
Gerard DELANTY, *Senses of the Future:
Conflicting Ideas of the Future in the World Today*
(Liverpool, Walter de Gruyter, 2024, 213 p.)

Today it seems unclear whether humanity will have a future. News reports and social media feeds are saturated with images of catastrophes and crises, and there is growing academic interest in a so-called “polycrisis” or “permacrisis”.¹ In this context of uncertainty, the future is clearly a significant and salient topic. But what exactly is the future and how should it be theorised? In his new book, Gerard Delanty tackles these mammoth questions by reconstructing and critiquing the main “theories of the future” in modern thought. While Delanty interrogates past notions of the future, his central argument is firmly rooted in the present. In this regard, he claims that “despite the apparent closure of the open horizon of the future, we are in fact experiencing a shift away from the sense of the death of the future” [20]. He goes on to provide recommendations on how we *should* view the future and thus does not shy away from the normative dimensions of the future. Delanty brings together different approaches to the future, evaluates them in light of present crises – particularly the climate crisis – and advocates a perspective that sees the future in terms of “present potentialities and future possibilities”, inspired by the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. In fact, he insists that this is the “only adequate approach to the future” [157].

Delanty undoubtedly engages with a relevant and important topic. He is not alone in this regard and many sociologists have recently gone “back to the future”.² The burgeoning and somewhat scattered literature on the future has provided insight on how imagined futures, expectational dynamics, and aspirations shape technological developments, political legitimacy, social identities, economic coordination, and a host of other social phenomena. In concurrence with this literature, Delanty emphasises that “we live in the present but we are always oriented toward the future, whose shadow falls across the present” [1]. While Delanty does

¹ Lawrence MICHAEL, Homer-Dixon THOMAS, Janzwood SCOTT, Rockstörn JOHAN, Renn ORTWIN and Jonathan DONGES, 2024. “Global Polycrisis: The Causal Mechanisms of Crisis Entanglement,” *Global Sustainability*, 7: 1–16.

² Suckert LISA, 2022. “Back to the Future. Sociological Perspectives on Expectations, Aspirations and Imagined Futures,” *European Journal of Sociology*, 63 (3): 393–428.

not unequivocally situate himself in this literature, he comments on some of it and points to its perceived limitations, most prominently to the fact that there is no fully developed theory of the future in the humanities and social sciences. One could ask whether such a theory is even possible, considering that it is not at all evident that we have a fully developed theory of the past. Rather, there are multiple theories of the past, just as there are multiple theories of capitalism, modernity, the state, and many other prominent concepts.

Delanty nonetheless provides a valiant attempt at such a theory, and commences by engaging with several conceptions of time in physics. He pays particular attention to developments in the conception of time in the Earth sciences in relation to the Anthropocene. This is a remarkable contribution to the imagined futures literature since it endeavours to bridge the divide between the natural and social sciences. Delanty combines insights from the natural sciences with a long-term historical and sociological approach to argue that the cause of climate change should be seen primarily in terms of energy usage. Consequently, he claims that “there is little point in attributing the cause to humanity in general, modernity or capitalism, or industrialism” [48]. Yet it seems crucial to establish the root cause of climate change since it should influence how we respond to the crisis. Energy usage is definitely significant, as Timothy Mitchell has also made apparent,³ but paying attention to *why* some societies require so much energy and seem incapable of reducing their consumption is surely relevant. Delanty later states that “there is general consensus that the economic model of perpetual growth is no longer sustainable if human societies are to have a future” [193]. While I wish this were the case, the dominant paradigm rather seems to be some version of “green growth”, and degrowth or post-growth imaginaries have thus far gained little traction, at least in formal political circles. Although Delanty appears to suggest that perpetual growth, a hallmark of capitalism, is impossible if we are to address the climate crisis, he does not unequivocally argue that capitalism has to be transcended. Accordingly, the nature of the socio-economic system that might facilitate a change in energy usage remains vague.

