Futures in Contention: Projecting Sustainability in the Rio+20 Debates

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ABSTRACT: While there is an extensive subfield in sociology studying the sources, content, and consequences of collective memory, the study of future projections has been much more fragmentary. In part, this has to do with the challenge of measurement; how do you measure something that hasn’t happened yet? In this paper, I argue that future projections can be studied via their externalizations in attitudes, narratives, performance, and material forms. They are particularly evident in what I call “sites of hyper-projectivity,” that is, sites of heightened, future-oriented public debate about possible futures. As a pilot project, I analyze contending narratives about possible futures in the online documents of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development and the accompanying “People’s Summit,” held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012. I analyze how programmatic and oppositional debates about the meaning of “sustainable futures” and the “green economy” differ on various dimensions of projectivity, including their temporal reach (extension into short, medium and long term futures), attention to contingency and causality, and network mapping of future actors. I do this at the level of narrative and grammar, by analyzing the use of predictive, imperative and subjunctive verb forms, as well as the use of temporal markers and the characterization of the subjects and objects of action. I close by suggesting ways in which these different projective strategies might be mapped onto particular positions in the contentious, conjoined fields of environmental policy-making and activism.
Futures in Contention: Projecting Sustainability in the Rio+20 Debates

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[Note to the Measuring Meaning conference: this paper is preliminary, with the data analysis still underway. I have chosen to give a programmatic overview of my theoretical framework, as well as a sketch of my analysis-in-progress of the Rio+20 documents. This may very well need to be split into a programmatic and an empirical article. I am quite excited about how the empirical work is developing, and I welcome your suggestions as to how to take this forward, both theoretically and methodologically.]

While there is an extensive subfield in sociology studying the sources, content, and consequences of collective memory, the study of future projections has been much more segmented and fragmentary. In part, this has to do with the challenge of measurement; how do you measure something that hasn’t happened yet? Futures exist by definition in a state of potentiality, involving risk, hope and uncertainty, and are thus even more subject than the past to contestation and debate (Gibson 2012). Because futures are constituted as imagined pathways and possible end-states, they often encompass multiple branching possibilities for realization; it is hard to pin down what, exactly we are studying. The possibilities for recombination are, in potentio, more diverse and multi-stranded as memories of the past. While narratives about the past are certainly open to contestation and revision, they are still disciplined by truth claims that they are recounting “what happened,” which is arguably more rigorous than the discipline of “what might (or could or should) happen.”

Yet while futures imaginaries exist “in our heads,” they are nevertheless subject to a variety of externalizations in text, talk, and material objects, which make them accessible to empirical study. In this paper, I first review some of the perspectives by which projected futures – and their impacts on actions – have been studied in social science research. I discuss the promise as well as the inadequacies of these different analytical approaches. I then discuss ways in which recent conceptualizations of the dimensions of projectivity (e.g., Mische 2009) might be operationalized in empirical research. I suggest that there are at least four different ways in which we might study imagined futures: 1) longitudinal survey research; 2) narrative analysis of texts and interviews; 3) observations of performance and conversation; and 4) the analysis of material culture. While these methodological choices are more or less general in the social science, each of these has particular strengths and weakness as applied to the study of future projections.
I then propose one possible approach to the study of future projections via their externalizations in what I call “sites of hyper-projectivity,” that is, arenas of heightened, future-oriented public debates in communities, social movements, and policy arenas. As an example of this approach, I analyze contending narratives about possible future in the online documents of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development and the accompanying “People’s Summit,” held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012. This event brought together government actors, scientific experts, NGOs, businesses, community organizations, labor unions and oppositional social movements in (often fierce) debates about the meaning of “sustainable futures” and the “green economy.” In two weeks of overlapping public forums, these groups presented contending visions and proposals for “the future we want,” some of which were programmatic and policy-oriented, while others expressed opposition and critique.

This paper pilots an approach to the study of contending futures that examines how different dimensions of projectivity are manifested textually, at the level of narrative and grammar. I focus in particular on their temporal reach (extension into short, medium and long term futures), their attention to contingency and causality, and their implicit network mappings of future actors. I do this by analyzing the use of predictive, imperative and subjunctive verb forms, as well as the use of temporal markers and the characterization of the subjects and objects of action. I close by suggesting ways in which these different projective strategies might be mapped onto particular positions in the contentious, conjoined fields of environmental policymaking and activism.

**Researching future projections**

Historically, the study of future projection has gotten short shrift in sociological research, although a surge of recent work has attempted to remedy this deficit (Vaisey 2009, 2010; Gross and Fosse 2012; Frye 2012, Tavory and Eliasoph 2014). To some extent we can chalk this neglect up to the analytical division of labor prescribed by Talcott Parsons. When he divided up the disciplines according to the AGIL scheme, sociology was assigned latent pattern maintenance (with some integration thrown in), while goal attainment was mostly tossed to the economists and political scientists. Hence the Kantian divide between expressive and instrumentalist orientations was channeled into the deep structure of the discipline, while culturalist and rational choice perspectives remained mutually hostile and suspicious. While the pragmatist sociologists who helped to found the discipline challenged this divide, they lost hegemony after the 1950s and their insights about the close interpenetration of goals and values were theoretically sidelined (Joas 1993, Abbott 1999; Gross 2007, 2008).

