Talk, Ties, and Social Times:
Unpacking the Duality of Networks and Futures

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Abstract

How is talk about what will, could, and should happen in the future shaped by networks of actors engaged in these conversations? And how do conversations about imagined futures reshape social relations? This essay considers the roots of my current research on "the duality of networks and futures" in seminars and conversations with Harrison White at Columbia in the 1990s. First, I recount generative exchanges with White on language, interaction, and publics, focusing on how "social times" are developed through switches between "network-domains". Second, I describe how these ideas inform my current work on the construction of futures in public interest scenario projects, as examples of intentional and focused "sites of hyperprojectivity". As a historical example, I explore intensive debates about imagined futures in the *Kenya at the Crossroads* project in 1998–2000. Finally, I share some preliminary mappings of transnational networks of public interest scenario projects, based on an original dataset of 230+ multi-stakeholder foresight exercises conducted worldwide since the 1990s. This analysis attempts to channel White's theoretical and methodological insights by formalizing the link between cultural and relational processes at a larger scale.

Keywords: Networks; futures; publics; temporality; conversation.

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What happens when people from diverse networks and institutional sectors gather to discuss what will, could, and should happen in the future? In what ways do the intentional exchange and co-development of imaginaries about the future reshape both (1) relations among participants, and (2) the cultural contours of those imaginaries themselves? My current research focuses on how narratives about the future and transnational networks of foresight practice are co-constituted and reformulated through participation in public interest scenario projects. My research builds on thinking about the "duality of networks and futures" that I began developing in seminars and conversations with Harrison White during the 1990s, focusing on how "social times" are developed through switches between network-domains.

In this essay, I draw several lines of connection between my early-career discussions with White and my current work on transnational foresight networks. First, I recount some of the generative conversations that seeded my thinking, in dialogue with White's explorations of language, time, and interaction in the 1990s. Second, I describe how I have drawn on these ideas in my subsequent work on the construction of futures in "sites of hyperprojectivity". As a historical example, I explore the intensive debates about imagined futures in the *Kenya at the Crossroads* scenario project in 1998–2000. Finally, I share a few teaser network diagrams from my current analysis-in-progress with my research team at Notre Dame, to give a sense of how we will be taking our conversations with White forward in the future.

1 From Networks into Futures

In 1993, while a doctoral student at the New School for Social Research, I took two graduate seminars with Harrison White at Columbia University (on "Contemporary Theory" and "Identity and Control"). Both classes were memorable, although we did not read his 1992 book of that name in either one. Instead, White created ample space for discussing our own projects-in-development, in dialogue with questions that he was wrestling with at that time.

During this period, I was preparing for my fieldwork in Brazil, with plans to study the diversification of youth activist networks during the period of democratic reconstruction. At the same time, I was developing a separate strand of theoretical work on the topic of temporality, agency, and imagined futures (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Mische, 2009 & 2014). These strands came together in those seminars and in subsequent workshops and collaborations at Columbia's Lazarsfeld Center, which White directed and where I became a visiting scholar and postdoc. My ideas on these topics were interwoven with discussions of publics, switching, and network-domains, as White moved from the early formulations in *Identity and Control* to broader ruminations on temporality, language, and social change (White, 1995 & 2008; Mische, 2011).

Amidst these discussions, I began mulling over the question of how engagement with futures is shaped by interactions within and across networks, and vice versa: how future imaginaries shape social relations. Within social networks, actors generate timeframes, commitments, and storylines in conversation with others, projecting those networks backward and forward in time. As people move within and between networks, they develop representations of futures, which in turn can sustain or challenge those relations. This conception is critical to my current research on transnational foresight interventions in response to urgent global problems, as I will discuss below. But I can see these ideas germinating in memos for White's seminars, as well as in subsequent exchanges with him at the Lazarsfeld Center.

For example, in my final memo for White's spring 1993 "Contemporary Theory" class, I asked the following two questions: (1) *How do hopes work to imaginatively structure the fu-*

ture, and how does this pre-structuring shape and mobilize action?; (2) *By what mechanisms of interpretation and action does this imaginative pre-structuring help to stabilize and/or change social structure?.* The paper tours through Bourdieu, Garfinkel, Luhmann, Coleman, Giddens, and Sahlins, with several key moments of engagement with White. I noted in this memo that White's focus on the "prefiguring effects of narratives" in *Identity and Control* was useful for understanding my first question.

I hoped to get insight into the second question from a draft essay he had written that very semester, "Narrative into Times from Zap and Rachet". I saw a useful link between narrative projection and structural change in White's attention to "the over-determination of social experience by multiple, narratively constructed times, resulting in mismatches between narratives and practices ('zaps'), requiring, finally, the construction of new narratives ('ratchets') during periods of social transitions". For White, "social times" involve webs of stories and interpretations that construct temporally infused meanings around sets of relations; social times are generated by storytelling provoked by movements across networks. During periods of social disruption, storylines and relations are revamped ("ratcheted") across levels, leading to recalibrations of histories and futures.

