

Diagnoses of the Future Horizon

Abstract This chapter considers how the future has been conceptualised in sociological work, focusing predominantly on theoretical accounts which have sought to diagnose the character of the future horizon due to their strong influence on the discipline. While the future horizons of pre-modern and modern eras have been conceptualised in largely uniform ways (with some notable exceptions), the future of the contemporary, late modern era is comparatively contested. Competing diagnoses of this era as, for instance, late or post-modern, and as characterised by temporal acceleration, risk, or a new relationship with tradition are placed into dialogue in this chapter in order to highlight their key points of difference and similarity. Finally, alternative accounts of temporality and futurity produced by figures such as Johannes Fabian and Barbara Adam are considered.

Keywords Future thinking • Social acceleration • Risk society
Post-traditional society

While analytic distinctions between premodern and modern forms of temporality are commonly utilised and understood within sociological literature,¹ the categorisation of the contemporary future horizon with reference to this dichotomy remains a deeply contested issue, in part because of the sheer number of competing analytical frameworks which have been deployed as diagnostic tools. In establishing the context within which the empirical component of the book is situated,

this chapter first examines how sociological studies concerned with future-oriented thinking have construed the premodern/modern distinction before focusing on how the contemporary future has been conceptualised, with the ultimate aim of comparing these popular theoretical approaches with the findings of the study in later chapters. Although this chapter focuses on the type of grand, epochal theorising that seeks to define the character of the future horizon at specific historical junctures, the discussion also indicates some key points at which theories of this kind have been challenged. Such challenges are largely posed by more recent studies of historical contexts that contest the validity of totalising claims, as well as by accounts that have questioned the assumptions upon which grand theories of this type are based.

THE PREMODERN FUTURE

Although theoretical accounts of the premodern future horizon are not uncontested, the premodern future is generally characterised as a predetermined or ‘closed’ horizon. This is overwhelmingly attributed to what Armin Nassehi (1994: 48) has termed the ‘world-immanent presence of God’, which refers to the perceived presence and intervention of God in the material world. This reading of the premodern future has generally reinforced claims of a shared social imaginary during this era, which was buttressed by the largely static nature of social change and mobility. For instance, a number of accounts have argued that the sense of eternity fostered by the premodern perception of the future was reinforced by the highly stratified organisation of society, which bolstered stable expectations by affording individuals little chance of social mobility, and by reproducing unity, hierarchy and centralism in the societal form (Nassehi 1994).

This reading of the premodern future horizon (as determined or predictable) is often used to support claims about the qualitative experience of time during this period. In his analysis of the progress of secularisation since the Axial Age, Charles Taylor (2007) has proposed that what he terms the ‘higher times’ of the divine acted as an organising field for the ‘profane’, ordinary time of everyday life, which was thought to have been guided by natural processes such as changes in seasons. For instance, religious holidays and festivals that recurred annually punctuated the profane time of everyday life and fostered a sense of both constancy and eternity as time stretched on endlessly while returning to the same events.² Using this dual model of temporality, Taylor argues that

the experience of the future horizon of premodern times as ‘closed’ or determined established a sense of continuity between the past and present. It is important to note that this account does not suggest that change did not occur over time. Rather, it is intended to highlight that expectations of the world were guided entirely by the past (as communicated by predecessors), and as such when change did occur it took place gradually. This meant that processes of change did not affect a rupture between the past and the present and therefore did not disrupt the cyclical form of time and the corresponding structure of expectations (Koselleck 1985). It is therefore proposed that during this period strategies were developed for dealing with expectations that did not relate to previous experiences. They were related to the hereafter, rather than to the immediate world, and were therefore channelled out of the horizon of the future.