As a result, much of the work in sociology related to future aspirations has tended to focus on routinized value schemas and role expectations – L and I in Parsons’s schema. It has paid less attention to the reflexive engagement with future scenarios of action as part of deliberate efforts at social change, a process that was central important to theorists such as Dewey, Mead and Schutz. I have written about this elsewhere (Mische 2009, 2012), so I won’t elaborate on their theories here. Suffice it to say that we can suggest a number of contending ways in which futures have been theoretically conceived in sociology, none of which would completely satisfy the pragmatists:
• The future as strategic calculation (rational choice)
• The future as routinized expectation or unconscious value-schema (habitus, dual-process theory)
• The future as structured narratives and careers (sequence analysis, optimal matching, narrative positivism)
• The future as accidental or entrepreneurial recombination in response to emergent problems and challenges (studies of heterarchy and institutional innovation)

These four theoretical perspectives have developed in epistemological tension with each other, involving different assumptions about people, about cognitive processes, and about the way these are shaped by social relations, institutional environments, and larger socio-political contexts. They all suffer, I would argue, from inattention to reflexive processes of social critique, problem-solving, and political challenge. For the purposes of this paper, I want to focus on the fact that they also entail different methodological orientations (although the chicken and egg question is difficult here). As Steve Vaisey (2009, 2010) has pointed out, whether we conceive of future aspirations in terms of discursive accounts, practical strategies or deep-seated moral schemas makes a difference in terms of our choice of methodologies for studying how futures are constructed and how they affect choices, behaviors, and social environments themselves.

These challenges have compounded by evidence from a variety of disciplines that we are very bad at predicting the future. Recent experimental work on in cognitive psychology has demonstrated that our goals and stories about the future tend to be overly optimistic and highly scripted (Ross and Newby-Clark 1998); they overemphasize recent events and emotional extremes while discounting the effects of future context (Gilbert and Wilson 2007); and they are highly vulnerable to suggestion and priming effects (Custers and Aarts 2010). Behavioral economics, with its focus on accessibility, framing and judgment heuristics, makes similar points while offering a resounding challenge to rational choice models of human action (Kahneman and Tversky 2000; Kahneman 2003). Drawing on dual-process models of cognition, these studies focus on the important role of intuition and automatic cognition in decision-making, as well as the ways in which that intuition can be “nudged” by benevolent social engineers (Gladwell 2007; Ariely 2008; Thaler and Sunstein 2008; Kahneman 2011).

Likewise, cultural sociologists who draw upon cognitive psychology have noted a “positive asymmetry” in our future predictions that prevents us from foreseeing worst case scenarios (Cerulo 2006). Important recent work in cultural theory has drawn on dual-process models of cognition to argue that our aspirations, behavior and networks are influenced more by deep-seated moral schemas and cultural scaffoldings than by deliberate choices and justificatory accounts (Vaisey 2009, 2010; Vaisey and Lizardo 2010; Lizardo and Strand 2010). This work finds theoretical grounding in the work of Bourdieu and Giddens, who emphasize routinized practices and durable schemas of thought and action, in which future projections often appear as mere expectations adapted to a pre-given field of action (Lizardo 2004, 2007). The upshot of much of this work is that our conscious future projections are often poor predictors of future states, and the “real” locus of effects on behavior and choices lies in unconscious, routinized, or situational factors.
While this work offers valuable insights into social cognition, it poses further questions about the interrelationship between automatic and deliberative processing. Even if we engage in automatic cognition “most of the time,” we need to pay detailed scholarly attention to the potentially important role played by the moments in which people do actively stop and think projectively – and yes, critically and deliberatively – about what might or might not happen in the future. Such moments of heightened subjunctive engagement of imagined future possibilities – even in tentative, fragmentary, opaque and contradictory form – can have critical outcomes for both for personal and historical trajectories, although often not in the ways that people hope or expect. (Or, to riff on W.I. Thomas, if we imagine that something will happen, it affects how we act, whether it happens or not.) Such projective engagement of the future does not usually take the form of rational cost benefit analysis, nor of utopian fantasies – these are only some of the diverse modes of future engagement, and probably not the most common ones. Rather, pragmatist and phenomenological thinkers such as Dewey (1922) and Schutz (1967) show us how future imagining is built into the fabric of our daily lives, especially when we encounter problematic situations, which, in today’s mobile, complex and exclusionary world, probably happens more often than not.

However, such future projections are often hard to see. Strong resistance to rational choice and functionalist theorizing in cultural sociology has schooled us not to sociologically notice future orientations, or attribute them narrowly to “expectations.” Moreover, future projections do not just happen inside people’s heads, but rather develop via communicative interaction within groups, organizations, and institutional settings. Thus we need to focus on the effects of talk on future projections – not just in retrospective account-making, but in the jostling, jockeying, listening, learning and arguing talk that unfolds in relational settings and is located in larger contentious fields. How do we do this? Here we have to pause to take stock of the methodological challenges involved in studying futures and their effects.

**Seeing “futures” and measuring their effects**

Methodologies for “seeing” imagined futures and measuring their effects on action have varied, although we can group these into survey, narrative, performative and material approaches. I’ll explore each of these briefly, and then explore their usefulness for studying future-oriented deliberations and their positioning and intervention in contentious fields.

**Survey approaches**

Within sociology, studies of future projections have mostly been carried out by demographers and life course researchers, particularly those working in tradition of aspiration and attainment studies. Operationalizing future orientations in terms of self-reported goals, aspirations or expectations, such researchers have used surveys to examine associations with outcomes such as educational or occupational attainment, social class, fertility, retirement planning, life satisfaction, and mental health (e.g., Coombs 1974; Miller 1994; Agnew 1983; Spenner and Featherman 1978; Marin and Greenberger 1978; Ho and Raymo 2009; Campbell 1972; Emmons 1986; Alloy and Ahrens 1987). Longitudinal surveys such as the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study and ADD Health have examined whether future orientations at time 1 can be associated with outcomes at time 2 (Sewell and Shah 1968; Sewell and Hauser 1980; Crissey
Interesting work in this area has tracked shifts in aspirations over the life course (Jacobs, Karen, and McClelland 1991), as well as the ways in which gaps between aspiration and subsequent achievement affect psychological well-being later in life (Carr 1999).

