

Futures of Society

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The Present of the Future

The 43rd Congress of the German Sociological Association is dedicated to the *futures of society*. In a time of profound global transformations — from the climate crisis, wars, and the rise of authoritarianism to sociodemographic change and the growing use of artificial intelligence across many domains of life — the question of conceivable, desired, and feared futures is more pressing than ever.

At the latest since the advent of modernity, the so-called “Sattelzeit” (Koselleck), perceptions of past, present, and future have undergone a fundamental change: what is yet to come has become both a challenge and a mystery for society. Images of a better future and visions of catastrophe have repeatedly called social orders into question and spurred transformation. At the same time, representations of the future also create order and can serve stabilizing functions. A hallmark of modern societies is the experience of the future as open and shapeable. The future becomes a central point of temporal orientation, competing with concepts such as tradition, fate, and eternity. By addressing *futures of society* in the plural, the congress therefore does not merely refer to chronologies of events, but rather to the social processes through which the future is generated and gains social significance. What kinds of futures are conceivable? Who imagines, negotiates, or controls them? Under what conditions do they become socially effective? Although our epistemological access to the future remains limited — it cannot be observed, only anticipated — the future does not simply “happen.” It is imagined, planned, and shaped. Utopias, dystopias, scientific forecasts, and political scenarios never emerge in a vacuum: they process past experiences, respond to present crises, and are shaped by both historical and contemporary frameworks of meaning. While technological visions have often inspired positive images of the future, optimism about the future seems to be fading in the face of global crises: the future increasingly becomes a space of fear, while the present appears as a threatened normality. The congress therefore deliberately speaks of futures in the plural — *futures of society* — in order to highlight the diversity, simultaneity, and conflictual nature of possible futures.

The congress theme once again places sociological reflection on the futures of society at the center of attention. It aims to revitalize sociology as a science of the future in a twofold sense: as a discipline that empirically and theoretically investigates the future as an object of inquiry, and as a field that itself imagines, forecasts, and models future developments. That sociology has always also been such a science of the future is exemplified by the Sociological Congress of 1926, at which—exactly one hundred years ago—the future of democracy was under debate. The congress thus invites participants to conceive of sociology not merely as a descriptive and analytical discipline, but also as one capable of opening perspectives on alternative developments and utopias.

The Futures of Society as an Object of Sociological Research

1. Perspectives on Futures

From a sociological standpoint, one thing seems clear: in contemporary society, futures always appear in the plural. This does not exclude the possibility that singularizations of the future — the claim that “there is no alternative,” for instance — may themselves become socially powerful.

The congress seeks to do justice to this diversity and to make visible the different ways in which futures are framed, imbued with meaning, and interpreted:

1. Which *topics and contents* are negotiated as futures, and how are they represented, connected, and evaluated? When, how, and for whom does a future appear as an attractive utopia or vision — and when as a dystopian nightmare or catastrophe scenario? What concepts of the future — for instance, of the “good life”, justice, or emancipation — shape sociological, feminist, and critical perspectives on power? What role do utopias and dystopias play as modes of thought within social critique?
2. Futures appear in diverse communicative *forms and genres*: they may take the shape of scientific forecasts, socio-technical simulation scenarios, economic promises, artistic projections, religious prophecies, demands voiced by social movements, or political plans.
3. Futures become powerful when they circulate socially. The congress therefore asks about the *media, practices, and communicative forms* through which futures are displayed, narrated, and conveyed. What roles are played by artifacts, infrastructures, and institutional processes, as well as by informal narratives — for instance within families, chosen kinships, or through oral history? How are visions of the future imagined and passed on in small communities, and what effects do they have in discourse?
4. Some futures remain thought experiments, while others strive toward realization. Their *implementation* is contested; their realization is not accidental but the result of deliberate shaping. How are particular futures made practically probable or narratively plausible? And how are alternative visions delegitimized — for example, through the valorization of the past or the present?
5. The circulation and efficacy of futures also reflect *social inequalities*. Whose future is at stake — and who appears to have none? Which visions of the future gain recognition, and which remain invisible or excluded? Conceptions of the future unfold along axes of social difference such as age, gender, disability, origin, “race”, or class. Resources, interpretive power, and the capacity to act in relation to the future are unequally distributed. A sociological analysis must take these asymmetries of power into account — even beyond categorical group concepts, for instance by examining processes of visibility, participation, and exclusion. How do certain actors gain or lose power over the collective imagination of what is to come? And what does the future mean as a political object in the context of current conflicts between democracy and authoritarianism?
6. Finally, attention turns to the *future viability* of present societies. How can the spell of short-term considerations be broken in order to face existential challenges? How can a politics of long-termism succeed in the face of short political cycles? How are cities preparing for climate change, and how are demographic shifts being addressed? What strategies of resilience are emerging? And how can historical perspectives on the future serve as sources of learning?
7. Yet what does it actually mean to say that futures “appear in the plural”? Does this refer to a multiplicity of possible and imagined trajectories, or is there, in the end, only one real future — the one that becomes tomorrow’s present? To what extent are sociological analyses required to differentiate between objective future events and their current projections? And what methodological challenges arise from this distinction for a sociology of the future?