While I found this perspective extremely generative, I also pushed back on what I saw as an underdeveloped attention to intentionality in future construction in White's perspective. I noted in my memo that for White, "the need for new narratives arises almost accidentally, as a form of retrospective repair work made necessary by progressive mismatching due to the complexities of overlapping social times". In my own research on projected futures, I hoped to show that such narratives do not only arise accidentally, but also through *intentional* efforts to engage with transformative possibilities.

My reflections no doubt come across today as cryptic and jargony, as I tried to get a handle on White's lingo. However, my memo also tried to bring these points home more concretely to my developing proposal for research in Brazil, in which I wanted to study how young people's emerging hopes and projects during re-democratization were shaped by their participation in overlapping social and institutional networks. More generally, I told White that I hoped to understand "how cultural projections about the future, as imaginatively engaged by individuals and socially channeled through the stories and strategies of institutions, exercise a central role in mobilizing action and organizing practices".

2   Stories, Switchings, and Bayesian Forks

In seeking to link future projections and social relations, I was building on ideas that White began developing in *Identity and Control*. In his 1992 book, he draws explicit links between narratives and networks, arguing that ties are generated by contending struggles for control. These control efforts congeal into ties through "chronic reports" (accounting practices and forms of talk associated with reasonably stabilized relations), which can eventually split into distinct "types of tie". "As such reports accumulate [...] they fall into patterns perceived as stories. A tie becomes constituted with a story, which defines a social time by its narratives of ties. A social network is a network of meanings" (White, 1992, p. 67).

White expanded on these formulations across several essays and collaborations during the 1990s. He introduced the notion of "network-domains" (or "netdoms") in a 1995 *Social Research* article, "Network Switchings and Bayesian Forks", in which he describes social networks and narratively-composed domains as "mutual analytic abstractions from the social goop of hu-

man life". These abstractions help us to get a handle on the interrelationship between talk and ties:

> Networks catch up especially the cross-sectional patterns of connection and resonance in interaction. Domains catch up especially the meaning and interpretation which are the phenomenology of process as talk. These two, networks and domains, come together for the type of tie and, as I hope to show, for the construction of meanings and times (White, 1995, p. 1028).

The 1995 essay goes on to make several additional theoretical moves, which I helped unpack in our 1998 co-authored article "Between Conversation and Situation: Public Switching Dynamics across Network-Domains" (Mische & White, 1998). These include the proposition that language itself develops from "switching" between network-domains; as people move between netdoms, the use of "polysemic" words allows them to negotiate ambiguity and fold multiple storylines into emerging talk. "Persons" are merely a byproduct of "continuing ties in an ecology of switchings between netdoms" — and therefore (White thought) generally useless as analytic constructs. "Social times" as well as "identities" emerge from accounting and updating processes as people move within and across netdoms. And these switchings are eased by the buffering effects of what he calls "publics", i.e., fully connected interstitial spaces in which social times are decoupled, netdoms are superimposed and/or suppressed, and network ties are further differentiated.

I was particularly gripped by the "Bayesian forks" essay when I read it, and set out to unpack its glimmering opaqueness. In February 1996, I was back at the Lazarsfeld Center for a few months during my fieldwork in Brazil, shortly after my father had unexpectedly died (this is relevant to the story). I wrote an extended memo to White with reflections on that paper, to which he responded with three colors of scrawled mark-ups (red, blue, and black) with comments and connections, including notes on what I got right (with heavy underlines, circles, or the note "core" or "yes"), as well as on what I did not. (This included what he considered my chronic slippage into analyzing phenomena through an "individualist cognitive view, not in a social switch").

White left several exclamations linking my comments on his work back to my own developing dissertation research on Brazilian youth activist publics, connections that I have explored elsewhere (Mische, 2015; Mische & Chandler, 2019). Here, I'd like to pull out a different question, in which I asked him (in italics), "*Can storylines from multiple network-domains cross into a common experience of a Bayesian fork?*". I floated a tentative, very personal answer to my own question:

> I'm thinking of my many conversations in the past weeks over the question of when I should leave for Brazil. I found myself constantly weaving and reweaving alternative scenarios about the timing of my departure, each of which would make it possible to coordinate certain aspects of relations/joint activities while impeding others. Leaving earlier would mean not helping my mother finish the memorial issue [commemorating my Dad's life], not having time to do my income tax and other bureaucratic requirements; it would also mean being generally more harried and exhausted. On the other hand, leaving later would mean missing certain key activist meetings that might be important for my research, leaving relations with Brazilian friends and informants dangling, missing the festivities and emotional release of Carnival. I tried in each case to balance possible scenarios against each other

(along with the diversity of relations they implied), leaving them in suspension until the last possible moment, when I finally was required (by outside pressures) to make a phone call, buy a ticket, settle a plan. These demands precipitated me into a de facto decision, even if I hadn't really resolved the question in my own mind.

This passage certainly puts me at risk of the accusation of having an "overly cognitive view". In this case, however, Harrison had gone over the passage carefully in two different colors, circling the first two sentences and writing "key" next to them, underlining several aspects of my personal story, and putting a check mark with "exactly" next to the final sentence. His attentiveness is touching, although I wouldn't chalk it up to empathy with my decisional anguish. In closing my comments, I expressed some doubt about my take on his work ("of course, maybe I've got it all wrong; you are talking about identities, while I am talking about decisions"). Harrison sweetly crossed out "wrong".