While such studies usefully document the association of future-oriented thinking at T1 with behavior, attainment and other outcomes at T2 – and therefore can lay claim to measuring the causal effects of future projections – there are a number of difficulties involved in this approach. One is the problem of confounding variables; perhaps the same social conditions that “cause” the particular future perspective also underlie the outcomes in question. Moreover, it can be hard to tell whether aspirations self-reported in surveys express “true” personal desires or simply reflect prevailing social norms. Locating the “real social effects” of a particular way of imagining the future is a slippery task at best.

Drawing on dual-process models of cognition, Vaisey (2009, 2010) has argued that surveys can be especially useful for examining aspirations and their effects on behavior, due not so much to the content of responses as to the survey format itself. He argues that that such closed-question, fast response formats tap into automatic cognition, here conceived in terms of deep-seated, durable moral schemas underlying motivations as well as behavioral choices. This work provides a very useful corrective to approaches that discount long-term motivation altogether and focus primarily on situationally grounded strategies (i.e., the “toolkit” approach proposed by Swidler 1986, 2001). However, I would argue, that this perspective discounts the role of deliberative process as a component of (and influencing factor in) our decisions and actions – perhaps by assuming that such deliberations would need to be fully conscious, coherent, and “rational” to have a motivating effect. Once again, the strong division between normative and strategic action seems to be in play here. The more tentative, experimental, self-reflexive processes of imaginative reformulation (such as those described by the pragmatist and phenomenological theorists) are harder to capture through survey research.

Narrative approaches

An alternative approach is to study narratives about desired and expected futures, either through interviews or textual material. These narratives can operate at the personal level (individual accounts of hopes, fears, plans, expectations and desires) or collective level (e.g., utopian or dystopian writings, institutional planning documents, or ideological accounts of historical change). This approach has the benefit of showing the ways in which futures are conceptualized by means of stories about what will, could, or should (or should NOT) happen, giving them temporal extension as well as elements of plot (character, conflict, climax, and resolution). Recent work on storytelling in social movements (Voss 1998; Polletta 2006) has stressed the motivational and commitment-generating effects of such stories, as well as their selective, ambiguous and constraining nature. Voss (1998), for example, describes the “fortifying myths” that social movement activists tell themselves about the ways in which even defeats are located in larger narrative arcs of social change, thus using the hoped-for future to understand and endure the difficult present. And a recent article by Frye (2012) explores how externally generated public narratives about educational ambition, despite their lack of realistic grounding in outcomes, influence personal identity by valorizing the construction of the self as “one who aspires.”
One of the methodological challenges in using narratives as the basis for studying projected futures is the identification of which dimensions of future narratives matter for particular kinds of actions and outcomes. In my earlier work (Mische 2009), I have suggested that there are at least nine dimensions of variation that are useful for narrative analysis of projected futures:

- **Reach** (extension into short, medium, long term)
- **Breadth** (range of possible alternatives considered)
- **Clarity** (degree of elaboration and detail)
- **Contingency** (pre-fixed vs. flexible, uncertain, dependent)
- **Expandability** (expanding vs. contracting)
- **Volition** (relations of motion, influence and control)
- **Sociality** (considering future relations and interactions)
- **Connectivity** (imagined logic of temporal connection)
- **Genre** (recognizable narrative/dramatic templates)

While measuring these dimensions poses some challenges, it is certainly within reach, given existing tools for content analysis. All of these dimensions would be amenable to content coding at the level of documents, sentences, or conversational utterances. They could then be operationalized as either dependent or independent variables – for example, one could examine whether certain socio-economic, institutional, political or situational contexts contribute to projections that focus on short, medium, or long term – and how this affects things like career trajectories, coalition-formation, or policy-making at local, national and international levels. Likewise, I would argue many of the other dimensions in this list – the degree of clarity with which the future is imagined, the breadth of possibilities considered, attention to contingency and expandability, the self-understanding of agency and control, and the way other actors are taken into account – are also subject to empirical variation and change over time, and thus can be used as tools in sociological description and explanation. Future narratives are produced in response to varying social conditions and go on to produce (and sometimes, reproduce) them in turn – via, I would argue, the conversational interactions of people and collectivities.

What might be especially interesting would be to examine whether (and in what ways) these dimensions are associated with each other, using relational approaches for cultural mapping. So, for example, we could ask to what degree the expandability of narratives (i.e., whether they characterize future opportunities as opening up or closing down) is associated with different conceptions of volition and personal control. Or we could ask whether greater breadth of future possibilities is associated with looser connective logic, or with more complex ways of considering the role of other actors in projected futures. Formal-analytic approaches that examine the dual constitution of cultural elements – such as Galois lattices and correspondence analysis – might be especially useful here, especially when used as components of larger explanations of historical and institutional change. (see Breiger 1975; 2004; Breiger and Mohr 2004; Mohr 1994, 2010; Mohr and Duquenne 1997; Mohr and Lee 2000; Mohr and Neely 2009, Mische and Pattison 2000).
Performative approaches

While the narrative approach provides a promising means of examining cultural variation in future projections and their effects on action, it has a number of important limitations. First, as a number of scholars have shown, there is often only a loose association between the accounts people give of their motives and their practices (Swidler 1986, 2001; Vaisey 2009). Second, what people say about their motives for action often varies according to performative footings (or “group styles”) of particular contexts of interaction (Eliasoph 1996, 1998; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Mische 2008; Lichterman 2012). And finally, stories about projected futures are often constructed conversationally, and are thus subject to the rules and contingencies of sequentially evolving conversational interaction (Gibson 2005, 2011, 2012).