The congress takes up these questions and invites scholars to explore, from diverse theoretical, methodological, and empirical perspectives, how the *futures of society* can serve as a productive analytical category for sociology.

2. Futures on the Macro, Meso, and Micro Levels

Futures are imagined, negotiated, and experienced across different scales — from supranational contexts to everyday individual decisions. Between these lie additional sociologically relevant levels of analysis, such as social milieus, classes, or generations, each dealing with its own expectations, hopes, and risks regarding the future — for instance, aspirations of social mobility or fears of decline and existential insecurity. These levels can be examined in their specificity as well as in their interrelations: how can the dynamics and interactions between these levels be captured sociologically?

Macro Level: At the macro level, the focus is on large-scale social dynamics. These include: (1) political and economic transformations, military conflicts, and threats to peace; (2) ecological and technological challenges such as climate change, resource scarcity, and technological disruption; (3) demographic and social developments such as aging populations, changing migration societies, care crises, and growing inequalities; and (4) ideological shifts resulting from democratic erosion, new forms of authoritarianism, anti-feminism, and attacks on gender equality policies. Futures encounter, in the present, a multiply differentiated society. How do geopolitical (re-)orderings or responses to planetary boundaries shape the systemic trajectories of the future? What consequences does the so-called “Zeitenwende” have for societal pathways of development? What structural system effects arise from far-reaching transformations such as digitalization or artificial intelligence — not only for future forms of social life, but also for how societies today access and engage with the future?

Meso Level: At the meso level, institutions and collective actors — organizations, networks, and initiatives — come into focus as mediators of futures. They function as “distribution nodes” that bring ideas out of niches and translate complex plans into operational strategies. How is the future shaped and mobilized as a resource within welfare-state institutions, corporations, or civil society? How is the contingency of the future addressed in educational institutions that are, by their very nature, tasked with preparing for what is to come? In which domains — such as education policy, energy supply, or healthcare — are negotiation processes particularly intense? And to what extent do institutions act not only as mediators but also as entrepreneurs of the future, actively steering societal developments?

Micro Level: At the micro level, the focus lies on how futures are experienced and negotiated within social interactions, biographies, and subjective perceptions. How do individuals and groups navigate between conditions of uncertainty, lack of control, and the capacity to shape their own lives? What strategies do they develop — for instance through life planning, social movements, or technological self-optimization? How do social transformations, precarious situations, or openness toward the future shape biographical time structures? And how do these temporalities themselves change in the course of new social dynamics?

3. Temporalities and Structural Logics of the Future

Sociological analyses of the future must address both the temporalities of social processes and the structural logics inherent to them. Conceptions of the future acquire social relevance on different temporal scales: the transition from couplehood to family life, from war to peace, or from planetary crisis to a “post-planetary age” is imagined in distinct ways. Specific years — such as 2030, 2038, or 2045 — also lend symbolic weight to particular expectations of the future. Societal

futures do not simply follow a linear continuation of the present; rather, they are subject to diverse rhythms, accelerations, and decelerations. This asynchronicity generates tensions — for instance, between technological innovation and social regulation, or between generations with differing horizons of expectation. At the same time, futures follow different structural logics: they may be conceived as directed or contingent, governed by rules or shaped by erratic dynamics.

Sociology possesses a differentiated set of tools for analyzing the temporality of the future — yet it itself operates with multiple temporal logics. Time is not understood as a neutral background variable, but as a socially structured form: as a medium for the reduction of complexity (Luhmann), as the outcome of planning practices (Brose), or as a plurality of overlapping social times (Gurvitch). Time diagnoses — a genre of contemporary analysis that identifies trends and projects them into the future — produce their own temporal logics by extrapolating developments and marking turning points. Their predictive power has repeatedly been called into question, as illustrated by the 1998 KZfSS study, which showed that many time diagnoses from the 1960s to 1980s turned out to be misleading. The reconstruction of such “futures of the past” allows for a historical-sociological perspective on time diagnoses as snapshots of social interpretation. The congress therefore invites systematic reflection on these temporal logics of social transformation processes and their role in the construction of the future.

