

**SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO PROSPECTIVE MONITORING (VEILLE
PROSPECTIVE)
THE PROBLEMATIC OF DEFINITION AND METHODOLOGY**

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Abstract:

This article examines the epistemological and methodological problematics surrounding the concept of prospective monitoring (*veille prospective*) within sociology. It first addresses two main definitional issues: the multiplicity of terms used interchangeably (e.g., economic intelligence, competitive intelligence, strategic anticipative monitoring) and the question of whether “future” should be used in the singular or plural, arguing that the plural (“futures”) allows for multiple, adaptable scenarios rather than a single predetermined model. The article then reviews six sociological approaches to foresight: the positivist approach (Auguste Comte), which seeks to predict in order to control; the Marxist approach (Karl Marx), based on class conflict and linear stages of development; the Weberian approach (Max Weber), using ideal types and causal analysis; the phenomenological approach (Husserl, Schütz, Garfinkel), focusing on everyday lived experience and meanings; the Khaldunian approach (Ibn Khaldūn), centred on ‘*aṣabiyyah* (group solidarity) and the cyclical rise and fall of civilisations; and the critical approach (Bourdieu, Sporek, Malik Bennabi), which emphasises critique of the present to open up possible and desirable futures. The article concludes that no single, unified theoretical framework exists for prospective monitoring; instead, sociology offers diverse conceptual models and intellectual contributions that together enrich the study of the future of societies.

Keywords: Prospective monitoring (*veille prospective*); Sociological approaches; Foresight / futures studies; Problematic of definition; Social change and prediction

Introduction:

At first glance, when addressing the topic of prospective monitoring, we raise the question: does this subject belong to the field of sociology? If so, is foresight or thinking about the future one of the functions of sociology? Are there theoretical approaches that explicitly address the issue of monitoring or foresight? Or does the sociological contribution come in the form of conceptualisations and intellectual models? Another question that can also be raised is: does the role of the sociologist stop at conducting social research, investigating and interrogating reality in order to discover the laws that govern social phenomena and to predict them? Or does the sociologist also contribute to thinking about the future and shaping it?

In this regard, this article will address some of the conceptualisations and ideas, in the form of theoretical and intellectual models, put forward by certain thinkers and sociologists on the subject of monitoring and foresight. We shall raise several problematics concerning the nature of prospective monitoring and the multiplicity of approaches to studying the future of societies and creating possible or desirable scenarios.

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The Problematic of Naming the Concept of Prospective Monitoring:

First problematic is related to the multiplicity of terms used to define prospective monitoring this concept has been adopted by the French Centre for Future Thinking and Studies (Futuribles), a think tank specialising in future studies that aims to integrate action into long-term decisions and procedures. According to the researcher Céline Wendling and the researcher Hugues de Jouvenel, prospective monitoring is the process of seeking and generating unique information to feed future thinking. This information also relates to developments in lifestyles and technological progress, and it is particularly concerned with current facts and actions that may affect the future.

The concept of economic intelligence has been used as a synonym for monitoring. Humbert and Lesca considered them equivalent concepts, but with the nuance that monitoring takes place at the level of the firm, whereas economic intelligence operates at the level of the state. Others have regarded monitoring as a part of economic intelligence. In a French study conducted by the Institute for Advanced Studies in National Defence in 1999, covering 1,200 companies on the use of these concepts, it was found that 54.5% of cases used the term “competitive intelligence” instead of “economic intelligence” (9.8%), while 35.7% of cases used the term “monitoring”.

Some have also used the concept of “strategic anticipative monitoring” and the concept of “general intelligence” – a translation from the Latin for "veille anticipative stratégique" and "intelligence collective".

Second problematic defines the nature of foresight using the singular or plural form of “future”. It appears that definitions of foresight have often relied on the singular form of “future”, whereas other definitions have used the plural form (“futures”). Using the plural “futures” indicates the multiplicity of directions the future can take – whether for a society, a system, a phenomenon, or an action. It also allows for the design of scenarios specific to each, based on present and past data, and for their implementation in the future. Moreover, we can create possible and desirable futures, rather than merely discovering them and anticipating their consequences in the near or distant future.