Perpetual growth is not only a hallmark of capitalism but also a part of modernity’s imaginary of infinite progress. Delanty confirms that modernity is characterised by the belief that the future will be different and better than the present. This also inspires one of his central

³ Mitchell TIMOTHY, 2011. *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London, Verso).

arguments—“that the future is looking increasingly unknown, in contrast to much of modernity when the future was seen as something that the present can master” [64]. Before he discusses the current shift, Delanty considers the distinction between modern and pre-modern futures. Although the notion of infinite progress appears to be distinctly modern, Delanty rests his argument on the claim that pre-modern societies did not believe that human agency could change the course of history. He explicitly declares that “the idea of an open future was not a characteristic of premodern thought... the ancients did not have the means that we have to determine the future through human agency or to imagine very different futures” [68]. In this regard, he focuses on ancient Greece. Yet the examples he employs cannot adequately account for the roughly 15,000 years of human history around the world, consisting of societies that potentially had different conceptions of time and the future.

While Delanty discusses David Graeber and David Wengrow’s recent book on this human “prehistory” and aptly recognises some of its strengths and weaknesses, he does not adequately engage with one of their central arguments: namely, that many pre-Enlightenment or “traditional” societies did self-consciously intervene to change the course of events. They actively decided to change how they were collectively organised based on their perceptions of neighbouring societies, and thus had some sense that they could influence the future.⁴ It is difficult to establish how ancient societies conceptualised the future based on archaeological remains, but it seems pertinent to consider the possibility that at least some of them believed that they could change their fate. This is not simply a matter of historical accuracy; it is also a theme that is deeply intertwined with power relations. Societies outside of the Global North are often viewed as having “traditional” structures and are thus deemed to belong to an anterior stage of history. As Johannes Fabian already argued in his seminal 1983 book, temporal concepts have an ideological nature and form part of the “politics of time”. In this regard, the “temporal conception of movement” that expresses a “passage from savagery to civilization” is highly ideological and has “served to legitimize the colonial enterprise on all levels”.⁵ Accordingly, a reflection on temporal politics and colonial power relations could have enriched Delanty’s already insightful account.

⁴ Graeber DAVID and David WENGROW, 2021. *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London, Penguin Books Limited).

⁵ Fabian JOHANNES, 1983. *Time & The Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York, Columbia University Press: 95).

The book provides a discerning and fruitful discussion of modern theories of the future. It is undeniable that “modernity looks to the future” in the sense that the modern temporal order is oriented towards it [91–94]. In this regard, it is almost impossible not to mention Reinhart Koselleck. Delanty recognises Koselleck’s great contribution, but astutely notes that “the notion of the future as expectation” omits other significant dimensions, particularly the future “as an imaginary” and “Marx’s sense of the future as a product of political struggle” [95]. Furthermore, Koselleck did not take historical struggles into account and expressed a naïve belief in modernity’s ability to open up possibilities for the future [99–100]. This vaguely resonates with the criticisms other scholars have raised against Koselleck’s work, specifically the charge that he overlooked “the political ramifications of a teleological modernity articulated through European history and universalized through colonial domination”.⁶ While Delanty perceptively draws attention to the absence of historical struggles in Koselleck’s narrative, it would be interesting to position this observation in relation to global colonial power relations and temporal politics more broadly.

A more thorough engagement with colonial power relations would perhaps also have prompted a more critical approach to Steven Pinker’s work, which Delanty describes as “meticulously presented with incontrovertible conclusions” [100]. However, Pinker’s work has been repeatedly disputed for both its questionable data and its conclusions.⁷ Delanty does fault Pinker for failing to address the “problems that progress indirectly created” [101]. However, from a Global South perspective, it is evident that “progress” in Europe was at least partly built on slavery and colonialism. Although he does not directly reference colonialism, John Urry makes an analogous point, stating that futures “do not develop automatically but involve suffering, struggle and conflict. There is no simple progress, since one social group’s progress is potentially another social group’s loss”.⁸ The aim here is not to rehash old critiques of Pinker or to launch clichéd accusations of Eurocentrism. Rather, we shall see that Delanty’s decision not to engage seriously with international power

⁶ Weiskott ERIC, 2021. “Futures Past: Prophecy, Periodization, and Reinhart,” *New Literary History*, 52 (1): 175.

⁷ See, for example: FERGUSON Brian, 2013. “Pinker’s List: Exaggerating Prehistoric War Mortality”, in FRY Douglas, ed. *War, Peace, and Human Nature: The Convergence of Evolutionary and Cultural Views* (New York, Oxford Academic); CORY Stephan, 2013.