3   Networks and Futures in Sites of Hyperprojectivity

I highlight these cross-textual conversations with White as they provide a bridge to my current research on futures and foresight methodologies. In this work, I am operationalizing the concept of the "duality of networks and futures" in what I have called "sites of hyperprojectivity" (Mische, 2014), that is, intentional gatherings that focus collective attention on heightened deliberations about future possibilities. Such settings can include emergency response and preparedness meetings, as in Gibson's (2012) discussion of the Kennedy cabinet discussions of the Cuban Missile Crisis or Lakoff's (2017) account of government preparedness efforts for global pandemics. They also include more mundane administrative or community planning meetings, or consultative public forums (Lee et al., 2015; Lee, 2014).

My work focuses on how transnational coalitions use public interest scenario techniques as a form of "foresight intervention" related to problems ranging from the future of democracy to transitions from armed conflict, urbanization, energy use, food security, and adaptation to climate change (Mische & Mart, 2025). Scores of public interest scenario workshops have taken place around the world, with a particular surge following the 2008 global financial crisis.[1] Scenario exercises are relationally complex, convening diverse actors across multiple sectors and institutional domains. These heterogeneous — and sometimes adversarial — sets of participants can include academic or professional experts, government and corporate leaders, social movements, civil society organizations, and local residents or citizens. These projects are generally supported by transnational networks of researchers, consultants, and donors. Some involve broad public or stakeholder dialogues, while others rely on expert consultations (or a hybrid of both).

Scenario approaches distinguish themselves from both predictive forecasting (what will happen) and normative visioning (what should happen). Instead, they use narrative, visual, and performative techniques to create multiple storylines for what *could* happen, with attention to complexity, contingency, and multi-linear causality. Scenario exercises aspire to help collectivities take the "long view", grapple with diverse perspectives, and develop robust responses

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1.   Scenario methodologies were pioneered in military and corporate contexts in the 1970s in response to perceived failures in conventional forecasting methods (Fosbrook, 2017; Andersson, 2018), and have been broadly used in government planning contexts (Andersson & Keizer, 2014; Janzwood & Piereder, 2019). They migrated to the non-profit or "civic" sector in the 1990s, after their well-publicized use during transitions from apartheid South Africa and civil wars in Colombia and Guatemala (Kahane, 2012; Finlev, 2012).

to emergent problems (Schwartz, 1996; van der Heijden, 2005). Practitioners claim that these methods are especially well-suited for reframing future possibilities in "TUNA conditions", that is, situations of turbulence, uncertainty, novelty, or ambiguity (Ramírez & Wilkinson, 2016).

My research asks: Why have scenario methodologies emerged and spread transnationally as a tool for public deliberation? Who is initiating, supporting, and facilitating this work? How does the relational composition of scenario projects vary across the transnational field of foresight intervention? What voices have been incorporated into the diverse forms of scenario work developed in response to local and global problems? And what new kinds of networks, future imaginaries, and coordinating actions are being developed through them?

4 The Relational and Communicative Nature of Scenario Work

Scenario work represents itself as intrinsically relational and communicative. While scenario projects do not claim to predict the future, they do want to help people pry the future open and perceive it as plural and malleable. This depends on having many different kinds of people "in the room", generating collective learning from the clash and synergy between multiple perspectives. This, in turn, practitioners hope, allows participants to challenge the cognitive biases that are generated by social and institutional silos and our tendency toward groupthink, thus opening up the possibility space of the future. Scenario work proposes to harness divergent views to help collectivities move beyond blind spots and impasse, and toward alignment and consensus on desirable paths forward, particularly in situations of turbulence and uncertainty in which such pathways are not clear or self-evident.

At the same time, scenario exercises present themselves as spaces in which new relations (i.e., forms of social capital) are built through challenge, bridge-building, re-alignment, and consensus formation. As such, foresight practitioners do more than simply champion their ability to help collectivities re-articulate futures through the use of specialized techniques. Building on Breiger's (1974) classic extension of Simmel, I argue that they promise a dual relational outcome: *they claim to help people build relations with others by means of these futures, while simultaneously building futures by means of those relations.*

Central to these efforts are emerging connections among actors at different sites and scales (including between the global and local, and between North and South). These relations involve clear asymmetries in resources, status, and expertise, associated with the positioning of participants in local and global power relations. At the same time, scenario projects aspire to develop new channels of dialogue across differences, putting diverging (and sometimes adversarial) perspectives in conversation via discussions of imagined futures.[2] Because scenario projects set out quite self-consciously to build relations — as a means of cognitive insight, social capital, and political leverage — they constitute intentional and ambitious "relational interventions".

