contradictory and surprising ways, without assuming that they necessarily come true (Mische, 2009, p. 702). This focus on the study of projections aligns with our emphasis on certain aspects of the imaginaries of the future. Projections are integral to our reciprocal relations and contribute to the construction of society, extending their influence into the unpredictable future. Therefore, the analysis of our imaginaries of the future holds significance because these imaginaries profoundly shape the present. They influence the decisions we make, the actions we take, the perspectives we share, the lifestyles we create and follow and the causes we champion.

Mische proposes a nine-dimensional framework for analysing future projections, which provides a deeper understanding of them (Mische, 2009, pp. 699–701): reach, breadth, clarity, contingency, expandability, volition, sociality, connectivity and genre.<sup>3</sup> In parallel to Mische's distinctions, in our previous works, we have developed an analytical framework based on interconnected 'images', 'figures' and 'forms' to relationally understand the imaginaries of the future as they are expressed and mobilised in autobiographical narrations (Cantó-Milà & Seebach, 2015; Cantó-Milà et al., 2020). Like other second-order concepts, imaginaries cannot be grasped directly. Instead, we view them as a relational assembly of images, figures and forms that articulate our shared but not uniformly held assumptions, expectations, anticipations, fears, plans and hopes about what lies ahead. These elements combine in various ways to create a narrative that, more or less consciously, communicates, expresses, shapes and reshapes our imaginaries of the future.

We understand 'images' as concrete contents that come to mind when thinking about the future. Some of those 'images of the future' are recurring topics or dimensions of people's lives such as 'work', 'family', 'children', 'partner', 'technology', 'success' and 'poverty'. Others are more concrete and personal. 'Figures' are ways of framing these images, articulating meaning beyond the mere content of each image. In our previous work (Cantó-Milà & Seebach, 2015), we analysed autobiographical interviews and

identified, for instance, figures like: ‘we make our own future’ (self-made wo/man), ‘the future is already written’ (destiny/fate), ‘no one can know and control the future’ (open future), ‘time is cyclical’ (past, present and future as a continuous circle), among others. Thus, for example, a narration that involves the images of ‘children’, ‘family’ and ‘work’ takes different nuances and meanings if it is formulated within the figure of ‘cyclical time’, ‘self-made wo/man’ or ‘fate’. One figure may present having children as almost part of a natural cycle of life, the other as a choice and a decision that mainly depended on the parent’s will, and the figure, ‘fate’, turns the fact of having a child into something that was already written in the stars, by the gods or by whomever may write the book of life for us and hold the threads of our existence (Bruner, 1991; Ricoeur, 1984).

Although the importance of images and figures is paramount, they alone cannot fully capture the complexity of how imaginaries of the future are interwoven, mobilised and reflected in individual narratives. Here, the concept of ‘forms’ can play a pivotal role. ‘Forms’ can be understood as the overarching frameworks or structures that guide the narration of these combinations of figures and images, creating a coherent thread throughout the narrative (Ricoeur, 1984). Forms serve to modulate the expressions of certainty, desirability, probability and expectancy within the narrative. They provide a structure that helps shape the way these elements interact and are presented. Moreover, forms are closely related to various genres of narration, influencing the way we engage with and narrate the future across different contexts (Ricoeur, 1984). All in all, forms act as the underlying frameworks that give structure and coherence to the diverse array of images and figures. They help make sense of the narratives we construct about the future, providing a lens through which we view and interpret what is yet to come (Ricoeur, 1984).

With the concepts of images, figures and forms, we gain the tools to provide accurate accounts and analyse narrations, particularly in the case at hand, which concerns narrations of the future – be it one’s personal future, collective futures and beyond. However, it would be an oversimplification to assume that these concepts grant us immediate access to the complex domain of imaginaries of the future. Much like languages, imaginaries are not the exclusive creation of an individual or a select group; rather, they result from ongoing processes of human relationality (which includes relations to non-humans as well). They are relational and ever-evolving constructs, mirroring the nature of languages, and can be shaped to articulate, and mobilise, individual narrations. Yet they do not solely originate from these narrations. Instead, they shape and are shaped by them, continuously sustained through this intricate interplay, between imagination, and taken-for-grantedness, sociability, creativity, practice, and power.