What temporalities are associated with the future? Sociological approaches such as Luhmann’s concept of contingent possibility or Koselleck’s distinction between space of experience and horizon of expectation make it clear that the future is not given, but emerges relationally between different times. At the same time, predictions about the future have a retroactive effect on the present — as narrative constructions that render certain futures plausible and orient action. Which pasts of the future continue to resonate, which have become obsolete, and which return in new form? And under what disciplinary conditions have particular conceptions of the future been able to emerge in the first place?

How can the temporal logics of the future be captured analytically? The future may appear as an abrupt rupture (“Zeitenwende”), as a gradual development (“neoliberalization of higher education”), as a protracted process (“gender-equal society”), or as a cyclical dynamic (economic cycles of capitalism). Such temporalities require specific sociological concepts, categories, and modes of description — all of which often carry implicit notions of time themselves. While theories of modernization assume directed, structurally embedded processes of change, models of path dependency emphasize the significance of historical decision points, and theories of social evolution inquire into patterns of stability and transformation within long-term processes of change. What further developed or new perspectives are needed in light of contemporary societal scenarios of the future?

How do the temporal regimes of different societal domains differ? Economy and technology often follow logics of acceleration, whereas social institutions, norms, and cultural interpretations operate according to other temporalities. Does law lag behind social developments — or can regulation itself foster innovation? Do social media accelerate political processes, or do political decisions slow down media dynamics? And how can the rhythms of different spheres of society be synchronized?

How do futures change and transform over time? What are their cycles and conjunctures? Under what conditions do they gain attention, and when do they fade from view? What determines a society’s orientation toward — or indifference to — the future?

4. Narratives, Discursive Framings, and Interpretive Authority

The ways in which the future is narrated and symbolically charged shape social expectations and horizons of action. Conceptions of the future never arise in a vacuum; they are embedded within social structures, normative orders, and political power relations. In late modern societies, grand meta-narratives coexist with local and specialized narratives that influence how the future is understood and communicated. The future is not merely a matter of prediction or planning but constitutes a field of negotiation among social interests — a symbolic space in which power, conflict, and dissent become visible. Critical perspectives, particularly feminist and postcolonial theories, ask who participates in shaping the future — and who remains excluded. Sociological analysis must therefore attend to the narrative structures and discursive framings of the future — including their positionality — and interrogate their significance for contemporary social developments.

How is the future described and evaluated in different contexts? Historical and sociologies-of-knowledge perspectives demonstrate that conceptions of the future are culturally variable and situated (Mannheim). They are shaped by social institutions, political programs, and economic interests. Discourses about the future are never neutral: they reflect existing power relations and are embedded within normative orders and political dynamics. Which actors establish the interpretive frameworks that shape how the future is perceived?

What affective contents and normative interpretations come into play? Discourse-analytical approaches reveal how narratives of the future convey hopes and fears, moral imperatives and normative assumptions — and in doing so, generate affective mobilization. This becomes particularly evident in current debates about climate change, technological innovation, or economic transformation: here, different actors compete for interpretive power, construct alternative visions of the future, and seek to popularize and normalize them in order to advance their realization. How do emotional and moral evaluations shape societal conceptions of the future?

What relationships exist between scientific, political, and popular-cultural futures? Sociological perspectives on media and technology discourses show that the future is shaped not only by expertise but, to a significant extent, by narratives mediated through the media. Whether in economic forecasts, political scenarios such as election-night projections, or technological prototypes, the future appears as a social construction deeply embedded within existing power relations. At the same time, questions arise regarding the social reach of such narratives: which futures reach which audiences, through what channels, and with what effects? And how do scientific scenarios differ from popular visions in literature, film, or advertising — in their assumptions, their modes of address, and their social impact?

How are futures constructed through language and metaphor? Sociolinguistic and literary-sociological approaches make it possible to examine the linguistic mechanisms through which futures take shape. Which discourses, norms, and power relations structure the negotiation of the future? Which concepts dominate debates about desirable or threatening future scenarios?

Domains of Sociological Research on the Future

The congress opens a space for diverse engagements with societal futures — from both empirical and theoretical perspectives. The study of the future follows no single order but rather constitutes a multifaceted field encompassing a wide range of subjects, concepts, and methodological approaches. Around this engagement, not only have scientific discourses evolved, but entire social practices and future industries have emerged. Research on futures thus includes both the analysis of concrete phenomena and reflection on time and temporality. While empirical studies examine how forecasts are produced, scenarios are designed, or technologies are negotiated as

shaping forces of the future, theoretical sociology asks about temporal regimes, temporalities, and the semantics of the future. Theory, in this sense, is not merely a heuristic tool, but develops its own perspectives on the relationship between society and the future. It is concerned with the logics, paradoxes, and conflicts that structure the future as a social category. What theoretical concepts does a sociology of the future require? And how can empirical and theoretical approaches be productively related to one another in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of societal futures?