Some of the key tenets of this account of the future have been challenged by more recent scholarship which has taken issue particularly with the claim that the premodern era was marked by a single, predetermined view of the future. In her study of future perceptions in ancient Greece, Beerden (2014) has claimed that divination—a practice through which signs perceived to be sent by supernatural forces are interpreted—was used as a means of managing the uncertainty of the future. Although such a future was still necessarily mediated by the divine and could, therefore, be perceived as predetermined or perhaps not entirely open in this sense, Berdeen also found that by virtue of knowing the future (at least from their perspective) individuals felt that they could act to avoid or change certain outcomes. In this way, the premodern future, as experienced by the ancient Greeks, was plural rather than singular. The general thrust of this claim is supported in the work of Adam and Groves (2007) who similarly found that premodern cultures used means such as divination to experience the future as somewhat knowable. This runs against the grain of the conventional sociological account of the premodern future as the providence of the Gods.

Taken together, these accounts of the premodern future, although presenting several differing contentions, nevertheless converge on two central claims. Firstly, they depict an enchanted world view which is characterised by the absence of a strong distinction between human and supernatural forces. Secondly, the future that is associated with this world view, while not necessarily singular and entirely outside of human control, is equally not depicted as lying entirely in human hands.

THE MODERN FUTURE

The premodern perception of the future, which has commonly been depicted as a period of stable and constant expectations, is generally thought to have been disrupted by the process of modernisation. In studies of modernisation, Max Weber's account has often been used as a starting point, as he is the background figure who is common to almost all major accounts and discussions of modernity (Tiryakian 2001). For Weber, the key to understanding the distinctiveness of Western modernity is the disenchantment of the world, a process by which the ambiguities of the natural world and human experience were stripped away (at least in principle) as these realms became knowable, predictable, and manipulable by human actors (Jenkins 2000). A number of events that coincided with this process—such as the beginning of the French Revolution—have been read as moments of rupture that made a break with the expectations underpinning the premodern social order, and in so doing produced a new understanding of the future horizon as open and manipulable by human actors (Zerubavel 1981).

For Weber, the process of disenchantment was underpinned by two main developments which each shaped how the newly open horizon of the future could be perceived. The first was the intellectualisation of the world which was augmented through the scientific revolutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and contributed to a view of human achievements as ends in themselves (rather than illustrations of the glory of God) (Seidman 1983). The second development was the process of secularisation through which the reform, rationalisation and privatisation of religion dismantled the 'higher times' of the divine (Taylor 2007) and formed a more rigid separation between the transcendent and immanent world.³ The processes of secularisation and intellectualisation were instrumental in forming the perception that humans could have a guiding hand in their destiny, which provided a new conceptual framework for human activity (Nassehi 1994).

Although disenchantment and the processes of intellectualisation and secularisation are conceptually linked to an open and contingent future horizon, Weber's account of modernity has also been read as pessimistic or fatalistic. This reading—which has influenced studies of the contemporary future horizon—focuses on the concept of rationalisation which, along with bureaucratisation, accompanied the intellectualisation

of culture (Weiss 1987). These processes transformed the premodern social order based on divine rules and precepts into a new, modern social order governed by laws legitimated by a formal, procedural type of rationality. Weber (1930/2001) uses the metaphor of an ‘iron cage’⁴ to describe the increasingly predictable and instrumental character of human action in the context of a rationalised society in which structures—such as those of rational administration—entrap behaviour into patterns and routines. He argues that in this formalised social universe individuals are increasingly dominated by mechanical processes that are underpinned by the development of an instrumental form of rationality rooted in the three dominant forces of modern life: capitalism, science and bureaucratic organisation. The energy underpinning these spheres is manifest in organisations for which order, predictability and regularity become ends in themselves, a process which opens individuals up to a mechanical form of standardisation and homogenisation that narrows the bounds of acceptable conduct. As such, while Weber (1958) proposes that modern society is differentiated into value spheres that are organised through competing forms of rationality—which suggests that values become pluralised—his understanding of modernisation has nevertheless been read as a linear narrative marching towards a rationalised and disenchanted world. Consequently, while the equation of modernisation with disenchantment suggests a reading of time as linear—which has facilitated the modern perception of the future horizon as both open and contingent—the process of rationalisation which accompanies it has informed readings of contemporary society as increasingly homogeneous in conduct and culture, which suggests that a similar narrowing or closure may be reflected in subjective perceptions of the future.

