Akos Rona-Tas, The Importance of Thinking Forward

Jens Beckert, Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Symanics

The 2012 Chilean movie, with the short title No, takes us back to 1988, when General Pinochet, feeling self-confident, called a referendum to legitimize his dictatorship. Based on historical events, the movie shows how the opposition, with the help of a young advertising executive, René Saavedra, managed to turn public opinion against Pinochet. At first, advertisements by the opposition detail the horrific history the dictatorship visited on the country but fail to get any traction. Saaverda then begins to produce a series of funny, lighthearted ads showing people enjoying the small pleasures of normalcy in a post-Pinochet Chile. The opposition politicians are outraged by what they consider to be a shallow, commercial message insensitive to the gravity of the decision about the fate of the country; but they come around to Saaverda’s main insight, which is also the central claim of Beckert’s brilliant book, *Imagined Futures*: people are motivated not by the facts of their pasts which are always open to multiple interpretations, but by their expectations about the future. Moral outrage over what happened is a weaker motivation than the joyous anticipation of what is yet to come. Our cognition and emotions about the future are different from how we think and feel about the past as recent research by cognitive psychologists, like Daniel Gilbert and others, have demonstrated (Gilbert and Wilson 2007). Sociology and economic sociology in particular must incorporate this fundamental insight.

*Imagined Futures* is a theoretical work of a special kind. There is theoretical work devoted to reinterpretting the work of earlier theoreticians making them relevant to current concerns by weaving the yarn of intellectual history. Block and Somers excellent book on Karl Polanyi, *The Power of Market Fundamentalism*, belongs to this group (Block and Somers, 2014). Another type of theoretical contribution is a general explanation of some important phenomenon, a broad theory of the middle range anchored firmly in some empirical material. One example of this would be Sabel and Piore’s 1984 classic, *The Second Industrial Divide* (Sabel and Piore, 1984). And there is also work that offers a novel way of looking at things, a new approach that rather than answering existing questions, makes way for new ones. Granovetter’s landmark 1985 article, *Economic Action and Social Structure*, falls into this category, and so does Beckert’s book (Granovetter, 1985). Good specimens in this category tend to do three things. First, they present their theory as an argument against existing ideas. Second, they provide methodological tools to conduct inquiry based on the new insight. Third, they offer examples of how their theory may work on a series of subjects.

Beckert’s theory, which he presents in a critical dialogue with sociological and economic theories, rests on two premises, each is neatly encapsulated by one of the two words in the book title. The teleological premise is that modern (as opposed to traditional or pre-capitalist) action is oriented towards the future. Intentional action must have a future goal in mind and this goal is the proximate cause of social behavior. Sociology, currently dominated by causal and structural explanations, should turn to teleological ones. Teleology in sociology fell into disrepute with the demise of functionalism where it appears at the institutional or societal level. There are at least two major problems with the way teleology is deployed by functionalism. First, it attributes intentionality to social aggregates and does not let us ask any question about how individual intentions add up to a
collective purpose. Second, it is based on a notion of equilibrium and does not allow for change, thus novelty and time are concepts very hard to account for.

Teleology at the individual level is largely missing from sociology and it is often swept under the concept of agency or treated as a cultural norm. Expectations about the future play an important role in economics, but economics cannot accept the second fundamental premise of Beckert’s theory, that the future is fundamentally uncertain. The uncertainty of the future, as Beckert argued in his earlier work, is ubiquitous and not subject to calculable deterministic forces (Beckert). Whether this uncertainty is epistemological (result of our lack of knowledge that we can, in principle remedy) or ontological (irreducible, no matter how much information we gather) or strategic (as knowledge is filtered through other actors who maybe interested in keeping up uncertainty) is irrelevant because for one reason or another, in real social situations actors will never have the power to fully predict the future, not even in a probabilistic way. Beckert’s emphatic point is that thinking about the future, while inevitable for strategic action, is always a creative act. If the future is indeterministic (or “imagined” to use the word in the title), than we can no longer depend on the usual, rational explanations that start from the historical and current circumstances of the actor, but we must scrutinize how people imagine a future which is fictional but appears to them as real. Instead, we must open ourselves to new forms of analysis borrowing from the tools used to decipher various forms of fantasy and fiction.

At this point, Beckert takes an important step that makes his alternative vision so much more powerful. Like Granovetter did, he suggests a set of methodological instruments to begin the exploration of future-motivated social action. Granovetter offered network analysis, Beckert proposes that we can learn a lot from literary analysis and rhetoric. How these fictional ideas become credible and motivating can be usefully explored with the same hermeneutical instruments the humanities investigate novels or arguments.