Against this background, the following list of potential domains should not be understood as a definitive systematization, but rather as an open collection of themes and areas in which *societal futures* are staged, constructed, and rendered effective. It encompasses both the social fields in which the future is negotiated and the possible objects of sociological research on the future. This heterogeneous collection of phenomena thus points, on the one hand, to social domains that may benefit from future-oriented sociological perspectives, and on the other hand, to processes in which the future itself becomes the object of sociological analysis. In doing so, it aims to provide points of connection for diverse sociological perspectives as well as a basis for discussion and further development of sociological research on the future.

- *Political and social orders*: crises of democracy, authoritarian dynamics, new forms of participation and governance, global shifts in power, protest and resistance, policy advice, tactical fields of social changemaking, and foreign policy visions of the future.
- *Technological developments*: digitalization, automation, and AI (generative and agentic systems, autonomous machine decision-making, robotics), new material and energy technologies, biotechnologies and neurotechnologies, quantum communication, digital twins, e-democracy and digital self-determination, transhumanist visions, as well as future imaginaries emerging from prototype development and space exploration.
- *Prevention, prognostics, and social technologies of securing the future*: social mechanisms and institutionalized practices that aim to render the future available, controllable, or supposedly predictable — ranging from health prevention, psychological diagnostics, and risk assessment in the penal system to insurance logics, welfare-state precaution, military threat prevention (such as preemptive warfare), racial profiling, and agrarian techniques of future-making like crop rotation, as well as teleological (e.g., religious or ideological) orders.
- *Work and economy*: transformations driven by the platform economy, the digitalization of work, Industry 4.0, precarity and new employment biographies, demographic shifts, economic and financial crises, unconditional basic income, alternative economic models, the four-day work week debate, “innovation” as buzzword and guiding principle, the future of trade unions, automation in care work, the commodification of the future, and speculation on futures.
- *Population dynamics*: aging societies, shortages of skilled labor, brain drain, transnational migration, automation in service occupations, generational conflicts, family models, the gender care gap, political dynamics, generational orders, and generation-based inequalities.
- *Cultural and identity dynamics*: gender relations, postcolonial transformations, new forms of belonging and exclusion, human differentiation, migration and transnational networks, future visions of family and reproduction, children as a minority, and the queering of temporal structures.
- *Bodies and reproduction*: cryotechnologies, social freezing, medical prenatal diagnostics, prepper practices, models for coping with heat waves and air pollution, environmental toxins, and

the entanglement of bodily nature-cultures (PFAS in the air, microplastics in food, nanoplastics in human organs).

- *Ecological transformations*: the climate crisis, sustainable urban development, new mobility concepts, human–nature relations, ecotourism, generational change and the questioning of generational order, the re-evaluation of lifestyles, resource conflicts in relation to geopolitical and energy futures, planetary boundaries, debates on geoengineering, and climate-induced migration.

- *Social policy and education*: transformations of the welfare state, concepts of care work and social security, new public management, the future of education and knowledge production, the university and higher education, the future of pension systems, the privatization and commercialization of education, as well as upbringing and socialization as future-oriented social practices.

- *Inequality*: prognostics that perpetuate inequality, the predictability of widening gaps between top and bottom, notions of equality in utopias and social semantics, globally unequal exposure to crises, and unequal conditions for engaging with (distant) futures at all.

- Futures research *itself* as a sociological object of inquiry.

Sociology as a Science of the Future

1. Methodological and Methodical Challenges of a Sociological Science of the Future

The future, by definition, cannot be directly observed — it exists empirically only insofar as it becomes observable or effective as projection, expectation, or possibility. This fundamental epistemological challenge confronts sociology with the question of how it can speak, in a scientifically grounded way, about what is yet to come — that which is absently present — and how it can empirically grasp the openness, contingency, and plurality of futures. While many approaches in the social sciences are directed toward the analysis of past and present social structures and dynamics, the question arises as to whether the investigation of processes of futurization requires an expansion of sociology's methodological repertoire — toward a form of sociological research that engages more directly with the analysis of the future as future.