The reading of modernisation as a steady march towards the rationalisation and disenchantment of the world has also been accompanied by the cognate association between modernity and continuous progress. Such ideas are reflected in Parsons’ (1964) evolutionary understanding of modernisation and Kohli’s (1986) claims of the growing normalisation and predictability of the modern life-course. Each of these accounts point towards a future which is at once a space of continual betterment, and a space which is increasingly open to human intervention and control. These ideas ultimately contribute to what is termed a ‘narrative of progress’ in the context of this book.

THE LATE MODERN FUTURE

While the premodern and modern future have broadly been conceptualised as closed and open horizons respectively, the future horizon of what has been termed late, second, reflexive or postmodernity has been subject to a greater degree of debate. As demonstrated by the variety of terms with which it has been conceptualised, the character of the late modern future is contested. This is the context in which the present study takes place. The following discussion therefore establishes how the possibilities for perceiving the future have been set in existing theoretical work. The inclusion of each of these approaches in this chapter is based on both their influence and their applicability to discussions of the long-term future horizon.⁵

Postmodern Decline and Fragmentation

The postmodern account of the contemporary future horizon rests upon a claim that the conditions under which society and the future could be imagined underwent a second substantial shift in the mid-late twentieth century. Although attributed to events such as the end of WWII (Heller 1999) and epistemological changes resulting in the growing realisation of the contradictions inherent in the project of modernity (Beck 1992), this shift is commonly thought to have come about due to the collapse of the modern narrative of progress which provided societies with a cohesive vision of themselves as progressing into a unified future horizon shaped by expectations of improvement and perfection. Widespread declarations of the decline of progress in social, cultural and critical theory culminated in the publication of Jean-François Lyotard's (1984) pamphlet *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* which, by declaring that the possibility of meta-narratives such as those of history and progress had come to a close, posed the quintessentially postmodern question of how to go on after the collapse of such narratives. A number of issues that are central to the concerns motivating this project—such as whether imaginings of the future are possible in this context as well as what form they might take—are implicit in this question.

For Lyotard, modernisation was a process through which meta-narratives, such as those of history and progress, were placed into an epistemologically privileged position and became metaphysical diagnoses of the state of modern society. He argues that these narratives

maintained this position by dismissing alternative representations as ideology that should be omitted from scientific and political life. Lyotard, therefore, contends that the decline of these narratives (which marked the beginning of the postmodern era) signified a reversal of this process. As a result, he associates the decline of these narratives with the development of incompatible, relativistic perspectives which undermined the possibility of the socially shared truths and norms necessary for the development of viable social imaginaries. Lyotard therefore proposes a negative reading of modernity, seeing it not as an opening up of society to a plurality of perspectives and viewpoints, but instead as a process of closure under which the possibility of these viewpoints is eroded. In a similar vein, Jean Baudrillard (1990) addresses more directly the implications that such developments may have on socially shared views of the future by reading the decline of progress as a loss of the teleological orientation of society and equating it with a loss of the conditions under which meaning can be interpreted. This claim ultimately led Baudrillard to propose that, in the postmodern context, time is emptied of its meaning and simply left to serve the function of synchronisation which facilitates social action.

By proposing that the postmodern era has corresponded with an extreme narrowing of the conditions under which shared understanding of the future are possible, the postmodern account appears to suggest that while the future may be imagined as a factual extrapolation of present conditions, the loss of socially shared visions and meanings has stripped away its normative potential to form a creative space for imaginings, dreams and interpretations. Lyotard (1984: 60) appears to confirm this reading, stating that ‘we no longer have recourse to the grand narratives—we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse’. This statement highlights that the erosion of grand narratives leads to a pluralised, relativised understanding of truth and cultural identity, and as a result suggests that the conditions under which shared, socially legitimated accounts of the future can be formed have been extinguished.