“The Case of the ‘Brutal Savage’: Poirot or Clouseau? Why Steven Pinker, like Jared Diamond, Is Wrong,” *Open Democracy* [<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/case-of-brutal-savage-poirot-or-clouseau-why-steven-pinker-like-jared-diamond-is-wro/>].

⁸ Urry JOHN, 2016. *What Is the Future?* (Cambridge, Polity Press: 85).

relations has implications for his proposal as to how we should approach the future today.

This brings us to the book's main contribution – its inclusion of critical theory in the imagined futures canon. Delanty argues that critical theory is based on the notion that society is “comprised of potential sources of transcendence” [158]. Marx's usage of Hegelian dialectics bestowed on critical theory “a way to see the present in terms of future possibilities, since the present is incomplete” [158]. In Delanty's reading, critical theory was predominantly concerned with identifying alternatives to the present. Furthermore, change does not necessarily have to emanate from an external force, since “future possibilities by which the present can transcend itself are immanent in society” [158-159]. Here Delanty introduces the key concept of “immanent transcendence”, defined as “the internal transformation of society by ideas that while being immanent in society entail its transcendence” [159]. For example, modernity promises liberty and equality, while capitalism produces systemic exploitation.

Delanty's discussion of Critical Theory, especially the work of Frankfurt School theorists such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Walter Benjamin, in relation to the future is undoubtedly a timely contribution. According to Delanty's somewhat eccentric interpretation, these theorists were concerned with how a better world could be made possible in the context of a very bleak situation. Moreover, they resisted the urge to “retreat into the past or see only a perpetual present devoid of a future” [165]. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Delanty emphasises the element of political struggle contained in critical theory. This implies that a better future cannot simply be wished or waited for, but has to be fought for. Consequently, Delanty insists that “the logic by which potentiality becomes possibility is thus the key to the conception of the future” [170].

Delanty's conception of the future in terms of political struggle and his claim that that future is “opened up by the life-world in its resistance to instrumentalization” [172] might lead us to expect an analysis of power relations. Instead, he argues that cosmopolitanism is the answer to our current predicament, with cosmopolitanism defined as “a condition of openness to the world; that is, it is about the opening or expansion of horizons” [181]. The key claim is that cosmopolitanism as a political movement would counteract the dominance of global capitalism and serve as a critique of nationalism. In contrast to a normative cosmopolitanism, Delanty proposes a critical cosmopolitanism, which is “rooted in social reality in terms of people's experiences, identities, values,

solidarities, and social struggles” [181]. While the repeated mentions of political struggle and social movements suggest that power exists, the fact that it is not explicitly discussed makes it difficult to understand how precisely cosmopolitanism will undermine the structural power relations that have become entrenched over centuries. This is not to say that such a feat would be impossible, but rather that a more direct engagement with political and economic power imbalances might have made the proposition more convincing.

The lack of serious engagement with power relations is even more striking considering that this theme is often mentioned in the literature on imagined futures. For example, Jens Beckert highlights the ability of politically and economically powerful actors to “influence the construction of imagined futures” and thus to limit the futures available to others.⁹ John Urry likewise argues that a key element of power is the ability “to determine—to produce—the future, out of the many ways it is imagined, organised, materialised and distributed”.¹⁰ In a capitalist system, structurally powerful actors have the ability to withhold or provide resources based on their perceptions of the future.¹¹ It is important to recall Delanty’s aim of developing a complete theory of the future. Such a theory would surely have to account for the power that actors derive from their ability to influence imaginaries of the future, as well as the power relations involved in enforcing a future, especially considering that the future is contested and there are usually alternatives—in spite of claims to the contrary.

Delanty offers a productive way of approaching the future, especially in a time when it seems rather bleak. He proposes a multi-level conceptualisation of the future that spans the “meta order”, consisting of principles and ideas that transcend the empirical world; the “macro order” of general cultural models; and “the meso and micro order”, which focuses on “what social actors do as collective agents or as individuals” [191]. The “ideas that transcend social life” are embodied by social actors and revealed in imaginaries, ideals, programmes, and political goals. Summarily, he thinks of the future as “the coming into being of what exceeds that which is presently actualized in the logic of current forms of social life. It thus concerns what is potential and possible” [183]. As already noted, a primary contribution of critical

⁹ Beckert JENS, 2016. *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics* (Massachusetts, Harvard University Press: 14).

