

# **The Pluralization of Futures. In this critical moment in time, we must open up the self-understanding and shape of Critical Futures Studies**

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## **Abstract**

In this critical moment of history, we must open up and renew both the shape and self-understanding of critical futures studies to fully become part of the contemporary project of positive social interventions. This short text explores the significance of innovating critical future studies in the context of increasing societal complexity and technological advancement. It emphasises the need for a pluralistic approach to understanding, shaping and discussing futures in open societies, highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and scientific rigour in futures research while calling to a more multiversal and experimental approach in applying futures to critical social interventions.

**Keywords:** Innovation of Critical Futures Studies, Societal Interventions & Life Worlds, Theory and Practice, Pluralization, Multi-, Inter- and Transdisciplinarity, Anticipation.

## **Introduction**

What after WWII has been traditionally, and sometimes with dubious reputation, understood as “the future” is nowadays experiencing new and increased global interest, albeit in different and often contradictory forms, with diverse and sometimes opposed actors and with competing intentions and interests. The repeated systemic crises of recent years have intensified calls for “the future”. However, digging a bit deeper these calls were not for an old, speculative future, but a new, more complex kind of future that also demands new concepts and ideas for how to engage with it. Diversification, differentiation, and pluralization are the trends of the epoch. The growing variety of ideas, expectations, and fears about what is to come, and the multiplication of anticipation strategies into short-, medium-, and long-term approaches, create more socially relevant futures than ever before.

Experiments in their systematic networking have only recently begun

to take shape. Yet they too are rapidly multiplying. For many recognise that open societies should understand development in the creative tension between the proliferation and convergence of futures more stably and holistically by now, in order to preserve them whilst working with them in a more orderly and sustainable manner. This innovation-prone mindset offers an opportunity for a fundamentally reformed relaunch of critical future studies as an accompaniment form of societal evolution which may serve as “non-traditional diplomacy” (UNTRAD 2025) both in educational and social environments across political systems and ideologies and thus interrelate them towards joint trajectories. To institutionalise such approaches openly and adaptably through the integration of experimental idea-approaches such as *World Generation*, *Forefront Mapping*, and *Futures Staging* as critical – and above all self-critical! – futures research, rather than wanting to normatively and regulatively control futures before they even occur, as has been the case particularly in Europe thus far, is a progressive idea for practice-oriented actors at the intersection of economy, technology, and politics. It will help these sectors to be prepared for the more dynamic, diverse, flexible, and creatively unpredictable environment of the coming years.

## I

A core motif of the present era is the rise of projections of imagination, and with them, imagination politics. We have been experiencing a massive increase in the significance of futures conceptions for years – across the world. The faster the world changes, the faster these conceptions also take on political significance. The trend clearly moves from monolithic to pluriverse futures. That means: not a single future in the singular is under debate anymore, but futures in the plural. We see a multiplication of meaning attributions to the term “future” proportional to its rise in public discourse. The “ever more” of futures that has been spreading for years has to do with the epochal combination of *uncertainty* – in the socio – economic sphere, especially in the context of the rapidly successive systemic crises of the 2020s – with *acceleration* – driven primarily by the digitalisation and information sectors. Uncertain acceleration has become accelerated uncertainty – and both together have become the systemic characteristic of our time.

The consequence? The increasing pace of “deeply uncertain” upheavals, because they are highly diversified, accompanied by an unmanageable anarchy of future conceptions that often remain unreflected or preconscious but increasingly shape voting behaviour, makes more integrated and widespread future competence necessary – in practically all sectors of society and thus also at all levels of multi-level governance. The fundamental demand of the time for future competence extends far beyond political elites. It affects economy, civil society, and culture as well as, with long-term effects on all other social sectors, the technology, science, education, and training sectors.

## II

Against this fluid background, today – both for democratic societies and for those on the threshold to democracy, that is, for all those who do not succumb to the temptation of authoritarianism under the pressure of the future – it is primarily about *seven* fundamental points:

*Firstly, exploration:* better research into futures. System understanding and design should no longer occur through spectacular speculation, but with the empirical-practical help of better future studies and ultimately more rational future science. However, this must first be organised.

*Secondly, the negotiation* of futures: the most balanced possible social negotiation of the most diverse, often dialectical or contrary future conceptions of different groups, generations, genders. The two novel instruments of imagination politics and non-traditional diplomacy can be helpful here. They should be expanded theoretically and didactically and then continuously adapted contextually.