Such claims are echoed in accounts which have addressed the concept of social imaginaries. Although he does not align himself with the postmodern perspective, Cornelius Castoriadis (1997) has similarly diagnosed a contemporary crisis in what he terms ‘social imaginary significations’ or privileged symbolic apparatuses that produce a coherent

image of a given society, a thesis which directly mirrors the decline of meta-narratives of history and progress. He relates this crisis to an erosion of collective social identities (as the Chosen People or the subjects of a specific king, for instance) and argues that such developments have two important implications. Firstly, the loss of these significations has caused individuals to draw significations from the past into a contemporary context with which they do not correspond, leading them to form a decontextualised collage that cannot intelligibly disclose the nature of their society. Secondly, this loss of a collective social identity as a seat of meaning—providing material from which individuals can shape meaning in their lives and for their deaths—has resulted in the perception of social norms and mores as constraints imposed on de-socialised, autonomous individuals. For Castoriadis, the loss of meta-narratives and the erosion of the collective identities that they support has led to the decline of the conditions under which meanings can be socially recognised, which severely undermines the possibility that coherent social imaginaries can be formed. However, while the claims of Castoriadis and the postmodern theorists resonate with the notion that the long-term future has been eclipsed by more immediate concerns (as outlined in the introduction), it remains to be questioned whether unified perceptions of the long-term future have ceased to be viable in empirical experience.

Social Acceleration and the Dominance of the Present

While postmodern scholars have viewed the future horizon as a space of irreconcilable fragmentation (Lyotard 1984), several sociologists of time have contended that the future horizon has been eclipsed by a growing focus on the present. Such claims have been communicated predominantly through the interrelated concepts of acceleration and immediacy. These accounts have proposed that an accelerated perception of time developed as a result of the modernisation of society, commonly finding its genesis in the technological advances of the industrial revolution (Thompson 1967) and the development of an increasingly globalised capitalist economy (Taylor 1911/2008; Harvey 1989). This new perception of time is therefore associated with science, capitalism and bureaucratic forms of organisation—the spheres that Weber associated with the process of rationalisation.

Hartmut Rosa (2013) has drawn together contemporary technological, social and experiential developments, arguing that the acceleration of society in the context of modernity is driven by a combination of the increasing velocity of technology, the rate of change and the pace of life. His thesis consequently has implications on various levels of experience and has been used as the conceptual underpinning of his reading of modernisation as a process of ever-increasing acceleration (Rosa 2013). At first glance, the attribution of social acceleration to the dynamics of technological development and capitalist production appears to echo the Marxist claim that the acceleration of time can be attributed purely to changes in the dominant modes of production (Harvey 1989). Rosa's account, however, avoids reducing the social and cultural aspects of acceleration to epiphenomenal effects of economic processes by arguing that the economic logic of this account is not continuous with subjective experiences of acceleration, which sometimes run counter to the economic interests of actors. Rosa (2013) has explicitly discussed the implications that his work has for the future, contending that the combined forces of technological innovation, social change and the increased tempo of life have not moved society forward upon a historical trajectory. Instead, he argues that these forces have destroyed the idea of history by placing it into a context in which 'nothing remains the way it is while at the same time *nothing essentially changes*' (Rosa 2013: 283). This static image suggests that a meaningful relationship with the future is impossible, as individuals appear unable to imagine a society which differs from the one that they inhabit at present. As such, when the long-term future is read in the terms of Rosa's (2013: 283) account it appears to be stripped of any normative content, while the flatter lines of expectation are similarly superseded by what Rosa terms the 'frenetic standstill' of a society in which the temporal rhythms have caused a homogenisation of experience and perception.

Similar claims are evident in the work of a number of scholars who have also discussed temporal acceleration. Carmen Leccardi (2012), for example, has argued that the acceleration of time impacts not only upon individuals' qualitative experiences of time, but also upon their perceptions of the future. Indeed, as Leccardi (2012: 61–62) outlines, the collateral effects of the acceleration of time include:

the contraction in temporal horizons and the dominion of the "short term"; the out-and-out hegemony of the *deadline*, elaborated as a

principle of action; the discrediting of perspectives founded on the idea of “once and for all” (i.e. irreversibility); the spread of a culture of the provisory; and the growing difficulty in relating to the future and constructing projects.