As concepts of the second concepts, imaginaries of the future demand an additional layer of relationality for comprehensive consideration. The conceptual tools of images, figures and forms allow us to reach an in-depth analysis when analysing transcribed interviews, literary fictional or non-fictional texts, films or theatre plays. However, to assert that we have delved into a social imaginary, the just mentioned additional layer of relationality must guide us in tracing connections among the analysed texts. This process illuminates shared elements within the social imaginaries, as we were discussing at the beginning of this text. Through an intertextual analysis, we can relationally delineate the



contours of shared, contested, disputed, hegemonic, marginal, seemingly unanimous, fragile and robust, imaginaries. Similar to collective memories as studied by Halbwachs (2020), imaginaries are also made and remade in interrelation with one another. Halbwachs theorised how things we all remember, like birthdays (especially one's own birthday), become mnemonic common places formed relationally, interindividually and embedded within broader historical and cultural processes. Likewise, certain images and figures become commonplaces for shaping individual, shared and collective futures interrelationally, not directly resulting from individual or group action, but in a contested reciprocal shaping of imaginaries. Hence, concepts like Mische's 'projections' (2009) or 'trajectories' gain an additional dimension and depth, when embedded within a relational analysis.

The work of Tavory and Eliasoph (2013) adds additional value to a temporal framework for the analysis of narrations of the future as well as for the more relational analysis of the social imaginaries of the future and of time in general. These authors distinguish what they call 'forms of future-coordination into three basic modes: a) protentions, b) trajectories, and c) plans and temporal landscapes' (2013, p. 909). Trajectories fit well with the individualised trajectory narratives and projects/projections. Protentions are those forms of taken-for-grantedness that almost without reflection intervene in future projections of very short reach (Husserl, 2019; Schütz, 1946). Temporal landscapes and plans are the 'overarching temporal orientations that actors experience as inevitable and even natural' (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013, p. 909). They are the frameworks, underlying layers, assumptions and structural conditions that pre-organise the order of time, the calendar and consequently also the future and potential future projections. We understand temporal landscapes as the general social time-orientedness (e.g. towards the past, towards the future), the temporal embedding (e.g. what social meaning the future holds within a social constellation) and the temporal rhythm of the social (theories of social rhythm and acceleration; e.g. Rosa, 2009; 2019). We propose to rename plans as 'social scripts' for clarity reasons. The concept of 'plans' is very often articulated in the narrations of individual trajectories, filled with a strong self-perception of volition and agency and could easily become a 'false friend' in the coding or data analysis processes. Furthermore, these 'scripts' either directly inscribe the conditions for our social practices (e.g. a calendrical organisation of certain practices, temporal organisation of individual lives in institutions – school years) or they provide cultural or discursive narratives for when certain things should or need to happen during one's life cycle (when we should be married, have children, when we are considered to be old or just old enough).

Protentions follow mainly a logic based on embodied past experiences, practices and a trust in underlying rules and norms of social behaviour. Temporal landscapes and social scripts are more directly shaped by structural, cultural and discursive elements. Trajectories intertwine embodied practices and dispositions with grand narratives and discursive frames of what is and ought to be (in alignment with Taylor's definition of social imaginaries, and Castoriadis' actual imaginary). This intertwining or entanglement is processual and relational, and yet, notwithstanding, an analytical separation helps to analyse with clarity how underlying structures influence the concretisation of narratives of the future, hence articulating projections and horizons.

## **Social imaginaries of the future within the frame of a sociology of the future**

After elaborating on the concept of social imaginaries of the future to emphasise their significance and centrality in the context of sociology of the future, we now shift our focus to other equally crucial elements that contribute to our comprehensive approach to the sociology of the future. These elements include imagination, temporalities, materiality and latent futures, also referred to as futures in the making.

### *On imaginaries and radical imagination*

Castoriadis conceived the social imaginary as composed of the actual imaginary (corresponding to what Taylor has called ‘social imaginaries’) and the radical imaginary, which represents unbounded human creativity and the possibility of seeing things as they are not, as they could be, could become or could have been. The relationship between these two forms of the imaginary is not stable; it does not always remain the same, the only constant is its continuous entanglement within the magma of the social imaginary. They do not exist without one another.

There are societal, cultural and material contexts that actively enhance the creative power of the radical imaginary, contexts that do not restrain it and contexts that try to keep it as quiet and invisible as possible. Of course, we are not speaking of three modes or three gears, but of a continuum, a gradation, as in Simmel’s relationship between proximity and distance, where neither complete proximity nor complete distance can be reached or would make any sense. Moving along the continuum is rich in analytical possibilities. While Athens in the fifth century BC seems to embody for Castoriadis (2007) one of those moments in which the boundaries of the thinkable expanded and reflections and projections could be born that would have been unimaginable just a few decades before, our late modernity can be characterised by a progressive sedation of the radical imaginary, as authors like Fisher (2009, 2014) and Jameson (1991) have emphasised, and writers like Haraway (2016), Le Guin (2014) and Butler (2014, 2019) have fought to counterbalance.