On the other hand, if “future” is used in the singular, presenting a single, unique model for the predetermined design of a society’s or a specific organisation’s future, this implies that such a model cannot be adapted or adopted by another organisation. Even for the same organisation, it may cease to be effective if circumstances, actors, or objectives change.

Most of these difficulties concerning the definition of foresight in the singular or plural can be attributed to:

1. The vast expanse of knowledge, due to the multiplicity of fields and schools of thought.
2. The lack of a comprehensive and precise description of sociological subjects as a methodological scientific guide to help define concepts.
3. The varied nature of studies in the social sciences, whether macro-sociological or micro-sociological.

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4. Differences in determining the dimensions and variables – both manifest and latent – involved in the occurrence of a phenomenon, depending on the angle or aspect adopted by the researcher in their study.

Sociological Approaches to the Subject of Prospective Monitoring:

The multiplicity of theoretical approaches to prospective monitoring in the field of sociology – concerning the search for meaning and the causes leading to the repetition of the same phenomena or actions performed by individuals and groups within organisations or institutions in order to find future alternatives and options – is due to differing viewpoints among theorists. This does not mean that these approaches have failed to find a unified definition or a law agreed upon by all scholars, such as the fixed and precise laws of the natural sciences. Rather, it reflects the fact that sociology is a set of achievements and knowledges that strive to investigate the reality of individuals and societies, which are in perpetual motion and constant change.

The Positivist Approach:

Positivist sociology adopted a scientific research methodology for studying social phenomena and investigating the causes that led to their occurrence, within an empirical, inductive, and scientific vision. The first pioneer of the positivist school was the sociologist Auguste Comte (1798-1857). His intellectual starting point was philosophical theory, moving beyond theological and philosophical thinking in explaining social phenomena through superstition, imagination, and myth, in order to formulate the principles and foundations of sociology – which he initially called “social physics”. His principles revolved around the idea that knowledge must be based on scientific observation, experimentation, the comparative method, and the historical method. Comte believed that: "If we can discover the laws governing the movement of human society, that will enable us to shape our future and our destiny in the same way that the natural sciences allow us to control events in the natural world. This view is expressed in his famous phrase: “To predict in order to control”."

According to Anthony Giddens¹, Comte’s aim in establishing sociology was to reform a society driven by critical philosophies and revolutionary movements. Giddens adds that sociology is a tool for preserving order: “You study in order to regulate.” In this context, Comte identified three foundations or rules upon which organisations are built: the material rule embodied by numbers and wealth; the intellectual rule embodied by conceptions; and the moral rule embodied by character and ethics.

Although Auguste Comte is regarded by Europeans as the first to apply the principles of natural sciences and the historical method to explaining and predicting phenomena, he focused on the material aspect of man that is measurable and testable. In this regard, Anthony Giddens¹ criticised him, saying: “We cannot study society or social phenomena in the same way as the subjects or events of the natural world, because societies exist only insofar as they are created and then re-created through our actions as human beings. In social theory, we cannot treat human activities as if they were determined by causes in the same way that events and things are determined in the natural world.”



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Positivism sees natural science as a model for explaining social phenomena and applying scientific principles and methods to describe and study them. These principles were summarised by Auguste Comte in four elements: quantification, behaviourism, empiricism, and utilitarianism, in addition to qualitative techniques. Comte studied society in both its dynamic and static states, although he did not call for change but rather for integration, reform of the existing order, and submission to it. His study of social statics added to “the consideration of the individual, society, and the state as the basic elements of society, regarding the individual as having no value except through his existence and cooperation with others.” Comte’s studies were limited to investigating phenomena and relationships to discover the causes and laws of control and regulation of a phenomenon in the future. He did not address the possibility of shaping a phenomenon according to his own will, rather than as dictated by circumstances. Nor did he go beyond studying society in its dynamic and static states. Moreover, for him the development of human thought or intellect is confined to seeking and studying what is clear, tangible, and subject to observation and experimentation.

The Marxist Approach:

The intellectual starting point of sociologists in investigating societal issues usually appears in the set of conceptions, assumptions, and visions formed, whether consciously or unconsciously, by the researcher during their life journey. These influence their view of the world and their choice of topics, hypotheses, or theories that they deem appropriate for understanding the world around them.