By projects, Leccardi is here referring to the ‘projects of the self’ through which individuals construct their biographies, which makes reference to both the increasing difficulty of establishing a coherent identity and envisioning a point beyond the present. The acceleration of time is therefore linked to what has been termed ‘the coming of immediacy’ (Tomlinson 2007). The resulting state—in which the future comes to be subservient to the present—has been termed the ‘extended’ (Nowotny 1994) or ‘absolute’ (Heller 1999) present. This can be read as a result of the three aspects of acceleration which Rosa outlines (which are the acceleration of technological development, the rate of social change and the pace of life). Indeed, it appears that the steady increase in the general rate of change and pace of life has meant that the temporal distance which individuals can project into the past and future respectively without seeing a world which is alien to their present-day lifeworld, or finding themselves unable to infer the likely conditions, has increasingly shrunk. Such developments appear to lead to what Hermann Lübbe (2008) has termed a contraction of the present.⁶ These developments have been explained in part by the ever-increasing complexity and contingency of the structures of expectations with which social actors operate. Such developments can be related to numerous claims that conceptual links between the past, present and future are no longer perceived as having a linear or chronological logic, which again highlights how the existing structures of expectations with which individuals navigated the future are claimed to have been dismantled (Nowotny 1994; Harvey 1989; Bauman 1998).

Ultimately, this body of work can be read as suggesting that the present has come to dominate social concerns at the expense of the future, whether it is eclipsed by an extended or absolute present, rendered incoherent by the ever-increasing complexity of society, or forced out of focus by the acceleration of the temporal underpinnings of both personal and social life. The largely uncontested claims that temporal acceleration found its genesis in techno-scientific thought and developments highlight that this body of work is relatively sympathetic with a reading of modernisation as the progressive rationalisation of the world, which

has filtered into individual perceptions and dispositions. The reading of the contemporary condition as a frenetic standstill is also reminiscent of Francis Fukuyama's (1992) influential claim that the dominance of liberal democracies at the close of the Cold War brought the sociocultural evolution of mankind to a standstill. Such claims suggest that shared perceptions of the future have become untenable not because the conditions under which collective understandings can form have been eroded, but because the future itself either directly reflects the present or else is crowded out by present-day concerns. Similarly, this account shares several commonalities with the postmodern approach that was discussed earlier in this chapter. Specifically, although the postmodernists claim that the grand narratives through which one can perceive the long-term future have become untenable and the acceleration theorists contend that they are simply eclipsed by more pressing concerns, these accounts each propose that contemporary individuals are unable to form viable imaginings of the long-term future horizon.

Risk and Uncertainty

The accounts of the contemporary future horizon outlined above suggest that it is fragmented and disjointed from previous eras. For instance, the postmodern account of the end of modernity poses a significant challenge to contemporary sociology, which is largely underpinned by dominant narratives of modernisation. In answer to such claims, Ulrich Beck (1992) conceptualised modernity as unfolding in two stages: first and *second* or *reflexive*. In so doing, he emphasised the continuing relevance of modernity by claiming that its fundamental principles (such as the free market or the nation-state order) persist in the reflexive modern era (Beck 2014: 86). Beck's work also appears to pose a challenge to the impossibility of collective future imaginings suggested by the postmodern account by proposing that contemporary society is inherently oriented towards the future, and that this future is perceived in largely uniform ways. Specifically, Beck claims that the future has increasingly come to be populated with new risks. These risks are the unintended consequences of the optimistic, progress-oriented ethos of first modernity and are epitomised by nuclear catastrophes and environmental degradation resulting from industrialisation, as well as other man-made catastrophes related, for instance, to terrorism and genetically modified food. For Beck, these new types of risks—which have come to the fore

in the reflexive modern era due to an epistemological shift resulting from the attainment of a minimum standard of living—have drawn the focus of both individuals and social institutions towards a future which has come to be crowded with risk and uncertainty.