### *The role of materiality in imaginaries of the future and beyond*

Material conditions undeniably play a crucial role in shaping the possibilities for constructing, articulating, embodying and projecting imaginaries of the future. Despite this recognition of the deep entanglement between matter and imaginaries, as discussed by Adam and Groves (2007, pp. 36–37), Michael (2017, p. 10), Barad (2003) and Haraway (2016), we have chosen to exclude materiality from our conceptual framework of imaginaries of the future for analytical purposes. In line with Mische’s point about the inability to derive future events directly from present actions, Tutton (2017), from a materialist science and technology studies perspective, has advocated for an approach to ‘wicked futures’ that incorporates a materialist account of ‘latent futures’ or ‘futures-in-the-making’. He highlights a significant tension in terms of how to navigate the relationship between imagination and materiality, between how futures are represented or

performed in discursive practices and their intended and unintended material consequences (Tutton, 2017, pp. 8–10). Tutton's arguments suggest a redefinition of futures as 'entanglements of matter and meaning' (Tutton, 2017, p. 9), where both aspects engage but should not be reduced solely to their imaginary component.

While we fully acknowledge the validity of these assertions in the context of futures research and do not advocate for reducing sociological engagement with the future to any 'imaginary component' at all, we do argue that focusing on imaginaries of the future as an independent and pertinent concept within this broader theoretical framework is analytically fruitful. Thus, when we propose to explore imaginaries of the future, our intention is not to disregard the deep entanglement of discursive practices and their material consequences. We acknowledge the profound material dimensions interwoven in protentions, trajectories, temporal landscapes and social scripts. Our rationale for keeping materiality and imaginaries separate for analytical purposes is to allow for the identification of discrepancies. These distinctions/discrepancies become particularly important when narratives of the future, which articulate imaginaries of these futures, present scenarios that, from a material perspective, are implausible or when they directly articulate discursive futures that contradict the futures emerging at the material level. In our empirical work (Cantó-Milà et al., 2020), we have encountered clear contradictions across these dimensions, for instance in the case of climate change, which have led us to advocate for maintaining this analytical separation to foster a more comprehensive understanding of our complex navigation through time, living in time.

The argument we wish to emphasise regarding the importance and utility of this separation draws from Koselleck's theory of multiple temporalities (Jordheim, 2012; Koselleck, 2004). While we exist in an unbreakable relationship of reciprocal effects with everything that surrounds us in space and time, not everything that coexists in time and space with us shares the same temporality. This consideration was implicitly introduced earlier when we discussed Tavory and Eliasoph's work on protentions, trajectories, social scripts and temporal landscapes (2013). However, it needs to be fully incorporated into our ongoing discussion.

As we may raise our eyes on a starry night to admire the sky, and we are indeed together in space and time with everything that surrounds us, the light we actually see at this very moment is light that shone a long time ago. We're together in space and time with the light that has reached us from the stars, but the stars and us do not share the same temporal scope. This is the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous, as Koselleck termed it. At the same time, when we experience the first signs of climate change, we may be simultaneous with these concrete manifestations of climate change, but what has led to these manifestations has been in the making for decades. Climate change has been a latent future long before it became part of our imaginary. Koselleck makes us aware of the differences that we must acknowledge regarding geological time, natural time, historical time, personal time . . . and with Tavory and Eliasoph, we could add the time of protentions which points at a level of immediacy that goes beyond the level of personal time, which is closer to 'trajectories' in their terms. If we remain with Tavory and Eliasoph, we may also highlight the different temporalities of protentions, trajectories, temporal landscapes and social scripts. This of course implies that the different temporalities we were pointing at do not only affect the difference and differentiation

between imaginaries and futures in the making, but there are also different layers of temporalities within our imaginaries as well. On one side, we have protentions and their almost immediacy, representing the backwards-looking memories and forward-looking anticipations that shape our immediate actions and decisions. On the other side, we have temporal landscapes that embrace decades and sometimes even centuries of taken-for-grantednesses. These temporal landscapes, along with our trajectories, provide the broader context in which we frame our life experiences, construct historical accounts and develop our understanding of our planet's long-term transformations.