An example of the latter can be seen in David Gibson’s (2011, 2012) account of the deliberations of Kennedy’s adviser’s during the Cuban Missile Crisis. In his analysis of the secret audio recordings of the ExComm deliberations, Gibson shows how Kennedy’s advisers tried to spin actionable stories about the future in a situation in which all scenarios looked bleak. They did this not by marching logically through a cost benefit analysis and deducing the optimal course of action, but by interactively telling and re-telling stories of future contingency and causation. As Schutz (1951, 1967) would say, they shined “rays of attention” back and forth across possible lines of action (and their anticipated consequences) in often amnesiac and ambiguous ways, achieving a sense of actionability only when potentially disastrous endings (e.g., general nuclear war) were conversationally suppressed or obscured.

As this example shows, a performative approach to future-oriented deliberations focuses on what is said – and perhaps more importantly, what is not said – in particular settings of interaction. Not only do we know a lot more culture than we use, but we also think (and imagine) much more than we say, given the constraints of settings and conversations. Both norms of conversational appropriateness (Goffman’s “footings”) and the sequential unfolding of conversations affect how stories about the future are woven together through talk and interaction. This in turn can affect conversational outcomes, ranging range from simple and mundane decision about where to go to dinner to more consequential deliberations over how to form alliances, challenge powerholders, or avoid engulfing the planet in a nuclear war.

How do we study the performative construction of futures? Eliasoph’s ethnographic strategy is to follow actors as they move between settings, showing how their articulation of their motives and projects changes as they move between front and back stage interactions. Gibson’s strategy is to analyze audio recordings at the level of conversational turns, analyzing dynamics such as pauses, interruptions, and claims on the floor, at the same time as he studies the evolving content of collectively spun stories about the future. In another study, David Gibson and I are using audio recording of group meetings to analyze future-oriented deliberations between developers and community associations charged with finding “common ground” proposals for the reform of the Philadelphia Zoning Code (Gibson and Mische 2011). We focus on the process by which opposing parties were charged with identifying shared principles and recommendations for the future of the city’s zoning policy, in the face of marked disparities in power and resources. Two interaction practices were crucial: story-telling about past and future, whereby participants gave flesh and force to their grievances, and extraction, whereby moderators
intervened to draw out of the stream of talk simple principles that could be funneled into subsequent reports and recommendations for the future. We ask what was left out, flattened, or suppressed by these practices, given the contending interests of (and real stakes for) differently positioned actors.

**Material approaches**

[Here I’ll talk about how future projects are often given material forms, in terms of architecture, public infrastructure, lifestyle choices and consumer goods. These externalizations of future projections express expectations and hopes for the future at the same time as they lock participants into particular trajectories of action. An example is María Islas’s (2013) account of how Mexican immigrants send money home to build houses for the future that no one will live in, or Janet Lorzenen’s (2012) account of green consumption lifestyles as part of a long term project of social transformation, or the local debate in my town about the installation of a 7-11 and its potential effects on walkability, car culture, and “the community we want.” One could also look at Chandra Mukerj’s (2013) work in this vein, as well as other work on urban planning and design. It also ties into the Rio+20 discussions of sustainable development. This is a really rich area to be tapped, and I’m looking forward to thinking more about it.]

**Future-oriented deliberations in sites of hyper-projectivity**

Given that projected futures are often hard to see amidst the routine practice of day-to-day life, I propose that one of the most promising approaches to studying these is to look for settings in which reflective thought about the future is particularly salient and encouraged. Such “sites of hyper-projectivity” are communicative settings, somewhat removed from the flow of day-to-day activity, in which the explicit purpose of talk is to locate problems, visualize alternative pathways and consider their consequences and desirability. Examples of such sites might be public forums, group retreats and assemblies, and institutional planning sessions of various types – such as those designed for reflection on communities, social movements, and public policies.

As I have noted above, such deliberations are collective, dialogic phenomena – they rarely happen inside peoples’ heads as a solitary reflective endeavor (and even when they are done alone, they maintain characteristics of dialogue). Futures are elaborated through interaction and talk with others. As a result they are often scripted to various degrees, adhering to recognizable narrative genres (which may be heroic, tragic, utopian, pragmatic, instrumental, compromising, resigned, or fatalistic). These narratives “work” in our daily lives in a selective, sometimes loose and jumbled way, with different possible narrative elements co-existing in a rough, semi-conscious, occasionally strained dialogue with each other, in ways that enable and constrain action in particular institutional and interaction contexts.

What happens in these kinds of “hyper-projective” settings is that participants are asked to bring these fragmentary, semi-submerged narratives to the level of reflective consciousness. Through talk, they make the implicit explicit and put contending narratives about possible futures in direct, at times conflictual juxtaposition to one another. Such settings vary in degree to
which participants are focused simply on “airing” or “exchanging” these stories in an open-ended fashion, or alternatively, to which they are directly positioning against one another, or else pushing toward collective synthesis, resolution and closure (e.g., provisional agreement on “where we go from here”). Moreover, they may also vary in the degree to which they demand adherence to pre-defined scripts of future engagement, or alternatively, encourage participants to question, criticize, rethink, or creatively recombine those scripts.

Participation in these kinds of future-oriented deliberative settings does not necessarily allow the participants to reach their goals. Even if they do succeed in achieving something approaching clarity and consensus on where they want to go (which difficult and rare), the implementation of those goals poses its own set of challenges, often coming from power disparities, systemic barriers, and unintended consequences. But the fact that people put futures into explicit, self-conscious (if often thorny and contentious) consideration often has a redirecting effect on action; in Dewey’s words, such settings can serve as “pivots” for action, even if the futures under discussion are not realized or even clear. Such talk can lead to social learning, alliance formation, and the construction of new temporal scaffoldings that in turn set new trajectories in motion, with their own channeling effects upon historical process.