Beck's risk society thesis also has implications on the level of individual experience. For instance, Beck's individualisation thesis contends that the transition between first and reflexive modernity is marked (in part) by the contestation and subsequent rescission of rigid identity categories. However, the increased freedoms that are afforded to individuals who are no longer constrained by the norms and expectations characteristic of traditional identity categories are matched by the new risks and uncertainties that they must contend with. Although such risks include the catastrophes on which Beck based his original thesis, his individualisation thesis also extends to the risks and uncertainties inherent in establishing one's own life-course trajectory rather than following a pre-established path. Consequently, while the future is open to individuals in the context of radical individualisation, they are also exposed to, and responsible for managing, an unparalleled level of risk. Although in positive readings such developments prompt individuals to construct an entrepreneurial self who is responsible and reflexive, and actively plans for the future, these developments also suggest a new relationship with the future horizon. Specifically, the new risks characteristic of reflexive modernity present an unprecedented challenge to the modern rhetoric of human achievement and progress; although they are man-made, they cannot be contained by scientific strategies, nor through the actuarial calculations of insurance. As such, these risks have eroded the legitimacy of expert forms of knowledge by highlighting their limitations and fallibility through the production of multiple competing viewpoints, and in so doing erode the perception of the future as knowable and manipulable by human action. Beck argues that as a consequence of this, previously uncontested truths and orders have been challenged. For instance, the naturalness of the traditional life-course, the nuclear family and gender specific divisions of labour has been contested (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), the sanctity of the nation state has been challenged by globalisation (Beck 2000: 11), and science has become increasingly cognisant of its own biases and limitations (Beck 1992: 158). An example of this is provided by Norgaard's (2011) claim that the relationship between laypeople and knowledge about climate change is more complicated than was originally expected. In her ethnographic study

of members of a rural Norwegian community, Norgaard found that, in contrast to the claims of the prevailing ‘information deficit model’ (Buckley 2000), individuals received sufficient information about climate change. However, they avoided thinking about it because doing so raised fears which threatened their existential security, provoking feelings of guilt and helplessness, while also threatening both their individual and collective senses of identity.

As Beck (1994) contends, while the perception of risks can provide an indication of what should not be done, it is ultimately unable to suggest what course of action should be taken. However, Beck’s later work began to develop a normative account of how the risks facing contemporary society could—or indeed *should*—be met. Drawing on the concept of cosmopolitanism, Beck (2006: 338) argues that the new, largely man-made risks which face world society in the late modern era may, due to the shared nature of the threat that they pose to all of the residents of the globe, serve an ‘involuntary enlightenment’ function. By this, Beck means that awareness of these large-scale risks, and the shared fate that would be sealed if they eventuated, leads to the type of discourse that may create a global public and work to destabilise the existing order, perhaps encouraging the development of new institutions. Beck (2006: 340) views these potentialities as inherently hopeful, as they prompt what he has termed ‘enforced cosmopolitanism’, referring to the necessity to communicate and cooperate across national borders. Although Beck is careful to stress that the enforced nature of this type of cosmopolitanism robs it of its ethical weight, his account nevertheless contains a normative element, as he emphasises the potential for this type of cosmopolitanism as a source of hope. As such, although the future horizon that Beck depicts does not resemble the open and progressive horizon of modernity, it also differs from that which is suggested by the other accounts outlined above because it does not preclude the possibility of a socially shared outlook upon the future.

The Post-traditional Society

While Beck has focused on the increased risks that are apparent on both an individual and social levels, Anthony Giddens (1994) has built upon the understanding of reflexive modernity as a discrete historical stage to claim that premodern, early modern and late (reflexive) modern societies can be distinguished on the basis of their relationship with tradition.

He has termed the contemporary era a post-traditional society, claiming that the relevance of the traditions which held premodern societies together through rituals and repetition persisted into the modern era—for instance, in the practises and beliefs of nationalism—before declining in late modern times. Giddens' account is premised on the claim that traditions signify a society's relationship with the past by acting as the organising medium of collective memory, which means that his account has implications for how contemporary individuals can relate to the past and imagine the future. Specifically, he reads traditions in premodern and modern societies as a constraining force from which individuals are freed or disembedded in late modern times. Although he claims that traditions can persist in the era of reflexive modernity, the conditions under which this can occur are narrow. They can either be acknowledged as a single perspective in 'a universe of plural competing values', or else they can take the form of fundamentalism, calling upon a logic that is no longer socially recognised (Giddens 1994: 100). Traditions that persist in the late modern era can therefore either have their claims and validity tempered with relativism, or else signify flights from modernity which dredge up premodern patterns. As such, Giddens' approach is sympathetic to claims that there is no longer a meaningful connection between the past, present and future (see also Sennett 1998).