*Thirdly, building on these first two points, acceptance politics:* how people can accept the future at all, whether in the singular (which becomes more difficult) or in the plural (which generates anarchy and threatens to undermine the formal processes of democracy). How can “the people” be taken along when setting the course for different futures, so that society does not break apart between ideas and assumptions? Future designs, whether public (media, politics, administration) or private (chatbots, influencers, populists), rapidly gain or lose significance in democracies, depending on whether people go along with them

or not. Communication of futures becomes more important – especially for those who continue to commit themselves to public enlightenment.

*Fourthly, imagination or conception design:* the communal handling of desired or to-be-avoided forms of how the future should take concrete shape in society and politics. Imagination politics and imagination design rarely coincide. Both also drift further away in many sectors from those future conceptions that are designed by new technology instruments like AI and chatbots. They should all be brought into stronger alignment, if only for reasons of protecting the credibility of democracy. For this purpose, anticipation instruments in the conception area such as UNESCO Futures Literacy & Foresight (UNESCO, 2025) should be brought into alignment (Tuomi, 2024) with the conscious anticipation of AI, chatbot, and technology futures.

*Fifthly, making politics* with future conceptions, and especially: the “how” of this making. Work with the instrument of the future is, viewed from the meta-level, a deeply ethical matter. It must no longer be left to populists, who have used it abundantly to their advantage in recent years because they could nonchalantly exercise dominion over an imagination politics that was still in the stage of speculation politics – largely unaccompanied by science. The academic sector has mostly limited itself to criticism and protests, but has not presented a science of the future in opposition. This should urgently change. For the experience of recent years teaches that criticism and protests are not sufficient to end the misuse of futures for seducing the present.

*Sixthly*, in today’s – and future! – attention economy, it concerns the use of specific attention-work instruments such as *Futures Casting* and *Futures Staging*. What counts as the future and what is worked with must be effectively visualised, haptified, and staged in the age of chatbots, AI, and digital media in order to be perceived at all. It is important to be able to anticipatorily experience and safely try out the many roles and options connected with futures that are still unknown in details, life forms, and practices – initially, without deciding on a particular role or option. Futures Casting and Futures Staging could come together here in interactive attention forms, such as in “serious games” that are connected through hackathons and other connective cooperation forms.

*Seventhly*, finally, it is simply about a contemporary-circular *innovation strategy*: how futures can socially generate a creative self-fulfilling circle between anticipation, research, and realisation. Exactly as has been

the case, for example, since the 19th century in the relationship between fiction, science, and technology development. An important task here is the accompaniment and scientific support of this circle through the conscious cultivation of a rational discourse in the public sphere. This too can take the wind out of the sails of democracy's endangerers.

### III

With these seven points, the design of their creative intersection zones is particularly crucial. For it is at the intersections where their direction and efficiency are decided. The ability to work at intersections – inter- and transdisciplinarity – is decisive for the ability to work with futures. Therefore, future competence and interdisciplinarity belong together. In the coming technologically “transversal” civilisation: not sectoral, but only interdisciplinary future capability means lasting competitiveness. The mutual engagement brings advantages to both: competitiveness gets implementation options, future research gets measurability of its plausibility and practical usefulness. This is already shown today by signal events such as, to name just one example, the Young Researcher's Award of the Euroregion Tyrol at the European Forum Alpbach (Alpbach Forum, 2025), which is dedicated to competitiveness through forward-looking works of the new generation. Similar inter- and transgenerational approaches are taking shape today in various participation-oriented approaches (Larson *et al.*, 2024).

The design of a systematic reciprocity between theory, design, and practice is therefore decisive. However, this depends on a crucial lever that plays an increasingly important role year after year in the growing field of anticipated – and through new technological instruments like AI and chatbots increasingly empirically anticipatable! – futures. It is the *scientification of future competence* and, generally, the institutional rationalisation of work on future anticipation.

### IV

What exactly “scientification” can and should mean in this field is, however, subject to discussion. As of today, “the future” is the only object

of science that precisely does not “exist” – by definition and fundamentally. Scientification cannot only mean rationalisation in the classical sense vis-à-vis this programmatically not-yet-existing, even if this should be central. Rather, scientification must include a whole series of practically interwoven components. Among these are emotional future intelligence and social future intelligence, which move in the tension between social and individual future competence, which depend on future attention and future care.