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2. These kinds of scenario-building publics aspire to accomplish the "bracketing" of status differences that political theorists such as Habermas (1989) would argue are needed for public deliberation (or what White might call the "decoupling" of future-oriented discussions from the interests and positions in participants' home network-domains). However, as Fraser (1992) has noted, this bracketing is always limited, and differences in power and status remain. It would be worth examining the degree to which scenario-building projects approximate (or evolve into) other Whitean ideal-types, such as "councils" (that harness status distinctions to leverage particular future visions), "arenas" (that offer assessments of particular futures as "pure" or "impure"), or "interfaces" (that assign differentiated roles to future production, perhaps via policy recommendations). I am grateful to Matt Bothher for this suggestion.

This formulation builds on my early conversations with White in several ways. First, it draws attention to the *intermingling of multiple, narratively constructed temporalities in "publics"* — that is, relational spaces that are "in between" more specialized network-domains (Mische & White, 1998; Mische & Chandler, 2019). In scenario workshops, participants from different institutional sectors (academia, government, business, philanthropy, social movements, civil society) are asked to consider what they see as the core "drivers of change", to spin stories about futures they fear and hope for, and to listen to the stories of others. They are then charged with working together to come up with several diverging storylines about what "could" happen in the future (usually three or four).[3] In this way, scenario workshops are a good example of publics, i.e., "in between" sites in which people from unaccustomed "network-domains" contribute to the intermingling of narratives and consideration of new possibilities.

Second, in these sites, *multiple lines of future action and causality are held up for view simultaneously, suspended in the shared space of the imagination*. These publics are "elaborative" and not "deliberative" (Mische, 2008); that is, they are not charged with decision-making about specific interventions, but only with the generation and reframing of possibilities. Because of this, they can keep multiple futures in a suspended state of mutual dialogue, without arriving at the kind of decisional "fork" that I mentioned earlier in my personal exchange with White.[4] Of course, he would note that these "forks" are usually not intentional or fully deliberated; he argued that we stumble into them mostly accidentally, due to changes in the surrounding environments and through forced network switches beyond intentionality and control. When that happens, White maintains, *it triggers a process of updating, via a flurry of accounting practices and storytelling* that generates new narratives (stretching forward and backward in time), as well as reconfigurations of relations.

While new storylines and networks can certainly be triggered by major environmental shifts (such as an economic crisis, a climate-induced disaster, or an outbreak of violence), they can also be generated at a more micro level. The process of story-generation within complex and heterogeneous publics can contribute to new relations even if no crisis ensues and no explicit "decisions" are taken about how to respond to the problem under discussion. Scenario deliberations put a new set of plausible futures into a suspended state within the "bubble" of the workshop. After the workshop ends, participants take these storylines with them to their "home" networks and institutional domains, along with whatever shifts have happened in their own understandings of situational possibilities.

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3. Scenario workshops use a variety of techniques to generate these stories about the future. Sometimes futures are developed "deductively" through the juxtaposition of two intersecting axes (e.g., high or low economic growth, strong vs. weak governance, active vs. passive participation, attention or inattention to social inequality); the combination of two such axes generates four quadrants as parameters for imagining plausible futures (Scearce & Fulton, 2004; Ramírez & Wilkinson, 2014). At other times, futures are developed more "inductively" by clustering together story elements offered by individual participants in a first round of personal narratives.

4. This situation of "suspended futures" and the avoidance of decisional forks can be considered a form of what Eric Leifer (1988, p. 867) calls "local action", in which role ambiguity is maintained through preliminary moves to avoid "foreclosing coveted role possibilities". In the cases of scenario work, multiple lines of future possibility (story-sets) are generated through talk and interaction within complex and heterogeneous publics. By not "settling" on one imagined future at the expense of the others, the projects do not firmly "side" with any of the competing perspectives at the table. The projective ambiguity generated by the narration of multiple futures leaves open what specific participants will take with them into their future actions (and more specialized networks), constituting a relationally dual form of local action. My thanks to Ron Breiger for pointing out this connection, which I hope to explore more fully in the future.

These network switches occasioned by the return to more specialized network-domains may require forms of updating, as participants report these newly configured stories in their home networks and institutions, and use them to consider possibilities for new lines of action. At the same time, participants often maintain continuing relations with co-participants in the scenario workshops. This can take the form of partnering or co-sponsoring in the organization of future events, as well as the formation of new friendships, collaborations, or consulting relations generated by co-participation in these foresight exercises.

5   An Example: Kenya at the Crossroads

To demonstrate these processes, I will share the story of one such project, *Kenya at the Crossroads: Scenarios for Our Future*. This project was spearheaded in 1998–2000 by a group of young professionals associated with the local branch of an international development NGO (Society for International Development, SID), in partnership with a Kenyan think tank (Institute for Economic Affairs, IEA). Kenya was emerging from the autocratic regime of President Daniel Moi, and struggling with post-colonial leadership divisions, growing ethnic conflict, debates about economic modernization, and pressures for democratization and constitutional reform. SID and IEA convened a broad group of participants in an extended process of reflection involving five multi-day workshops in different regions of the country. The project was funded by USAID, the British Council, and Swedish and Finnish development agencies (among other groups), although the foreign funders were barred from participating in the deliberations. The only non-Kenyan in the room was a British consultant who had previously worked with the planning department of Shell Oil, a pioneer in the use of scenario techniques (Wack, 1985a & 1985b; Wilkinson & Kupers, 2014; Fosbrook, 2017).

