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**Visions of the Future:
The Plausibility Loss of Visionary Prophecies and the
Fragmentation of Prognosis**

– Extended Abstract –

Overview

This presentation will include three steps: First, I will introduce some bases of a phenomenological approach to the analysis of future knowledge. Second, I will report selected empirical results from a study of contemporary future visions. Finally, I will add some critical reflexions on the sociological reasons for the fragmentation of prognosis and the vanishing collective force of visionary prophecies.

This work develops within the general frame of a »Sociology of Transcendent Experiences«. Data analyzed here derive from an empirical study of contemporary prophetic visions. Research focused on the narrative reconstructions of visionary experiences by the persons who claimed to have lived them. We studied the forms, qualities and consequences of these experiences. Focusing on the effects, high biographical evidence and relevance of contemporary visionary experiences stand against its nearly insignificant social impact.

Following the analytical logic of sociological genre analysis, we ascend from a reconstruction of typical inner structural aspects of visionary experiences (1) to the situated character of a specific single historical form, namely prophetic visions at the turn of the millennium (2) and finally reflect upon its embedding in a specific socio-historical situation, in order to clarify its cultural meaning (3).

1. Theiresias or Modes of Future Knowledge

Philosopher and sociologist Alfred Schutz (2003[1945]) examined the phenomenological structure of future knowledge, sustaining that every form of anticipation in everyday life follows a model of retrospection. In structural terms, every prospect is a retrospect, and hence anticipation always a kind of »mirrored memory«. Schutz sustains knowledge of future events being similarly structured as past events being actively reconstructed by our conscience from the viewpoint of the vivid present. Thus, only the typical and the already-well-known may be anticipated, whilst the new and unexpected is singled out by this analysis. Although Schutz's theory has its merits, it is unable to solve the problem of anticipating something novel. Therefore, his conception needs to be re-

visited and modified. Trying to extend Schutz's phenomenological analysis of future knowledge, we add three aspects (Knoblauch & Schnettler 2005), namely by (a) taking into consideration *different types* of future knowledge and its respective evolution; by (b) connecting elements from Schutz's theory of acting in the mundane world of everyday life with his concept of ›Multiple Realities‹, putting special emphasis on the role of imagination and fantasy; and (c) by stressing the relevance of his theory of communication, in which symbols are the relevant class of signs to bridge the problem of translating experiences from one ›finite province of meaning‹ to another, in this case: from some ›supernatural realm‹ to the intersubjective social ›world of everyday life‹.

2. Visionary Experiences at the Turn of the Millennium

The social construction and social impact of future knowledge are problems not resolvable merely within social theory. Its further clarification depends on empirical research and consequently, we started to study contemporary prophetic visions. Prophetic visions are a type of transcendent experience traditionally claiming to draw on a special personal charisma or vocation. The future visions in our study can be understood as a specific subtype of the experience of »big transcendence« (Luckmann 1967). Knowledge of future events is usually undisclosed to the seer through an extraordinary experience. This subjective experience is often relevant for a wider community and therefore many visionaries throughout history have been driven towards public proclamation of the revealed future knowledge, engaging in prophetic activities. The social impact of future visions – as a subjective transcendent experience – depends on its public proclamation and propagation.

The visions we studied were experienced at of the turn of the Millennium. But despite strong debates in mass-media and among historians discussing the possible risk that could engender an upspring of prophetic visions, generate strong apocalypticism and occasionally even initiate outburst of violence by sects and »destructive cults« at the beginning of the year 2000, the level of millennial hysteria was remarkably low and apocalyptic feelings were not very popular. At least in Germany, prophets did not flourish. Rather, the Millennium seems to have been an opportunity for »eventisation« and the general attitude towards it may be described as »confident indifference« (Schnettler 1999).