Marxist analysis relied on a set of assumptions helpful for foreseeing the future, focusing on the concepts of alienation, conflict, and social and class differences. Class conflict is considered the main factor of social change. Karl Marx worked to explain and predict social and economic phenomena, and he presented an evolutionary model of how societies change and develop. He believed that the development of societies occurs through successive stages, known as linear evolution. These stages include primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and finally socialism. Marx’s materialist view held that the class relations of the economic organisation of capitalism directly affect the rest of the social system.

Many scholars have criticised this positivist and materialist model, especially those who focus on human and social determinants in the study of human behaviour and relations. For the sociologist Alain Touraine, this conception was criticised through his use of the concept of “historicity”, which refers to the historical prediction of society. He analysed the conflicts that emerged from industrial society and sought to understand social dynamics in order to preserve existence, social and cultural identity, and self-realisation through social movements led by elites. Thus, he replaced the focus on the conflict between the working class and the means of production with the conflict of the elite, which expresses the individual’s resistance to industrial transformation at the expense of identity and societal culture. Touraine also attempted to focus on the destiny of post-modern societies, or what is called the information society or the programmed society.

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After criticising the reality of modernity and the consequences of the technological and informational revolution, which led to the dominance of modern technologies over social structures and relations, and after criticising Comte's sociology, Touraine shifted his study from society and the individual as objects, instead highlighting the interpretation of society's study and its capacity for action – the acting subject. He also criticised Karl Marx's linear stages of development, arguing that any society can change or develop without passing through all six stages to eliminate capitalism and reach a socialist system. The project of transforming a capitalist society into a socialist one is an assumption difficult to realise on the ground.

The Weberian Approach:

According to Walīd 'Abd al-Ḥayy⁵, Weber analysed future issues using the ideal type model. He considered that the ability to know the future is primarily based on analysing the causal relationships between human actions and their outcomes, assuming that social action is the ultimate determinant and unit of analysis for the future. He explained the sequence of events with a plausible causal interpretation, using statistical data for phenomena that are describable and quantifiable. As for phenomena that are not describable or quantifiable, he interpreted them causally by comparing the largest possible number of similar models, present and past. This type of causal interpretation falls within the historical domain.

Alfred Schütz criticised the Weberian model. Schütz was among those who contributed to understanding social reality and critiquing the reductionist view of the development of capitalism solely in terms of religious factors, neglecting economic factors. Moreover, Weber's theory focused on European societies, making it difficult to apply to other societies.

The Phenomenological Approach:

The Austrian philosopher Edmund Husserl used the concept of phenomenology to express his opposition to the dominant ideas in social and psychological studies that were satisfied with studying phenomena only from the outside, adopting the methods of the natural sciences as the fundamental approach to understanding and analysing reality. For Husserl, "phenomenology is an epistemological method that takes into account feeling, consciousness, and experiences in the study; it is a type of descriptive study of experiences without attempting to formulate hypotheses or make judgments."

Alfred Schütz was also concerned with understanding the components of social life by relying on the data of the everyday life of ordinary people, their perceptions, and the meanings they attach to their behaviour in everyday language. He tried to understand how actors draw upon previous ideas and pre-existing knowledge of things and individuals when undertaking any action. Schütz's studies also contributed to understanding the way actors create situations and rules by dividing social reality into four fields: the field of directly lived social reality (the present); the field of indirectly lived social reality (the contemporary); the field of predecessors; and the field of successors (the past and the future). Schütz examined representational models of present and past reality in order to find explanations for the meaning individuals give to their actions. He considered the study of the future less important because what has not yet occurred is difficult to subject to those models or to simulate phenomena that are merely abstract

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conceptions. Although Schütz's theory gained wide acceptance, it exaggerated the individual's production of self and actions and neglected the larger structures of society.

In this context, Harold Garfinkel focused on the study of "the methods of groups and the ways ordinary people rely on to interpret the course of their real social lives." He studied social structures as they appear in individuals' consciousness and interactions, focusing on subjective structures, lived experience, understanding everyday life, and the meanings and significations behind social actions, as well as their impact on individuals' decisions and future orientations.