Particularly worthy of discussion in this context are recent advances in the computational modeling of social processes. In disciplines such as physics or data science, powerful simulation methods have become established — for example, in traffic management, climate modeling, or the modeling of pandemic dynamics. It is striking that sociological expertise has so far played only a minor role in these developments, even though such models increasingly influence political decision-making. What methodological and epistemological challenges does this pose for sociology? Which strategies are generally suitable for empirically capturing visions, fears, and expectations of the future? And how can the practices through which futures are produced be reconstructed?

Sociology brings with it a broad methodological diversity that offers important impulses for futures studies. Qualitative approaches such as ethnographic reconstructions of the future, discourse analyses, or narrative interviews capture actors' visions, fears, and expectations of the future. At the same time, data analytics, statistical modeling, trend analyses, and dynamic network analyses enable the quantitative examination of potential social developments — including in the sense of an active production of the future. Social simulations, such as agent-based models, create artificial social worlds with interacting agents in order to simulate societal “real experiments” (Krohn) as what-if scenarios. The topic of forecasting is gaining increasing

relevance in the social sciences. While sociology has traditionally aimed at explanation, data-driven predictive methods are becoming more influential — for example, in the computational social sciences, where predictive models of social trends and individual behavior are being developed. However, their high predictive accuracy does not always go hand in hand with theoretical depth. What is the explanatory value of such forecasts? Should sociology develop its own approaches to the prediction of social dynamics? And how might the discipline's potential for generating knowledge about the future be enhanced through the integration of theory and empirical research?

To what extent might speculative methods, experimental approaches, or interdisciplinary collaborations—with futures studies, technology assessment, foresight studies, design studies, or literary-sociological perspectives—enrich a sociological science of the future? What new methodological debates does this imply for sociology as a discipline? How do digital methods and computational social science shape research on processes of futurization? Questions such as these open space for reflecting on the existing methodological and methodical tools of futures research, as well as for developing new perspectives that can enrich and further advance sociological research practice.

2. How Much Future Does Sociology Need — and What Kind of Sociology Does the Future Need?

The congress ultimately invites reflection on sociology as a science of the future in several respects:

First, as a discipline that studies both the social production of the future and the future of societies themselves. Sociological research on the future may thus address representations and anticipations of the future within the present as well as yet unknown developments — thereby becoming a form of futures research of the “first order”. The congress encourages discussion on whether, and to what extent, sociology might move beyond the description of present processes to engage more deeply with prognostic approaches. Can and should sociology — like economics or the climate sciences — develop models to anticipate and shape social developments? What challenges would such a move pose for the discipline? At the same time, the question arises as to the role sociology itself plays in shaping societal futures — by providing, through its concepts, methods, and models, forms of knowledge that influence social processes. To what extent do crisis diagnoses and narratives of uncertainty shape how the future is thought about and governed? And what role do sociological prognoses play in political decision-making processes?

Second, the congress seeks to provide a forum for discussing how sociology as a discipline itself will change in the future. The focus here is on the shifting boundaries within the field as well as on the reconfiguration of its borders vis-à-vis other disciplines. Already in the 1970s, under the heading of a “Sociology of the Future” (as in Bell, for example), programmatic proposals were developed to make futures a systematic object of sociological research — as also occurred in interdisciplinary projects in futurology. Yet these early impulses were rarely institutionally anchored within the discipline itself. Questions concerning the future were often delegated to neighboring fields. Today, however, sociology is once again increasingly in demand as a partner in interdisciplinary contexts — for instance, in technology studies, sustainability science, or demography. What might future boundary work (Gieryn) look like, through which sociology positions itself in relation to other disciplines and societal demands? And what implications does this have for the discipline's self-understanding?

Third, attention turns to the future of sociology, understood as a question concerning the students and colleagues who will carry the discipline forward. How are career paths, qualification requirements, and institutional frameworks changing for students and early-career researchers?

The congress also aims to provide a forum for these issues, making visible the perspectives and challenges faced by the next generation of scholars. How can, and should, sociology continue to evolve in order to remain relevant within a society in which today's pupils and students will be tomorrow's researchers?

Mainz as Host City and Space of Inspiration

Mainz offers a symbolically charged setting for reflecting on societal futures. As one of Germany's oldest cities, it uniquely connects past and future: archaeological remains make historical continuities visible, while science, industry, media, and urban development open new pathways forward. For centuries, Mainz has stood for innovation — from Gutenberg's printing press, which transformed knowledge transfer and social change, to the Mainzer Republik as an early democratic experiment, and to contemporary breakthroughs in biotechnology. This intertwining of historical spirit of innovation and forward-looking research makes Mainz an ideal place for sociological reflection on the shaping of futures. The congress thus uses Mainz as a space of inspiration for unfolding sociological perspectives on the central questions of our time.