Although it is unclear whether Giddens is claiming that the future need not take its cues from the past, or that it *cannot*, it is evident that he is proposing that a radical break has been made between the past and the future. He defines this break using comparisons between tradition, which is based on local attachments, single authorities and formulaic notions of truth on the one hand, and expertise, which is universal, based on impersonal principles, and subject to multiple authorities and truths based on specialisation on the other hand. This distinction underpins his positive reading of modernisation, in which he characterises the increased accumulation of knowledge and technology as a freeing rather than constraining force. Using this reading, Giddens (1994: 107) appears to address the question of how society can continue after the decline of (first) modernity, stating that 'as collective humanity, we are not doomed to irreparable fragmentation, yet neither on the other hand are we confined to the iron cage of Max Weber's imagination'. However, in undertaking this ambitious task Giddens tends towards a unilinear view of modernisation as a constant and straightforward development, terming processes which do not fit into his account premodern.

Indeed, by equating traditions with irrationality and pitting them against expert knowledge, he ultimately presents them as regressive. His vision of a post-traditional society therefore appears to make claims to a future horizon unburdened by the past, but in doing so he severely erodes the conditions under which collective imaginings can be formed and interpreted. His account bears some resemblance to Castoriadis' (1997) de-socialised subject who draws upon social imaginary significations from previous eras which, when removed from their indigenous context, are devoid of affective potential. By claiming that the traditions of the past no longer hold any claim over subjects, Giddens proposes an actor who is freed from traditional perceptions, and as such stripped of a fertile space for interpretation and meaning formation.

ALTERNATIVE READINGS ACCOUNTS OF THE FUTURE

The division between the premodern, modern and contemporary future horizon is ubiquitous in mainstream sociological work. The type of epochal theorising that these distinctions rely upon has, however, been met with critique from a number of quarters. The following discussion considers some of these criticisms with the aim of discerning how the present study may be positioned in relation to both popular, large-scale accounts of the future and the criticisms that have been lodged against them. The discussion focuses on critiques of the assumptions or logic underpinning periodised accounts of the future horizon, rather than criticisms of the theories that have been discussed in this chapter, which are considered in Chap. 5.

The premodern/modern distinction has been critiqued perhaps most famously by Johannes Fabian (1983), who argues that by perceiving the societies that they study as 'other' in relation to the social structures and practices of the contemporary west, anthropologists also present them as 'other' in time. Specifically, Fabian claims that they view them as primitive, unchanging or 'cold' in the words of Levi-Strauss, while viewing their own, largely Western societies as modern and dynamic, despite the fact that these societies exist concurrently. Osborne (1995) has similarly claimed that the very act of periodising human history into distinct eras is inherently political and needs to be acknowledged as such. More recently, Pels (2015) has claimed that the implications of periodising in this way remain under-acknowledged in anthropological scholarship and has addressed the relevance that this has for research considering

the future, concluding that empirical research must remain open to multiple qualitatively different futures. In the light of such claims, it is especially important to be mindful of the fact that this study addresses a specifically Western experience of the future, and as such its findings should not be generalised without accounting for this consideration.

Barbara Adam and Chris Groves (2007) have similarly presented a number of correctives to the tendency to represent the future in a periodised and homogenous manner. They have, for instance, offered a new set of distinctions through which the future can be understood, focusing specifically on a contrast between the contextual, embodied view of the future which marked many early human societies, and the commodified future which emerged from the growth of international trade and the relaxation of religious prohibitions against usury (see Adam and Groves 2007: 1–13). This distinction between an embodied, contextualised future on the one hand, and an emptied, commodified future on the other maps loosely onto the well-established characterisation of the premodern future as predetermined and largely closed, and the modern future as devoid of divine determination, and therefore comparatively open to human intervention. Indeed, Adam and Groves view the emptying of the future, and its resulting equation with capital, as preconditions to the progress achieved in the course of industrialisation.