The following chapters establish how central issues in the economy, -- money and credit, investment, innovation, and consumption – can benefit from Beckert’s theory. Beckert elegantly demonstrates the role expectations play in all four of them setting up economic sociologists for further research. The final part of the book looks at imagining the future as an empirical problem, and shows the ways economic actors deal with the simultaneous need and impossibility of prediction.

When one lays out a new theoretical vista it is natural to push the claims as far as possible. But once the case is made, we should ask: do people always act teleologically and is the future always uncertain? Beckert does not claim that humans are always teleological. He sees this strategic future orientation as a cultural norm that has emerged fairly late in human history. And even in capitalistic societies, one could easily find instances of different types of actions, such as emotionally driven expressive action, habitual and procedural routines, or imitation, where wrestling with imagined futures is not salient. One could argue that alternative types of social action are ways to solve or at least avoid the inscrutability of the future. But that would take us back to rational choice theory where motivations are inferred from outcomes in an optimistic way.

One can also question the second premise. Is the future always uncertain? It is easy to see that predictability, is a matter of degree. First of all, no one would want to live in a perfectly
predictable world. It is not just that we may not want to know (or imagine) what Christmas present we will get or the exact details and date of our death, we also mostly settle for stability, a weaker form predictability. For instance, when we get into our car and turn the key in the ignition we do not have to ponder the uncertainty of the outcome of our action even if we know that on rare occasions the engine does not start. Predictability does not have to be absolute.

In the social world the inertia -- and therefore predictability -- of processes varies greatly. Events anchored directly in biological or physical processes are much more predictable than others. The number of retirees or school age children in the next five years is not hard to predict, the same way as we can be confident that after sunset visibility will worsen which will have predictable social consequences.

Moreover, there are certain ranges within which we can make confident predictions. We may not be able to predict the growth rate of a country next year with great precision, but we can definitely set a wider range within which the number must fall. The same way, we cannot be certain how long we live but we can confidently set an upper limit. One can argue that predictions of this kind that stretch the range too much gain certainty at the cost of being useless. What use is there to know that the GDP of a country will not change in either directions more than 25%? Or that one will not live longer than 130 years? The point is that uncertainty reigns within a certain range. That range is a social product, and therefore uncertainty is a social product as well. The same goes for time horizon. If you want to know if you will see the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in real life in the next hour, the answer is certainly not, unless you are already in the Vatican. If one asks the same question but broadens the time horizon to the next year, uncertainty begins to mount. The same goes to scale. Predictability in many cases depends at what level you want to predict. To predict at the individual level whether someone will visit the Sistine Chapel the next year may be hard, but the number of visitors is easier to predict.

There is also predictability that is enforced by institutions. We can predict in industrial countries that children at age 8 will spend several hours a day in school, or that cars will not drive on the wrong side of the road on divided highways. There will be exceptions but those will be heavily sanctioned and those penalties will make behavior more predictable. Finally, there are self-reinforcing processes and self-fulfilling prophecies. Payday lenders set high interest rates anticipating high default and those terms will make their “prediction” more likely to come true. Just as uncertainty, predictability is a social product too, it is achieved through different social mechanisms.

Uncertainty of the future, therefore, is not simply the essential characteristics of things to come, as anyone who ever waited for a train both in Frankfurt and, say, in a small town in Italy can testify. The future is never completely certain, but the degree to which it is uncertain (and the degree to which we can assess this uncertainty, which is not the same) varies in ways social actors care about.

Beckert has laid out a program for empirical research with its own challenges. There will be thorny measurement issues. How do we measure expectations? The problem is rooted in the fact that social scientists explain events that already happened. How do we find out ex post facto how what is now the past or present, was imagined further back in time? Retrospection is fraught with many problems, including rationalization, cognitive dissonance reduction, selective and distorted
memory, our tendency to explain from outcomes with hindsight etc. To argue that anticipating the future matters, we have to observe anticipation at the time when the expected future is still yet to come. Intertwined with measurement issues, we will also have to beware of difficulties causal explanations of this kind encounter, including the futility of intentional, future oriented action and unintended consequences: sometimes action does not matter, at other times it matters in ways not anticipated. In those cases, our explanation must reach beyond Beckert’s framework. Finally, research also has to develop an understanding of the ways individually imagined futures diffuse, are coordinated and aggregated in the social world. How can leaders spread visions of political, economic or social futures to others, how do organizations depend on complementary ideas and how do individually imagined futures add up to coherent ideologies?

Beckert’s book is a marvelous invitation to rethink problems not just in economic sociology but in any field interested in social outcomes through the lens of expectations, imagination and fantasy. I can only imagine its future impact on the entire discipline.

References:


To be published in the *Socio-Economic Review*