**Pilot project: mapping “the future we want” at the Rio+20 meetings**

One such site of hyper-projectivity, scaled up to the global level, consists of the debates about environmental sustainability and the “green economy” during the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio +20) and the parallel “People’s Summit” of civil society and social movement actors, held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012. This is an ideal setting in which to study heightened future-oriented deliberation, since it brought together a wide range of actors to debate the meaning of “sustainable futures,” including government representatives, scientific experts, NGOs, business associations, community organizations, labor unions and social movements from the Global North and South, often representing marginalized constituencies (such as women, youth, peasants, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples and the urban poor). At the official conference venue at Riocentro as well as the colorful tent workshops and assemblies on Flamengo Beach, these diverse actors engaged (some of) each other in vigorous conversation, argument, negotiation and consensus-building about “the future we want,” a phrase that constituted one of the dominant motifs of the event.

The study of future-oriented deliberations during the Rio+20 meetings provides a portal into several of the externalizations of future projections outlined above. The conference presents interesting resources for narrative, performative, and material approaches to the study of future orientations. Much of the discussion took place through written policy statements, position papers, and contending proposals for change – many of which were posted online before and after the conference, thus presenting the textual and narrative data for this pilot study. These texts in turn informed performative interactions, i.e., the conversations (both contentious and consensus-building) that occurred during face-to-face encounters at many levels, both prior to and during the June conference. These interactions took place during months of preparatory gatherings of UN and government actors, civil society groups, and oppositional social movements, in addition to the multi-level meetings and assemblies at the official and parallel summits. The conference also has material implications in terms of policies related to energy
sources and use, industrial incentives, community development, and urban infrastructure – all of which have manifestations at the levels of housing, transportation, architecture, jobs and lifestyle/consumption practices.

In this pilot project, I am beginning at the level of narrative and text, as the first step toward understanding the contending forms of future projection that were in play during the Rio+20 conference. I focus here on proposals posted on the website portal of the People’s Summit (I hope eventually to analyze the documents posted on the official UNCSD website as well). This website included a wide variety of proposals, documents and initiatives posted by diverse collectivities, ranging from coalitions of civil society organizations and social movements to inter-governmental agency working groups, academic think tanks and policy networks. These documents represent a range of different political perspectives, as well as differentiated access to power, resources and political influence among the diverse “publics” that engaged in the conference.

Many (but not all) of the documents on the People’s Summit website express varying degrees of opposition toward the official goals of the United Nations conference, which was organized around the following two themes: “(a) a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication; and (b) the institutional framework for sustainable development.” Much of the debate focused around the idea of the “green economy,” as proposed in a 2011 report developed in preparation for the conference by the United Nations Environment Program. According to the UNEP webpage:

“The Green Economy Report is compiled by UNEP’s Green Economy Initiative in collaboration with economists and experts worldwide. It demonstrates that the greening of economies is not generally a drag on growth but rather a new engine of growth; that it is a net generator of decent jobs, and that it is also a vital strategy for the elimination of persistent poverty. The report also seeks to motivate policy makers to create the enabling conditions for increased investments in a transition to a green economy.”

Together with a team of graduate students, I have been working on the pilot coding of the first 18 documents posted under the rubric of “proposals” on the website portal of the People’s Summit. These short online texts (1-3 pages) often consist of summaries of (or introductions to) longer documents, as well as the declarations and manifestos of particular groups. Most were posted in the two months leading up to the conference (May-June 2012), although the first four documents were posted in the two months following the conference. A list of these document and their organizations of origin can be found in Table 1.

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1 The website portal of the People’s Summit can be found here: [http://rio20.net/en/](http://rio20.net/en/) The website of the official UN conference can be found here: [http://www.uncsd2012.org/](http://www.uncsd2012.org/)

2 The two themes of the conference, as stated on the official webpage: [http://www.uncsd2012.org/about.html](http://www.uncsd2012.org/about.html)

3 UPEP website: [http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/greeneconomyreport/tabid/29846/default.aspx](http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/greeneconomyreport/tabid/29846/default.aspx)
These 18 proposals can be roughly divided into “oppositional” vs. “programmatic” stances. Programmatic stances are generally supportive of the goals and mission of the official UN Conference, although they may offer critiques of some elements. They offer a variety of programmatic contributions to “sustainable development goals” and the development of new (“greener”) economic strategies, along with positively framed transformations in value frameworks, institutional procedures, and global governance structures. Those with oppositional stances tend to see proposals for a green economy as a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” that will contribute to the deepening of global inequality and the advance of neoliberal economic policies. These critics see the green economy as advancing market expansion through the “mercantilization” of nature (via carbon markets) without real attention to questions of poverty, economic injustice, environmental devastation and political marginalization. Among these 18 pilot documents, we classified 9 as programmatic and 9 as oppositional (some are mixed cases, but we went with what we interpreted to be the dominant tendency in each case).

**Future grammars: unpacking the dimensions of projectivity**

[Note: the following section is highly preliminary and exploratory. We are in the process of cracking into these data, and I am thus only sketching our initial approach. We would love to hear your feedback and ideas on the promise and pitfall of this approach, as well as concrete suggestions on how to take it forward.]

What we have noticed in our preliminary read of these documents is wide variation in the degree to which they focus on broad, general statements of value (i.e., “the future we want”); on exhortations to action (“what we must do”); on causal predictions and if-then reasoning; or on detailed strategies of how to get from “here/now” to the “future we want” (or alternatively, how to prevent the futures we don’t want). Our initial idea was to code the documents with respect to their variable focus on value, prediction, and strategy, in addition to noting their variation on a number of the dimensions of projectivity described in my previous work (Mische 2009). In particular, we wanted to focus on reach (temporal extension), clarity (degree of elaboration), contingency (degree of flexibility or fixity), sociality (imagined networks of future actors), connectivity (theorization of causal links between steps) and genre (stylized narrative templates).