With these components, the epochal, at its core still new undertaking of scientifying the future sets itself apart from previous, mostly speculative discourses. Future research instead attempts strictly phenomenological work on concrete symptoms of the new in the present: namely, recognising the signs of the future in practical reality. That the future could today become the object of science for the first time consistently also lies in the fact that for the first time in history, empirically highly efficient instruments are available for this purpose. Artificial intelligence and chatbots enable new levels of precision for prediction and assessment approaches that already exist in principle because they can combine more micro-, meso-, and macro-information. With these information-integration instruments, elements and methods from the system sciences can be adopted and newly combined.

However, this must occur critically, for neither the previous system sciences nor the new “future instruments” of information gathering are free from errors. They must not be regarded as the wisdom of last resort, especially with regard to something as delicate and emotionally and existentially profound for people as “the future,” but soberly as what they are: as instruments and aids. No more, and no less.

## V

Overall, it is about a science of “the future” today that does not remain purely sectoral, but takes the larger whole into view in order to locate the contextual, local, and regional within it. Through this, orientation is gained that leads to motivation and better action capability. An example of how creative the tension science-system thinking-futures can be are newer experiments at the intersection of sustainability, environment, and future research. Publications such as those by Ludwig Weh (Fraunhofer Society): “A participatory

scenario framework that promotes ecosystem scenarios as an approach for the environmental future” (Weh, 2024) provide concrete inspiration in sustainability science, and beyond. Such – both perspectively and methodologically! – future-enabling approaches point the way to an attitude that opens itself to experimentation at the intersections of critically important themes and challenges, without leaving the accuracy and ethical demands of science. We need more such experiments for more fields, theme groups, and options!

The actual, ultimate desideratum of such approaches is, whether implicitly or explicitly, drawing a “future of humanity” perspective both in practical local applications and in the larger strokes, but especially at their intersection points. This does not fundamentally distinguish the “new futures” from what science has always factually strived for and done: to find the large in the small and the small in the large. But today, this will probably also require the creation of an institution where different futures can converge at the even higher level of open societies and their – hopefully interconnected! – future planning in the global development context. The existing science services do not accomplish this, actually intended for macro themes. Open societies need a more explicit, interdisciplinarily more specialised future research facility as a hub and platform, but does not yet have one. The previously only institute for the future of humanity existed until April 2024 at Oxford University in the UK, pursuing a strongly transhumanist approach. Open societies in their interconnection need a future institute with a more neo-humanistic flavour that takes up its intellectual-historical roots and reflects humanistic guiding values while integrating the best of the transhuman endeavor where it is based on reason and sober calculation. Through this, the overall direction can lead into the future in a more balanced way – and thereby include, for example, “constructive” components such as sustainability, resilience or transformation much more strongly and, above all, systemically more integrated into future prospects than was the case in Oxford.

## VI

Further experimental-avant-garde approaches that develop at the transdisciplinary intersection of various sectors and that are worth pursuing and elaborating exist. *Three* particularly interesting ones for the coming years are: World Generation, Forefront Mapping, and Critical Futures Staging.

*World Generation* is an experimental macro-approach that deals with the holistic process that is brought to life through engagement with futures. Future processes generate their own regularities, which are reflected in social dynamics of emergence and decay processes and thus in historical hermeneutic circles. *World Generation* draws inspiration, among other things, from the approach of *World Forming*, which describes itself from the side of its representatives as a “foresight-driven transformative innovation approach to design entire ecosystems” (Baumann, 2024). The resulting “worlds” are reality constructs that attempt to co-shape practical realities in the sense of life worlds. “Practical theorists” such as the future researcher and consultant Frank Kumli (Kumli, 2024) attempt to elaborate this approach and make it fruitful for critical social processes.

*Forefront Mapping* is a collective term we have coined with an organisational claim that wants to unite various novel “mapping” approaches and relate them to future research. Today, innovative empirical “mapping” approaches exist for visualising complex data, primarily with the help of connecting AI, virtual reality technologies, drone surveying, and automated information integration in various fields: such as in approaches of DepthMapping to emerging technologies, Geospatial Mapping, Web Mapping, Mobile Mapping especially for vehicles and infrastructure projects, Rapid Mapping and Rapid Survey Mapping, Mapping for Disaster Prevention, Projection Mapping for immersive, interactive, and adaptive “creative technologies,” Aerial Mapping, High-Precision Brain Mapping, and Coordinate Mapping for Quantum Computing. They are all supposed to refine and make decision-making more precise through data-supported holistic “maps” and significantly increase the probability degree of correct decisions.