¹⁰ Urry JOHN, 2016. *What Is the Future?* (Cambridge, Polity Press: 17).

¹¹ Beckert JENS and Timur ERGEN, 2020. “Transcending History’s Heavy Hand: The Future in Economic Action,” *MPIfG Discussion Paper*, 20 (3): 8.

theory is that it highlights social struggles. Social reality is thus always produced in the context of struggle. In Delanty's insightful and provocative words: "it follows from this that the horizon of the future is constantly being pushed back but is also perpetually present" [184-185].

In order to assess Delanty's overall contribution, it is necessary to position his conceptualisation of the future against the current literature. While Delanty recognises the significance of imaginaries, he insists that "neither the notion of imaginary nor the narratives it leads to can on their own create new realities... An image of the future is not enough to bring it about" [20]. It is a perceptive point that is often made by scholars who write about ideas and imaginaries.¹² The fact that an imaginary or idea of the future is not enough to bring it to fruition is also why it is essential to take power relations into account. Although I am sure it was not Delanty's intention, his social struggles rather appear to be happening on an equal playing field. Furthermore, Jenny Andersson, who Delanty perceptively cites, also conceptualised the future as "a field of struggle", but added a global dimension that strengthened her case.¹³ Delanty's book is full of discerning arguments and is surely a valuable contribution to our thinking on the future. It might, nonetheless, have reinforced the author's case if he had situated his account more thoroughly in the sociology of imagined futures, since this literature frequently emphasises the importance of social struggles.¹⁴ While Delanty makes a significant contribution to this field, it might have benefited the reader if he had more explicitly discussed how his account of the future in relation to social struggles goes beyond the current literature.

Providing a theory of the future is only one of Delanty's main aims. The second is to argue that a third epochal shift in consciousness is currently taking place, resulting from a crisis of modernity. In contrast to a modern outlook, which is confident that the future will be new and better, the current epoch is characterised by a sense of uncertainty and fear. He argues that this shift was introduced by the 2008 crash, which produced "a sense of 'permacrisis'" [193]. While this claim seems intuitively correct for North America and Western Europe, I was left

¹² See, for example: DJELIC Marie-Laure and Reza MOUSAVI, 2020. "How the Neoliberal Think Tank Went Global: The Atlas Network, 1981 to Present," in PLEHWE Dieter, MIROWSKI Philip and SLOBODIAN Quinn (eds), *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism* (London/New York, Verso: 282).

¹³ Andersson JENNY, 2018. *The Future of the World: Futurology, Futurists, and the*

Struggle for the Post-Cold War Imagination (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 26).

¹⁴ This point is confirmed by a meta-analysis of the imagined futures literature: BECKERT Jens and Lisa SUCKERT, 2020. "The Future as a Social Fact: The Analysis of Perceptions of the Future in Sociology," *Poetics*: 11-12.

wondering if it would apply to someone sitting in Beijing. For any Iraqi, the 2003 invasion was surely a more significant turning point, and the brutal US-led sanctions of the 1990s had already ushered in a period of profound uncertainty in the region. This is a rather convoluted way of highlighting Delanty's Eurocentrism. The problem is not that Delanty focuses on the Global North, which is of course a completely legitimate area of analysis, but rather that he speaks as if he is making an argument that is universally applicable—as implied by the subtitle, “conflicting ideas of the future in the *world* today”.

There is much more that could be said about Delanty's timely and fascinating book. I am fully convinced that the future is a crucial field of analysis and that his inclusion of Critical Theory is a great contribution to the burgeoning sociology of the future. While Delanty focuses on the future, his exploration speaks to the “crisis of the future” in the present, and he perceptively remarks that “the very notion of a major social transformation... entails precisely an orientation to the future since it will involve a transformation in structures of consciousness and the unavoidable pursuit of alternatives... the future is not exclusively a temporal category but is embroiled in other dimensions of society and is integral to the human condition” [189]. Like any ambitious and thought-provoking text, Delanty's book evokes some critical questions. In this regard, it seems clear to me that there is an urgent need for work that theorises the future from a Global South perspective.

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