The relevance of the distinction between contextualised and empty futures lies in the fact that although the latter is open to human colonisation, it is—in contrast to its context-bound counterpart—fundamentally unknowable. Adam and Groves contend that this conceptualisation of the future leaves it primed for exploitation and obscures the fact that the current future will be the present of other human actors. Essentially, while the contextualised future of premodern times was thought to belong to the Gods, meaning that human intervention in it is best conceptualised as a process of discovery and interpretation, the empty future often associated with the contemporary era is perceived as open to intervention, and therefore as something that can be controlled and moulded through human action. Drawing on this account of how perceptions of the future, and humanity's influence on it, have changed over time, Adam and Groves suggest some ways in which contemporary futures can be conceptualised differently. They distinguish, for instance, between the cycles that are evident in nature (e.g. the changing of the seasons) and the circular form that is taken by repeated practices which characterise human action and which, by allowing for measured and testable changes,

work as a means of domesticating the uncertainty of the future. Notably, this approach suggests an approach to the future which is alternative to both the modern notion of linear progress and the more recent accounts of dislocation and stasis. The aim of understanding how individuals perceive the long-term future that motivates this book is inspired in part by Adam and Groves' effort to understand the diverse ways in which the future can be conceptualised. As such, this study takes seriously the need to consider how individuals' views of the future may differ from popular accounts, even when they draw on elements of such accounts.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined how the future of the premodern, modern and late modern eras has been conceptualised in theoretical work. These accounts of how the future was perceived in each epoch, as well as readings which have sought alternatives to these sweeping claims, provide both a foundation and a sounding board for the findings of this study. Specifically, these theoretical accounts are compared with the respondents' large-scale and long-term imaginings of the future in Chap. 5 with the aim of considering whether they align. This chapter is therefore best taken as an overview of key material, and readings thereof, which are addressed in the course of this text and used as a basis for its central argument. Although this chapter has discussed large-scale, theoretical accounts of the future horizon and, where possible, considered how these futures may be—or have been—experienced by individuals, extended consideration of the relationship between perceptions of the future and individuals or subjectivities generally lies outside the scope of the literature discussed here. As such, the role of subjectivity is considered in the following chapter.

NOTES

1. There are some exceptions to this, as well as critiques of the very notion of periodising time in this manner. Such accounts are addressed in the course of this chapter.
2. The account of time outlined above refers to a generalised experience of the peasant world which comprised up to 80% of Europe 250 years ago. This population are proposed to have lived within the cyclical rhythms of nature and to have transmitted skills and knowledge intergenerationally (Koselleck 1985).

3. Through the process of secularisation, religion is thought by many to have lost its central place in public life, remaining solely as part of private life (Woodhead and Heelas 2000).
4. It is important to note that Weber's famous metaphor of the 'iron cage' came about when his work was translated into English by Talcott Parsons. The original German (*stahlhartes Gehäuse*) translates more accurately to a 'shell as hard as steel'. Although the distinction between these metaphors is important as they impart slightly differing meanings, the former is nevertheless used in this book because it represents the interpretation of Weber's work which has informed the work of the theorists who are discussed in the following section of this chapter.
5. Although various alternative readings of modernisation have been proposed in recent years—suggesting that modernity has continued into the contemporary era (Heller 1999), or that modernisation has not taken place in some crucial aspects of society (Latour 1993)—this discussion focuses on the accounts that have the strongest implications for how the long-term future is characterised in sociological thought.
6. Although Lübbe's account appears to contradict the work of Heller and Nowotny, who claim that the present has extended or eclipsed the future, each of these theorists argue that contemporary individuals' ability to relate to both the past and the future is steadily decreasing, which subsequently directs their focus to the present. As such, while these accounts are developed differently they have similar implications.

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Cook, J.

2018, IX, 141 p. 1 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-65324-2