After experimenting with several (quite clumsy) coding schemes, we concluded that one of the more feasible (and interesting!) ways to do this is to locate these differences at the level of grammar. In particular, we are focusing on future-oriented verb tenses, the subjects and objects of action, temporal markers, future-oriented action verbs and future-characterizing nouns. These various elements of grammar, and their links to the dimensions of projectivity noted above, are described in Table 2. We have begun NVivo coding of the first 18 documents on all of these grammatical elements, concentrating initially on the first three (verb tense markers, subject/object, and temporal markers).
Our first exploratory analyses have focused on the verb tense markers, which indicate various stances in relation to the future. We have found it analytically useful to distinguish between the predictive, the imperative, and the subjunctive modes:

Table 3: Modes of future verb orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictive:</th>
<th>Imperative:</th>
<th>Subjunctive</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a statement of the likelihood that something will happen in the future, often associated with an assertion about causality, conditionality or sequence</td>
<td>a call to action of some sort so as to bring a future possibility into existence</td>
<td>an expression of value, emotion, orientation, or subjective stance in relation to a possible, but uncertain, future event</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the 18 pilot documents, we have coded for the following verb tense markers, categorized by their tendency to indicate predictive, imperative, or subjunctive modes. [Please note that these categorizations are highly preliminary, and we would welcome discussion of how well they work.] You can find some examples of sentences from the documents containing these verb forms in Appendix A, as well as word trees based on the three most frequent verb forms in each category (will, must, want) in Appendix B.

Table 4: Examples of future verb tense markers (most frequent in bold)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictive</th>
<th>Imperative</th>
<th>Subjunctive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>can/cannot could (not) has begun if then In order to is likely to may (not) might (not) will (not) would (not)</td>
<td>have to let may have to must (not) need ought (not) should (not)</td>
<td>aim ask for believe doubt expect fear hope urge want/do not want wish would like to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exploratory analysis:

In order to explore the extent to which we are on the right track with this approach, I did some preliminary analysis to see if there are patterned relationships between verb tense modes and the stance taken by the documents in relation to the goals of the UN conference. At least one pattern jumps right out. If we compare Figures 1 and 2 (below), we see that the programmatic texts (i.e., those framed as supportive contributions to the conference goals and framework) have
a much stronger emphasis on *predictive* verbs (particularly will, can/cannot, would, if/then and in order to). In contrast, the *oppositional* texts (i.e., those critical of the “green economy” and the institutional framework of the conference) have a stronger tendency to use *imperative* verb forms (especially must, should, and need). None of the documents use many *subjunctive* verbs forms, although they appear in slightly more programmatic (7/9) than oppositional (5/9) texts.

---

This is an intriguing pattern, as it suggests that political stances and positionings in a complex field can manifest themselves at the level of text and grammar. Those taking a more critical, anti-hegemonic stance are more exhortational, even moralistic in style (often writing in kind of an “eternal future”). Those who support more institutionalized and programmatic styles of change appear to engage in more elaborated exercises of causal and/or contingent reasoning. This is not an absolute difference – clearly programmatic and oppositional groups engage in BOTH predictive and imperative modes of projection. But the relative proportion shifts dramatically, suggesting differently composed genres (or narrative templates) by which they elaborate – at least at the level of public rhetoric –their future imaginaries.

These preliminary patterns raise a number of interesting questions for further investigation as we move forward with this analysis:

1. Is there a connection between an organization’s positionality in the broader field of environmental activism and policy-making, and the deployment of different grammatical patterns and modes of projectivity? For example, do more marginalized or powerless groups use more imperative verb forms, as a means of challenging power and advancing counterhegemonic visions? And conversely, is the predictive verb form a signal of relative privilege and insider (or expert) status, or an indication of a particular kind of cultural capital? How do these different projective strategies reflect differential authority, access and influence in relation to decision-making processes at various levels of institutional power?

2. Do these various grammatical elements cluster in patterned ways, so as to compose recognizable *genres* or *modes* of future projection? E.g., would we expect to find that the use of predictive, imperative or subjective verb tense forms are associated with the inclusion of particular sets of (volitional or impersonal) actors, as subjects and/or objects in their narratives? As they associated with particular time frames (focus on the short, medium, or long term future), or with future-characterizing nouns or action verbs (e.g., crisis, risk, challenge, transition, progress, promise, struggle, convergence, etc.)? Can we differentiate between typically occurring projective modes, composed of characteristic syntactic and semantic elements?

3. If we are able to differentiate between these projective modes, we should be able to use them as either dependent or independent variables in addressing a variety of sociological questions. For example, we might examine their *origins* in different epistemic
communities, network positions, or regions of the field. We might examine their deployment in particular interactive or discursive situations (e.g., coalition-building, boundary-formation, institution-building), or in conditions of greater or lesser network heterogenetiy or polarization. And we might also examine their outcomes for the decisions and trajectories of these actors after the conference, in terms of processes of interest to scholars of social movements, civil society, globalization or environmental policy-making (e.g., coalitions, networks, policies, institutional innovations, or the failure thereof…)