## Concluding remarks

In conclusion, our elaboration on imaginaries of the future within the framework of a sociological research on futures has highlighted the analytical significance of integrating the analysis of social imaginaries, imagination, as well as their reciprocal relations, with an inquiry into latent futures, alongside an awareness of the unforeseen and unintended consequences of actions in their broadest sense. Our conceptual framework, inspired by the works of Simmel, Taylor, Castoriadis, Mische, and Tavory and Eliasoph, allows us to delve into how imaginaries of the future shape our social relations, interactions, decisions and the very constitution of society.

Through the concepts of 'images', 'figures' and 'forms', we have acquired valuable tools to depict and interpret how individuals and communities narrate the future, and how these narratives relate to 'social imaginaries'. These concepts allow us to analyse the specific content that emerges when individuals implicitly or explicitly contemplate the future, understand how this content is framed and ascribed meaning and discern the overarching structures that steer the narratives concerning the future.

Yet, it's crucial to acknowledge that analysing imaginaries is not a straightforward task. Similar to languages, imaginaries are not the exclusive creation of individuals or select groups; they are relational, ever-evolving and continuously shaping and being shaped by individual and collective narratives. To comprehensively address social imaginaries, we have recognised the need for an additional relational layer of analysis, allowing us to trace connections among codified and analysed texts, ultimately unveiling shared elements of social imaginaries (Castoriadis' 'actual imaginary'). This interconnectedness reflects the complexity of how imaginaries are interwoven, mobilised and mirrored in narratives.

In our comprehensive approach to the sociology of the future, we have also explored Castoriadis' distinction between the 'actual imaginary' and the 'radical imaginary', acknowledging the constant, relational and processual, interplay between these two facets of the imaginary, as well as the resulting different gradations of openness and scope for creative imagination within the societal milieu. In addition, we have separated materiality from our analytical framework for clarity, although we acknowledge its role in shaping futurescapes in a manner that resonates with the dimension of the imaginaries.

In a comprehensive approach to the sociology of the future, we have also explored the distinction between the 'actual imaginary' and the 'radical imaginary', recognising the constant interplay between these two forms of the imaginary, and the different openness or closeness of the scope for creative imagination resulting from each combination

of these two faces of the imaginary within the social magma. Furthermore, while acknowledging the role of materiality in shaping ‘futurescapes’ in a related yet by no means synonymous manner with the dimension of ‘imaginaries’, we have chosen to disentangle the entanglement of these dimensions for analytical purposes only.

Furthermore, we have integrated the work of Tavory and Eliasoph, introducing ‘protentions’, ‘trajectories’, ‘temporal landscapes’ and social scripts, which have deepened our understanding of how future narratives are constructed and coordinated across temporalities. These concepts emphasise the various time scopes at play within our imaginaries, from immediate protentions to overarching temporal orientations that shape our understanding of the world.

As we continue to explore the ever-evolving landscapes of imaginaries of the future, we are reminded of the simultaneous coexistence of the non-simultaneous, the interplay of past experiences, embodied practices and narratives. Much like stars in the night sky shine with light that has travelled through time and space, our imaginaries reflect the complexities of the times we live in, the histories we carry and the futures we envision. In this dynamic interplay of time/space, the material and the imaginary, the sociology of the future finds its purpose; that is, to unravel the threads of our collective imaginaries and imagination, to decipher the narratives shaping and (re)interpreting our present as well as our past, hence embedding and envisioning our next steps ‘forward’.

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### **Notes**

1. Although this text is clearly focused on the relation between present and future, we fully acknowledge the centrality of the past in shaping our present and hence our imaginaries, imagination and futures in the making. For the modern European specificities regarding our relation to temporalities, past, present and future, see Koselleck’s account of the disjunction of experience and expectation (2004, pp. 255–275).
2. Compare with Wagner (1994) for an elucidation of the reciprocal processes of liberty and discipline that configure European modernity.

3. For a more detailed account of Mische's analytical dimensions: (1) Reach: This dimension considers the temporal distance between the present and future, categorising it as short, medium or long term. (2) Breadth: It assesses the range of possibilities considered at different points in time. (3) Clarity: This dimension examines the level of detail and clarity with which the future is imagined. (4) Contingency: It explores the degrees of certainty or flexibility of future scenarios. (5) Expandability: This dimension concerns the potential for growth or narrowing of future possibilities. (6) Volition: It focuses on the actor's influence or agency concerning the impending future. (7) Sociality: This dimension relates to the extent to which future projections involve others and their actions in a relational manner. (8) Connectivity: It considers the interrelatedness of future imaginaries and their temporal scopes. (9) Genre: This dimension pertains to the narrating style used in envisioning the future, such as utopian, dystopian or social drama (Mische, 2009, p. 701).

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