*Critical Futures Staging* would, from our perspective, be the (self-) critical further development of staging futures to attract attention and engagement. New holographic simulation instruments can serve this purpose as well as their relation to Virtual Reality headsets or Augmented Reality projections onto buildings and spaces in real life worlds. For this, existing, rapidly spreading approaches such as Augmented Reality Home Staging, Luxury Staging, and Multi-Layer Event Staging are related to the future question and applied in different forms.

All three approaches: World Generation, Forefront Mapping, and Critical Futures Staging are predominantly constructivist-technologically characterised, but also show strong humanistic-enlightenment compo-

nents. All three conceive themselves as macro-approaches that simultaneously should have a high degree of suitability for contextualisation and adaptation. For the further development of all three approach formations, their mutual reference would be sensible in the coming years. A critical comparison of theory, performance capability, use value, and value effect could reflect all three approaches in strengths and weaknesses and thereby advance them not least with regard to institutionalisation experiments.

## VII

From these considerations, *five* challenges for open societies emerge in conclusion.

*Firstly:* there is a discrepancy between theory and practice in dealing with futures. In many discussions, especially the quality of theory and practice do not match: Innovation practices are hardly reflected, critically examined, or supported by future science. A theory is needed that adequately supports the implementation of processes of change in a more complex and inclusion-capable practice of futures.

*Secondly:* the previous main shortcomings exist not in the private but in the public sector. Entrepreneurs would immediately and gladly invest in futures. However, they can hardly do this in the appropriate balance between courage, orientation, and evaluation because politics in many contemporary democracies is unable to provide long-term framework guidelines for futures. Future investments by the private sector demand start-up, restitution, and amortisation times that must be stably supported administratively and tax-technically over longer periods. However, politics in open societies still think too much in legislative periods of a few years, whilst an entrepreneur who invests in the future must calculate in half a decade to a decade to justify and amortise the investment. For this, she or he needs stably calculable conditions for this period. No one can provide these to her or him so far – also because of constantly changing politicians and governments. National compensatory measures such as the establishment of the – important! – Agency for Disruptive Innovation in Germany, the “Futureversities” initiative of the German Foundation Association 2025-27, or measures such as the tender for “Skills Academies” in technological future sectors are significant signals, but not sufficient in themselves. They are generally too broadly conceived and too

little specialised in futures, thus understanding (also for lack of accessible examples) tendentially too much as “future,” “future research,” or “future competence.” The inability to approach futures long-term is meanwhile a serious structural problem of Western democracies in dealing with prosperity and security. Hardly anyone has addressed this primarily at their meta-level so far – but this should change as rapidly as possible. The difference to China and the Arab states is significant here. Western companies usually pay higher taxes but have significantly less access to global risk capital markets that are interested in courageous future investments. In China, companies compensate for the lack of political-administrative permanence regarding future investments that characterises democracies through better capital supply from the public sector. Companies in open societies cannot do this in the same way. They are on their own regarding the future – whilst in comparison, systems like China or many Arab states quite consciously provide stable conditions for future investment processes over decades and longer to gain an advantage over democracies. The resulting ambivalence of its social conditions must be urgently addressed by democracy to avoid, paradoxically, precisely because of the openness of its social systems, falling behind the actually rigid but already out of self-protection and self-interest of rulers actively future-attentive authoritarian systems regarding innovation. This was impressively highlighted recently by, for example, the two reports on the state of Europe by Enrico Letta and Mario Draghi in April and September 2024 (Letta, 2024; Draghi, 2024). Their warnings should not go unheard.

*Thirdly:* Similar applies to the institutionalisation of the future in the knowledge and science context, where one of its stable, long-term continuously self-renewing and self-critical nuclei should exist. Precisely the future – where it is about the new – requires continuity of knowledge, precisely because this continuously advances and does not remain the same. Exactly where it is about the productive dialectic between continuities and disruptions, a long-term stable institutionalisation of future science is necessary. Europe has much catching up to do here compared to other world regions like Arabia, China, and BRICS.