Discussions in the resulting complex "publics" crossed political, professional, epistemological and ethnic/tribal divides, involving industrialists and human rights activists, civil society leaders and government officials, representatives of the ruling party and the political opposition, economists and political scientists along with professionals from the humanities and the arts, and members of both dominant and marginalized ethnic and religious groups. Participants wrestled with deep, unresolved tensions from the country's colonial and post-colonial past, as the legacies of historic injustice infused fierce debates over contending models of political and economic development.

These discussions generated four different stories for the future of Kenya, depending on the degree to which the country pursued strategies to ensure economic growth, on the one hand, and/or democratic reform, on the other. The stark scenario entitled *Maendeleo* (the Kiswahili word for "development") describes high growth, liberalizing economic reforms accompanied by a repressive, technocratic, and patrimonialist state, resulting in deepening inequalities and unrest after a period of expansion. The somewhat more hopeful *Katiba* ("constitution") pathway describes movement-driven democratic reforms contributing to the expansion of political rights and social inclusion, but with continued instability due to slow economic growth. The catastrophic *El Niño* scenario (named for the destructive weather pattern) imagines a process of national disintegration due to intensifying corruption, inequality, and ethnic violence. The most optimistic *Flying Geese* scenario (discounted by many participants as unrealistic) describes a future in which different forces in the country move forward together; it is characterized by bold political leadership leading to social inclusion, institutional accountability, and a revitalized economy.

I interviewed over a dozen people involved in the *Kenya at the Crossroads* scenarios, as well as in several subsequent scenario processes in Kenya and East Africa sponsored by the two think tanks, SID and IEA. Interviewees reported that discussions were (a) difficult and contentious; (b) led them to see Kenya's future differently than when they went into it; and (c) influenced their personal career trajectories and styles of work. In particular, they noted that the discussions forced them — and more generally, participants from the contending "camps" — to wrestle with the limitations, trade-offs, and unintended consequences of their own preferred future pathways. So, for example, those advocating a strong technocratic economic growth model were challenged to consider what might happen if inequalities were allowed to deepen and fester, while those arguing for social and political rights and inclusive democracy were challenged to acknowledge the possibility of instability resulting from slow economic growth. Participants held each other's most expansive, optimistic visions in check, exposing their limitations while championing their own positions.

Drawn mostly from the ranks of young professionalizing elites, many *Crossroads* participants went on to occupy important roles in government, academics, business, media, and the arts. Several interviewees noted that the scenarios deepened their commitment to inclusive development models and the need for strong institutions. They also noted ways that the scenarios had entered the national discourse. For example, they believe it shaped the government's 2007 national visioning process, "Kenya Vision 2030", by persuading state leaders to consider the political and social "pillars" of development in addition to economic factors (Maina & Sivi, 2004; Sivi et al., 2006).

At the same time, many interviewees expressed frustration that the scenarios had little sustained policy traction. The warnings of the *Crossroads* team seemed to go unheeded by policymakers fixated on a technocratic, high-growth development model (resembling the *Maendeleo* story) — at least until Kenya's post-election crisis of 2007–2008, when the country plunged into a situation resembling the *El Niño* scenario. Ethnic and political violence following a disputed election left 1300 people killed and 600,000 displaced. The crisis generated renewed interest in the Kenyan scenario process, contributing to a major moment of scenario updating (including profiles in the national media about how a group of thinkers in 2000 had "foreseen" the 2007–2008 crisis). Participants claim that this attention contributed to redoubled efforts toward constitutional reform — that is, it helped steer the country back toward the democratic reform trajectory (the *Katiba* story). Kenya approved a new constitution in a 2010 national referendum, with measures to ensure civil and political rights and include marginalized ethnic groups in political decision-making.

This renewed public interest in the *Crossroads* scenarios helped to fuel a wave of interest in scenario planning across the country and region. Leaders of the scenario team from SID and IEA went on to facilitate a series of subsequent scenario processes in Uganda, Tanzania, and the East African region as a whole, as well as workshops on the futures of youth, constitutional reform, urban informality, and the extractive and energy sectors. Other participatory scenario projects have taken place in Kenya and the region, focused on community adaptation to climate change, socio-ecological management, and food security. Former SID and IEA team members facilitated scenario projects on the future of Nigeria, the role of women across Africa, and the dynamics of political and budgetary decentralization. An emerging network of African foresight professionals called "Foresight for Development" developed an online platform (supported by the UN-linked Millennium Project and the Rockefeller Foundation) aimed at supporting "the effective use of foresight for Africa's future by aggregating, enhancing and promoting futures thinking in practice in Africa", with profiles of several leaders of the Kenyan

scenario work.