Still we managed to contact modern visionaries and interview them about their special experience of the future. Additionally we conducted focused ethnographic observations in New Religious Movements headed by charismatic prophets, and analyzed visionary performances (Schnettler 2001). We studied the relation of visions as a kind of transcendent experience with the world of mundane life (Schnettler 2004). The data-corpus consists of narrative interviews

with 16 persons in the southwest of Germany and the north of Switzerland, roughly between the Black Forest, the Lake of Constance and Zurich.

Previous research on near-death experiences (Knoblauch, Schmied & Schnettler 2001) revealed special narrative devices that enable people to cope with the paradox of communication. Vision narratives entail an intricate temporal structure: the activity of accounting unfolds a narrative reference to a past experience mostly separated or contrasted to experience in everyday-life that is presented »past perfect« (plusquamperfect) and its consecutive fulfilling also in the past. In order to make plausible their future vision, people frequently use a typical narrative pattern called »A-B-structure«, consisting of two elements: In the first part A, they tell what he or she has experienced during the vision. Subsequently, in part B, the reference changes to the world of everyday-life and the narration of the vision's fulfilling. Members may use this communicative pattern as a resource to credibly construct the future relatedness of their subjective visionary experience. Members may also use certain specific motifs, in order to make understandable the future-relatedness of their visionary experience. In the case of the *motive type*, the future relatedness is communicatively constructed by using a range of preformed motifs culturally available which carry a future index, either apocalyptical or futuristic. People not only report extensively on the content of their visions, but also engaged in reflecting upon the forms of their experience in terms of an »ethnophenomenology« (Knoblauch & Schnettler 2001). Both the experience itself and its special qualities raised no doubts among those who have made them, causing strong biographical impacts. But although they believed firmly in its personal reality, most of the visionaries had major problems to interpret its meaning in terms of its collective meaning.

3. The Secularization of Vision and the Fragmentation of Prognosis

The third part will discuss the sociological meaning of the findings, especially the absence of prophetic commitment and the social inertia of contemporary visionary experiences. We did not frequently find an interpretation of the vision within a traditional religious framework. The vast majority of our interviewees did not understand their experience as a divine revelation nor felt any obligation to spread their message, gather followers or enounce public warnings of pending future events. There are several reasons for the comparatively low social impact of visionary experiences in our culture:

(1) Many empirical studies demonstrate that religious experiences have not vanished in modern society. Between 1962 and 1992, at least 1/3 of the population had a strong religious, mystical or ecstatic experience (Yamane & Polzer 1994). Nevertheless, there are striking differences between Europe and the United States. Although extraordinary experiences flourish in both cultures, in Europe

they are increasingly disconnected from the domain or religion and beginning to diffuse into a general »ecstatic culture« (Knoblauch 2001).

(2) By the same token, apocalypticism as *religious* interpretation of Doom is vanishing progressively in our culture, becoming substituted by secular symbols of destruction communicated through mass-media, whereas a vivid apocalyptic tradition is deeply rooted in American popular culture (Boyer 1992). Apocalypticism is an integral part of the worldview of large number of citizens, for whom »watching, waiting, and working for the millennium (...) has become, even more than baseball, America's favorite pastime« (Sweet 1979). »The ›Millennial Myth‹ is deeply ingrained in American Culture and represents a major cultural resource for the interpretation of unsettling events and trends« (Lamy 1997). For this reason, the majority of Germans has not interpreted the beginning of the new Millennium in terms of Apocalypticism and visions of the future rarely make any reference to it.

(3) There is also a significant shift in the social semantic of the expression »vision«, which is becoming detached from its links with supernatural or religious experience and used as a rather popular designation in the sense of a idea or plan for mundane developments in the near future. In some cases such ›secular visions‹ substitute what formerly have been called technical or political utopias.

As a result, these developments taken together point towards an important development in our contemporary culture, which shows little inclination to believe in prophetic visions, to follow broad announcements of promises for the future and, in consequence, seems to have split off collective binding expectations of *the one* future to come into a whole array of smaller future expectations in a whole series of mundane domains. In other words: Due to the complexity of modern culture, prognosis has become fragmented (Minois 1998).

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