These are just a few questions to put on the table. I am sure that you have many more, and I look forward to the discussion!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Doc Code</th>
<th>Doc Title</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Stance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PS_P1</td>
<td>The Economy we need: declaration of the Social and Solidarity Economy movement at Rio+20</td>
<td>Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social and Solidarity Economy (RIPESS)</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS_P2</td>
<td>Federated States and Regional Governments Committed to a New Paradigm for Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication</td>
<td>World Summit of Federated States and Regions organized by the Network of Regional Governments for Sustainable Development (nrg4SD)</td>
<td>Programmatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS_P3</td>
<td>Reclaiming Multilateralism for People Rights and Sustainable Development</td>
<td>United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS)</td>
<td>Programmatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS_P4</td>
<td>Final Declaration of the People’s Summit in Rio +20</td>
<td>Brazilian Civil Society Facilitating Committee for Rio+20</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS_P5</td>
<td>Asia Pacific Rio+20 declaration</td>
<td>Asia-Pacific Research Network</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS_P7</td>
<td>The scaling up of agroecology: spreading the hope for food sovereignty and resiliency</td>
<td>Latin American Scientific Society of Agroecology (SOCLA)</td>
<td>Programmatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS_P8</td>
<td>Reclaiming Rights at Rio: CSO Consultation to the African Agenda in the Rio+20 Summit</td>
<td>IBON International Rights for Sustainability Initiative - Program of IBON International</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS_P9</td>
<td>Towards the Future We Want: End hunger and make the transition to sustainable agricultural and food systems</td>
<td>Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)</td>
<td>Programmatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS_P10</td>
<td>People’s sustainability treaties: an alternative pathway for a sustainable transition</td>
<td>People's Sustainability Treaties</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS_P11</td>
<td>The agroecological revolution in Latin America: rescuing nature, ensuring food sovereignty and empowering peasants</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Programmatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS_P12</td>
<td>Our Gift to the World is to make all roads possible</td>
<td>Rio+20 Migrations Work Group</td>
<td>Programmatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS_P13</td>
<td>People’s Sustainability Treaties</td>
<td>People’s Sustainability Treaties</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS_P14</td>
<td>Global May Manifesto</td>
<td>People's Assemblies Network</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS_P15</td>
<td>Lifelong Learning for Sustainability in a Climate Changing World</td>
<td>International Council for Adult Education (ICAE)</td>
<td>Programmatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS_P16</td>
<td>Rethinking and changing world governance</td>
<td>Forum for a New World Governance (FnWG)</td>
<td>Programmatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS_P17</td>
<td>Premises for a New Economy</td>
<td>Great Transition Initiative</td>
<td>Programmatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS_P18</td>
<td>Civil Society Declaration to XIII UN Conference on Trade and Development</td>
<td>UNCTAD XIII Civil Society Forum</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical feature</td>
<td>Dimensions of projectivity</td>
<td>Subtypes</td>
<td>Examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future-oriented verbs: tense markers</td>
<td>Contingency, connectivity</td>
<td><strong>Predictive, imperative, volitional</strong></td>
<td>See Table 3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal markers</td>
<td>Reach</td>
<td><strong>Chronogramic</strong> (explicit chronological time frames) vs. <strong>embedded</strong> (temporal deictics, sweeping references, etc)</td>
<td><strong>Chronogramic:</strong> &quot;in the next ten years&quot;, 2015, 2020, 2050, the 21st century, etc. <strong>Embedded:</strong> “Now,” “in the next phase” “during the current transition,” &quot;in the long/short term” “future generations” “planetary time” etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects and objects</td>
<td>Clarity, sociality, genre</td>
<td><strong>Volitional</strong> (human, collective, institutional) vs. <strong>non-volitional or impersonal</strong> (non-human, systemic, abstract or material)</td>
<td><strong>Volitional:</strong> The People, civil society, corporations, environmentalists, women, peasants, NGOs, experts, governments, poor/ rich countries, native peoples, etc. <strong>Impersonal:</strong> environment, economy, nature, planet, democracy, globalization, neoliberalism, science, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future-oriented verbs: action</td>
<td>Clarity, connectivity, genre</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>advance, advocate, affect, aspire, change, claim, maintain, mobilize, move toward, promise, threaten, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future-characterizing nouns</td>
<td>Clarity, genre</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>alternatives, aspiration, challenge, change, convergence, crisis, goal, ideal, progress, risk, struggle, transformation, transition, vision, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: Programmatic texts x Verb mode (percent coverage)
Figure 2: Oppositional texts x Verb mode (percent coverage)
Appendix A: Coding examples from People’s Summit documents