In this story, we can see several of the dynamics that I described above, in which futures are generated and reconfigured by means of networks, and network relations re-organized via futures, as mediated by publics. Public interest scenario projects like *Kenya at the Crossroads* are sites of hyperprojectivity in which people with diverse perspectives and expertise — accumulated in specialized "network-domains" — gather to (re)consider future possibilities. Out of the interplay and clash of perspectives (what White would call "struggles for control"), four new futures were generated, crystallizing the group's debates about what futures were plausible and desirable.

These futures remained "suspended" and did not generate immediate policy shifts or clear decision points. However, they became reference points as participants returned home and resumed their work and careers. Several participants collaborated in the organization of other scenario projects in Kenya, contributing to the expanding network of foresight practitioners. Finally, the scenarios underwent a process of "updating" and renewed storytelling after a moment of dramatic national crisis, when the most dire scenario seemed to be coming true.

6   Transnational Network Mapping: Preliminary Analysis

The Kenyan story provides a ground-level view of what I mean by the duality of networks and futures. But we can also zoom out and consider what this looks like from a macro and transnational perspective. I have been working with Fabian D. Maldonado and Zhemin Huang at Notre Dame on the use of network and computational text analysis techniques to understand these processes at the global and regional scale. We are examining the historical emergence and global expansion of public interest scenario work through a transnational network mapping of shared organizational participation in these projects across multiple time periods, tracing flows of ideas, techniques, and resources over time.

To map these networks, we draw from an original database of 238 scenario projects carried out across multiple world regions between 1990 and 2017.[5] Building on Breiger's (1974 & 2000) operationalization of Simmelian "duality", we did a bipartite network mapping of organizational participation in scenario projects, differentiating between networks of initiators, facilitators, funders, and partners. Figure 1 provides a graph of the overarching "partner" network, which includes all organizations that participated in the organization and coordination of scenario projects (including leaders, facilitators, funders, and other listed partners).[6] Circles

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represent organizations, and squares represent scenario projects. Organizations are sorted into eleven "metasectors" to represent the different kinds of institutional sectors that compose these networks (see the key for color coding).
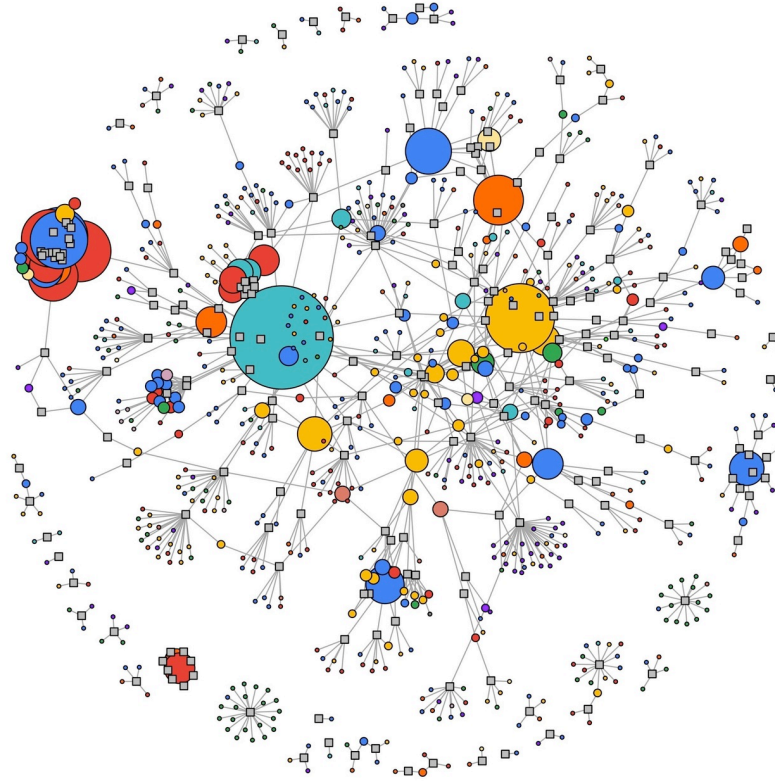

Figure 1. Partners Network

Key

In this graph, we see that there is a notable variation in the number of organizations associated with scenario projects, with some participating in multiple projects, while others take part in only one. There is a main network component connecting 81% of the scenario projects in our data, with connecting roles played by international or multilateral organizations (such as United Nations agencies, the European Union, or the World Bank), governments, foundations, research organizations, and academic institutions. We can specify this further by examining only the "leaders" — that is, the organizations responsible for initiating and convening the scenario projects (see Figure 2).

In the leaders network, we see a somewhat less connected graph, although there are still many organizations leading multiple scenario projects. The most central organizations are think tanks and research organizations (blue), academic institutions (red), and private foundations (orange). The SID, the civil society organization that organized the *Kenya at the Crossroads* scenario project, can be seen (in green) on the left side, surrounded by several subsequent projects in East Africa that it also coordinated.

Note, however, that the same set of scenario projects is funded by a quite different set of actors. In the funding network (Figure 3), we see a very large cluster of projects funded by the European Union (the largest circle, in teal), connected through co-funding to several other national governments (in yellow). Foundations such as Rockefeller, Ford, and Friedrich Ebert (FES) are connected to this main component. Other foundations — such as Robert Bosch (RBS), the Carnegie Endowment, and Robert Wood Johnson (RWJ) — fund projects in a different region of the network. Research networks and international think tanks, such as the World Economic Forum (WEF), focused on different sets of projects and are disconnected from the main component.