*Fourthly:* Foresight must be separated from ideological influence. This also applies in principle to the influence of liberal world attitudes on research and knowledge. Many non-Westerners emphasise today: If democracy wants to cooperate meaningfully with other systems, it must separate propaganda from foresight. This theme is very comprehensive

and can also be misunderstood. Therefore, it is important that the focus of new future initiatives lies on education and continuing education. The reference to democracy's backlog especially in the "neutral" future field is of fundamental importance for the West's ability to connect and dialogue in a changing global context.

*Fifthly*, finally: Of all democracies on the planet, Europe is the continent that is warming fastest in the climate crisis. The pressure of the future is enormous here – and is also experienced as such by voters. Probably Europe needs the most future competence and especially future *process* competence of all global actors – especially more than those who are already further in their institutionalisation of futures. Experimental training and methodological approaches for connecting transformation with future competences "from below" should therefore receive much greater attention because they stand at the centre of the socially "generative" intersection of the coming years. This happens, for example, in the new "School of Transformation" at the University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, where "Designing Futures" has recently been taught to business students in a consortium of future experts.

## VIII

In summary, we have identified seven social pivot points, three methodological approaches, and five challenges for contemporary futures work. They obviously do not constitute a complete list, but perhaps (necessarily unfinished at present) the sketch of a first experimental map. Looking at them together can be useful for further orientation and alignment. All challenges exist at the confluence of *five* fundamental – and closely interconnected – maxims for the coming years:

1. *The future is not an objectively "normalisable" object of scientific exploration, but an essentially experimental one. It will remain so, for the future does not "exist." Therefore, a congenial institutionalisation of future work is needed that gives permanence and continuity to experimental states.*

2. *There is not one future, but many futures simultaneously, alongside and within each other and overlapping. The Aristotelian criteria of potentiality and actualisation interweave in never-ending and principally open processes.*

3. *The future must therefore also be examined for its proximity to quantum theory and reality, which is also increasingly fruitful in social science*

today. If treatises on a “quantum theory of history” (Slavoj Žižek, 2025) are emerging today, a “quantum theory of the future” is overdue.

4. *The future creates society just as society creates the future. Understanding the future as a social construct emerging from social contexts, situations, relationships, and options (Intraltation, 2024) first gives it a truly human face. Part of the future of the social sciences (Benedikter, 2024a) depends on this in return.*

5. *The future, too, consists of different “tribes” of representatives, methods, and ideological groups (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2024) which struggle for dominance. Conducting negotiations between them about common futures becomes an ever more important socio-political task in times of tribalism and “strong” individualization of hopes and fears.*

This fivefold maxim, which only in the exchange of its parts generates that hermeneutic circle that can explain and shape current realities, will presumably characterise our time until at least the middle of the century. The hermeneutic circle writes its own laws of the future to which most individual processes will obey. In the overall process, a contradiction arises between plurality and unity, leading to the necessity of unity in diversity. This is interestingly also the motto of the European Union, which thereby indirectly opens itself to the future. It is time to do this more explicitly. Futures science in the sense of bringing together future competences for administrations, decision-makers, and civil society becomes a prerequisite for the further path of developed societies. Politics from the municipal through the regional to the national and transnational level should now accept this situation and systematically address it.

## IX

In outlook, one must quite fundamentally establish that the “pressure of the future” is felt today societally and individually no less strongly than the notorious “pressure of life” of which former US President Bill Clinton spoke in his memoirs as the central driver of contemporary politics, culture, individuals, and society. Both: the pressure of the future and the pressure of life are by now almost equal under today’s civilisational and living conditions. As a consequence, futures become increasingly important for the ideological and worldview balancing, pacification, and professionalisation of social processes. Their research can be a positive balanc-

ing element to negative developments that will inevitably also always exist within future processes. Futures are especially important for intergenerational dialogue and transgenerational justice of advanced societies.

And that means at the end of the day: A “futures maturity” (Futures Platform, 2024) of open societies in the area of foresight and anticipation is not yet given, but lies within the realm of possibility. Where the future of humanity is threatened, open societies now need the systematisation of futures competence to transversally anticipate positive – namely possible, desirable, and probable – futures and thereby make them shapeable. The cooperation of nations and cultures can profit from the rise of the ideologically rather “neutral,” yet simultaneously value-laden futures theme to become a sort of meta-civilisational roof.

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