The Khaldunian Approach:

Most studies and writings on the study of the future of societies acknowledge that Western sociologists were the first to lay down early research in understanding and predicting reality. However, Ibn Khaldūn's "Muqaddimah" on human civilisation presents the first scientific approach to foreseeing the future development of human civilisation, free from naive ideas and illogical interpretations. It is a systematic and advanced presentation for its time, through which he set out the three stages of the rise and fall of civilisation: Bedouin life (primitivity), civilisation (urbanism), and then the stage of decline – analogous to the growth of a living organism. Ibn Khaldūn considered "aşabiyyah" (group feeling/solidarity) as the fundamental unit of analysis for understanding future affairs and the main driver of the development of human civilisation. According to Walīd 'Abd al-Ḥayy⁵, "the conceptual content of 'aşabiyyah in Khaldunian foresight thinking is defined as the bond that brings together a group of people on the basis of shared blood – most common in tribal societies, where individuals unite to address a particular problem or to ward off harm or aggression."

Ibn Khaldūn demonstrated the future effects of "aşabiyyah" on human civilisation through real-life examples from his own era, stating: "Leadership is only achieved through domination, and domination is only achieved through 'aşabiyyah, as we have already mentioned. Thus, for leadership over a people, it must come from an 'aşabiyyah that overcomes all others, because when each 'aşabiyyah senses the dominance of the leader's 'aşabiyyah, they acknowledge submission and obedience."

Through his study of human civilisation, Ibn Khaldūn proposed a theoretical conception of the development of social life, relying on the historical method to uncover the laws that regulate and control the social, political, and economic affairs of individuals. He sought to predict what they would become in the future. This is evident in the section of his "Muqaddimah" entitled "The Affairs of Royal Authority and Its Decline", as well as the part "Souls Long for What Is Hidden from Them". However, this article will focus only on the former, as the latter would require an extended discussion.

The Critical Approach:

The ambition of the critical approach goes beyond criticising reality or criticising theories; it rejects the idea that what exists is the only choice or the only existence that must be accepted as it is. It refuses to be satisfied with understanding the social dimension merely by seeking to grasp the meaning that actors give to their actions – i.e., the reasons that drove them to act and understanding the bond of social solidarity to contribute to the emergence of a freer and more



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reasonable society. As Yann Sporck adds, "there is another world that is conceivable, and for that reason it is possible."

Thus, sociological work goes beyond searching for the latent and manifest causes of the spread of a phenomenon or finding meaning for individuals' behaviours. It aims to establish awareness of the future and its consequences, and the possibility of discovering and shaping it through a critique of lived reality and prevailing phenomena in the present. For Yann Sporck, critique is a process that raises consciousness within society. In this regard, Pierre Bourdieu³ said: "Sociology disturbs."

The sociologist must consider the foresight of the future as the key to transcending conventional thinking, rather than engaging in conditioned prediction. It expands the scope of future visions for present societies, helps organisations design future scenes and scenarios and place them in their general context, and contributes to developing a proactive vision and early warnings about what is coming or what could be.

The thinker Malik Bennabi also noted the necessity of building a conception of the future of societies based on a critical self-examination of our actions, not accepting ready-made ideas as they are without critique, and verifying their coherence with the true values of Arab and Islamic society. This idea is clearly expressed in his book "The Problem of Ideas in the Islamic World", which took him about ten years to write.

Conclusion:

The sociological treatment of the subject of prospective monitoring has varied according to the intellectual starting point and the Western theoretical schools, each with its own view of reality. This treatment has come in the form of conceptions and models, such as Auguste Comte's organic model, Karl Marx's model of societal development, Alain Touraine's model of industrial-cultural society, and Max Weber's ideal type model.

Anyone who sets out to study the future of societies will not find a self-contained theoretical approach with a conceptual framework that clearly and explicitly explains all the dimensions and indicators of foresight or the study of the future of societies – unlike other sociological topics or theories such as social change theory or social organisation theory. Instead, every scholar or thinker has addressed one aspect of the subject through their writings. Examples include Malik Bennabi's works, particularly in "The Project of the Renaissance", where he set out a conception of the future of Arab and Islamic societies, and Yann Sporck's writings, especially his book "What Future for Sociology?", in which he explored the future of society and the future of sociology itself.

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