This network analytic research with Maldonado and Huang is still very much in progress; I include these preliminary graphs here to give a flavor of what we hope to do as we formalize and expand our study of the duality of networks and futures. We see indications in these graphs that organizations are connected through foresight work, although different kinds of organizations are involved in *leading* and *facilitating* these projects (mostly research and academic organizations) than are involved in *funding* them (government, foundations, and multilaterals).
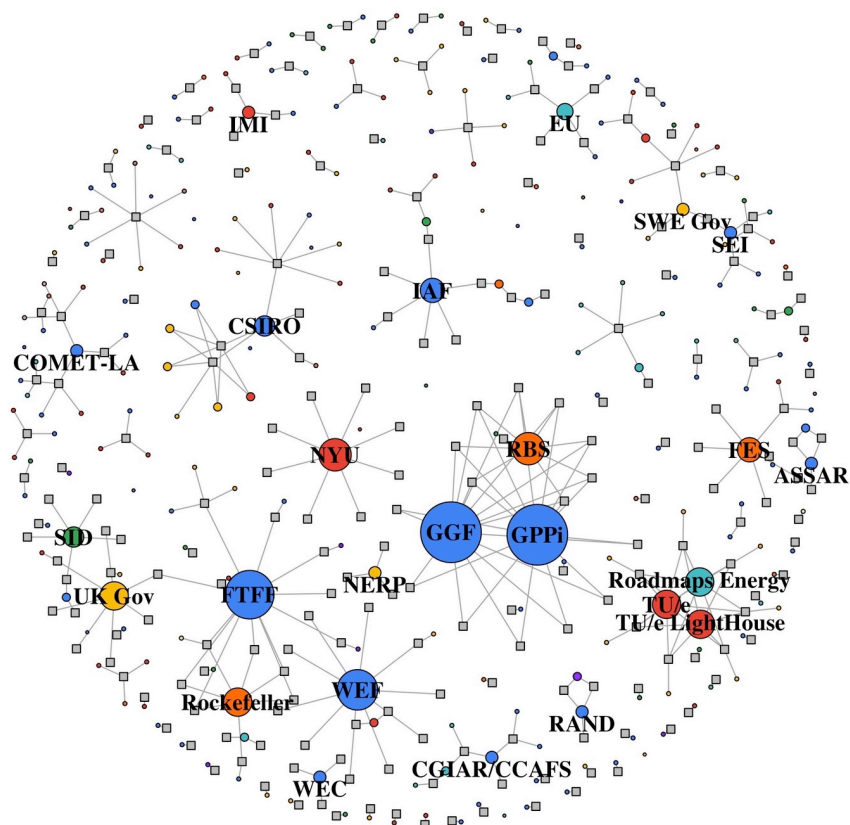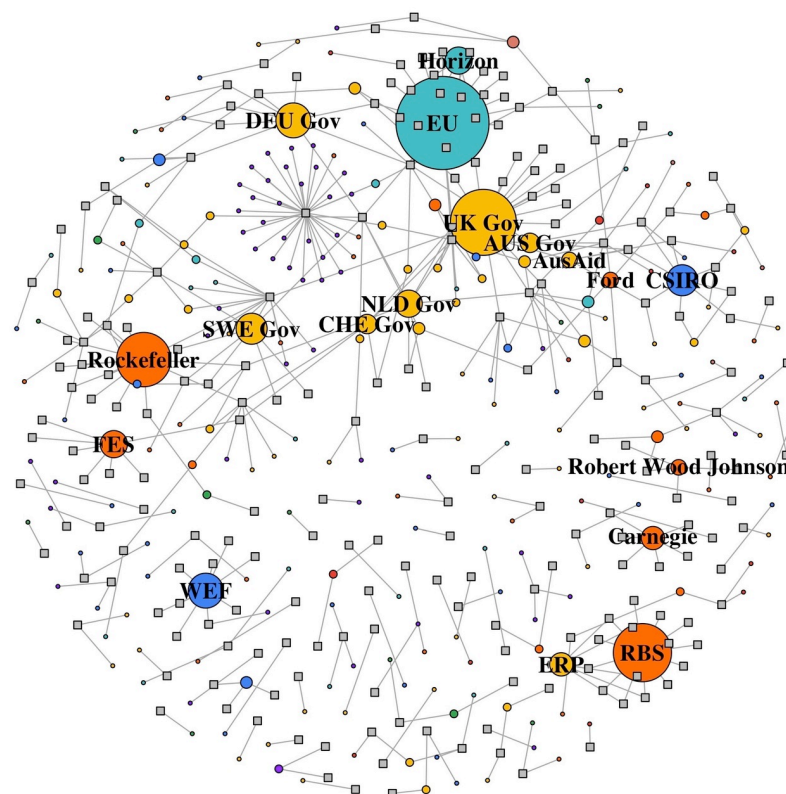
Figure 2. Leaders Network

Figure 3. Funders Network

We plan to disaggregate these networks into multiple time periods to understand the drivers of network expansion — that is, whether the expansion from one period to the next is driven by flows of reformist ideas, foresight techniques, or material resources. We hypothesize that these three types of flows will be associated with the networks of leaders, facilitators, or funders (respectively) emerging as the core actors in network clustering and expansion from one period to the next. We will also compare how these networks develop across different world regions, with particular attention to differences between the Global North and South.