A1. Examples of sentences using the PREDICTIVE MODE.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Doc</th>
<th>Sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P01</td>
<td>Rio+20 will only rise to the challenges that need to be addressed, if the governments that are taking part sign up to what is being built by the people as a genuine alternative for the future of humankind on Earth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P02</td>
<td>…the cost of inaction regarding the shift to a new development paradigm and its related risks are high and may lead to irreversible damage…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P03</td>
<td>As long as there are nation States, all countries will be able to justify the pursuit of sovereign national interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P03</td>
<td>Most of the actions will be the responsibility of government leaders and policy makers. But all multilateral stakeholders, including civil society, can use the recommendations to campaign for a new multilateralism, where the promises of justice, equity and sustainable development can finally be fulfilled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P05</td>
<td>We believe, however, that the Green Economy agenda will not allow us to break from this failed system as it follows primarily the profit-oriented logic of corporate and financial interest. (P05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P05</td>
<td>We decry attempts by powerful States, especially the North, to whittle down human rights obligations and equity principles in the Rio+20 outcome document in order to avoid concrete commitments to meaningful reforms in social, economic, and environmental policies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P07</td>
<td>Thus transgenic crops are likely to increase the use of pesticides as a result of accelerated evolution of ‘super weeds’ and resistant insect pest strains.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A2. Examples of sentences using the IMPERATIVE MODE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Doc</th>
<th>Sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P01</td>
<td>People’s sovereignty must be respected, as well as that of communities who are the only ones to have the legitimate right and the capacity to implement the solidarity development that can guarantee the preservation of the Commons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P02</td>
<td>With more than 3 billion people living below the poverty line, poverty eradication must remain the top priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P02</td>
<td>This should be done with a strong complementary focus on education and cultural aspects, gender issues, protection of common goods and future generations, and respect for global biodiversity and traditional livelihoods and knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P04</td>
<td>Let us return to our territories, regions and countries to build animated required to follow convergences fighting, resisting and advancing against the capitalist system and its old and renewed ways of reproduction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P05</td>
<td>We assert that States should not backtrack, but instead uphold and build upon the Rio principles and internationally agreed human rights norms and standards…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P06</td>
<td>Social organizations, particularly those of traditional peoples and small farmer communities, have to be an integral part of the monitoring of territories, systems of governance, and the use of (new) technologies, independent of governments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P07</td>
<td>There is no doubt that humanity needs an alternative agricultural development paradigm, one that encourages more ecologically, biodiverse, resilient, sustainable and socially just forms of agriculture.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### A2. Examples of sentences using the SUBJUNCTIVE MODE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Doc</th>
<th>Sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P04</td>
<td>People <strong>want</strong> to determine what and whom they are intended for common goods and energy, and take control of their democratic and popular production.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P08</td>
<td>This is not the world Rio envisioned and this is certainly <strong>not</strong> the future we Africans <strong>want</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P08</td>
<td>We remind our African governments that the people of Africa look up to them as defenders of their rights and <strong>expect</strong> them to ensure Rio+20 outcome promotes Sustainable Development rather than marginalize and drive them further into poverty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P13</td>
<td>Based on this, we the Civil Society of the World <strong>urge</strong> an outcome of Rio+20 to be the launch of an agreed process for the creation of Sustainable Development Goals under the principles express hereby.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P13</td>
<td>SDGs have to <strong>aim</strong> at eradicating poverty by addressing its root causes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P14</td>
<td>Simply put, we <strong>want</strong> a world ruled by the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity – the old dream of our ancestors when they rose against oppression in previous generations, throughout the planet!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P14</td>
<td>At all levels we <strong>ask for</strong> the development of a democracy that is as participatory as possible, including non representative direct democracy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P17</td>
<td>If GDP growth could be decoupled from increased energy use and energy use decoupled from CO2 emissions, we <strong>could hope</strong> to achieve safe emissions targets even with 20th century rates of economic growth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Word trees of the most frequently used predictive, imperative, and subjunctive verb markers (will, must, want)
must - Results Preview

all work towards that end, but those with

be agreed upon to help facilitate the

find alternative ways of organizing social and

recognize that discussion of a new civilization

take

a major shift under a food sovereignty

accountable to citizens and ensure their interests,

ambitious and inspirational. We urge the UN

based on the observance and fulfillment of

concerned under the language and action of

controlled by the principle that each human

dealt with together. All signatories agreed they

enforced in relationship to all -- in both

explicitly and unmistakably stated of all levels

to a fair and equitable multilateral system.

fully democratic. We therefore demand full democratization

given to more holistic, participatory and bottom-

incorporated into life-long learning practices.

logged in to post a comment.

proof Todos

must

begin from a recognition that none of the

craft a new global social contract, based on

create genuine prosperity and well-being for all by

delivery of quality, dignity and justice, both within and

develop more holistic visions and measures of progress

emphasize human solidarity, affinity with nature, and a

ensure that

the public, private and non-profit

foster diverse cultural values as it builds societal

fulfill its mission in conformity with international human

get democratic control over financial institutions, transnational corporations

have clear and transparent indicators, along with near-

implement the Pollutant Pay Principle as well, while

integrate social, environmental and economic dimensions, and interconnect

leave our future in the hands of the

live up to the challenge of its theme

maintain, upgrade and achieve scale project as counter

not be marginalized. This knowledge concerns how to

place social and environmental sustainability at the centre

priority domestic food self-sufficiency and livelihoods

reaffirm the precautionary principle, ban extremely dangerous technologies

recognize that a dramatically different way of how

reflect this, using the relationships between the issues

remain in the public domain. I Science in the

the top priority. In the perspective of

respect such limits and governments need to set

stop

"We want democratic control of the global

the excessive influence of big business in

strengthen our plan - and inter-cultural abilities and

support the right of all peoples to a

take

ownership and control of their natural resources

place. Commercialization of life and resources, as

for all, otherwise Justice is not justice,

to build local skills and capacities, while

work
and clearly state the future we want - Results Preview

- a world without hunger and with sustainable development
  - It has also dramatically decreased the inequitable gap
  - Rio 20 should learn from the failure of
  - While we are aware that an African Ministerial
- end hunger and make the transition to sustainable
  - political system which really represent the variety
  - system where labour is appreciated by its
  - world, where every woman, man and child
- another world, and such a world is possible:
  - democratic control of the global commons, defined as
  - roses: Everyone has the right to enjoy culture,
- determine what and whom they are intended
- fix the problem while also moving towards
- promote cooperative companies and corporations, as real
- rethink the existing architecture of world governance

Here and now we propose alternatives, because

- previous generations, throughout the planet!
- Simply put, food systems JOINED DOCUMENTS Towards
- West Africa World To achieve

new foundation for a new paradigm of society. People
of unacceptable levels of poverty, misery and desperate
this is certainly not the future we want.


----- 2011. “Avoiding Catastrophe: The Interactional Production of Possibility During the Cuban Missile Crisis.” *American Journal of Sociology* 117(2): 361-419.


Marini, Margaret Mooney and Ellen Greenberger. 1978. "Sex Differences in Occupational Aspirations and Expectations." *Sociology of Work and Occupations*