Finally, we plan to investigate the *content* of the ideas that are being generated in the scenario workshops, to understand how changing network relations contribute to the reconfiguration of futures. We will consider how cross-sectoral foresight coalitions coalesce around particular problem areas and proposed interventions through a computational text analysis of scenario project reports. We plan to explore how particular narrative operators (e.g., "participation", "governance", "sustainability", or "growth") are associated with discursive stances toward the futures of capitalism and democracy. Finally, we will combine the network and computational analyses to determine to what extent scenario projects that share organizations also share discursive stances in their imagined futures. We will track shifts in debates about global futures and proposed interventions by examining how relationships between networks and narratives change over time.

7   Generating Social Times Out Of Talk and Ties

In his later writing, Harrison White was chasing the idea that narrative reporting practices and discursive switching within and between networks generate "types of ties" alongside "social times". These switching dynamics are mediated by "publics", i.e., buffer zones between network-domains, in which multiple storylines and relations are superimposed. In my early work on Brazilian youth politics (Mische, 2008 & 2015), I built on some of these ideas by examining how different *styles of communication* were generated in activist publics, via differently composed intersections and trajectories of multiple group affiliations (a process I refer to, building on Breiger, as "Simmel through time").

In my current work on transnational foresight interventions, I am taking these ideas in a different direction, more directly highlighting the construction of social times. Public interest scenario projects are particular kinds of publics that are intentionally and collectively focused on the construction of future imaginaries ("sites of hyperprojectivity"). In these sites, people with diverse backgrounds, involvements, and perspectives on the future gather to talk about multiple possibilities for what could happen. To translate this into Whitean terms, they set out to reconstruct social times out of cross-network conversations, with the hope that this will allow participants to steer and redirect lines of action (what he calls "getting action") once they return to their home networks.

Strikingly, no futures are "resolved" or "settled" in these workshops; very few of the scenario projects produce actual policy recommendations, and none of them produce clear decisions. Most simply generate a set of multi-pronged futures that remain suspended until they are perhaps sucked into (as yet undefined) lines of action in more specialized netdoms, or until changing situations indicate that people are now living in one future rather than the other (sometimes despite their best intentions).

I illustrated these processes by describing the *Kenya at the Crossroads* scenario project, in which a group of young reformist elites convened a set of challenging conversations designed to help Kenya generate a new consensus on where the country should be heading. The project

was experienced by participants as generative and satisfying (despite heated and contentious moments), although they also admitted frustration in that the political influence of these conversations was hard to trace (and Kenya seemed to stumble through the two "worse" futures before heading toward the better ones). Arguably, the country has continued to cycle through elements of these multiple futures in subsequent years, demanding continual updating. Nevertheless, the project did help to generate a connected group of leaders that continued to take these stories as touch-points — and points of connection with each other — throughout their careers.

I also suggested that we can invoke White's legacy by using formal network analysis to zoom out from local interactional contexts to understand where projects like *Kenya at the Crossroads* fit in the broader context of transnational foresight work. The leaders and facilitators of the Kenyan scenario projects went on to organize other workshops, convening a diverse array of funders that were investing in this kind of foresight work worldwide. The young reformers leading the *Crossroads* project were very clear that this was a Kenyan-led and nationally focused project. However, my research suggests that other scenario projects in the global network are more donor-driven, or promoted by transnational consultants and think tanks with skills in foresight facilitation.

White might interpret the transnational network diagrams that I have shared as artefacts of contending efforts at control in an emerging field of public interest foresight. New networks were formed via the construction of intentional sites of hyperprojectivity, that is, through attempts to collectively re-imagine social times. Translating again into Whiteian terms, the goal of our proposed network and computational text analyses is to understand which specific kinds of contending control efforts — between local reformers, cosmopolitan consultants, and global donors — have driven the emergence of these transnational networks. We also want to understand what narratives about the futures of global capitalism and democracy are being produced by means of these efforts.

I can see many seeds of these ideas in the memo I wrote to Harrison in 1996, and in his scrawled, attentive, and somewhat cryptic responses to my responses. If he were still with us, I am not sure to what degree he would recognize all of his later theorizations in my current work. My research has been shaped by a quite complex set of conversations and publics, in which my intensive interactions with Harrison in the 1990s were only one component. Indeed, he might continue to scold me for being too cognitively oriented and overly focused on persons. As my work on Brazil indicates, I have always enjoyed moving from a person- and culture-centered view up to dynamic macro-structures and back again (Mohr et al., 2020, chap. 4). Still, I can hear clear echoes of those heady, generative conversations about netdoms and publics in my emerging work, and I hope that Harrison would still generously cross out "wrong".

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