

**Title:** Framing optimism sociologically: Temporal complexity, collective affect, and cultures of optimism

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**Abstract:** This article critically examines the concept of optimism through a sociological lens, challenging its conventional portrayal as a unidimensional, inherently positive, and often unrealistic disposition towards the future. We first argue against an individualistic understanding of optimism, emphasizing the necessity of integrating it into social theory as a multifaceted, cultural, affective, and temporal phenomenon. By elucidating our criticism of optimism as an unrealistic attitude, we delve into its temporal complexity, highlighting how its realism depends on its embeddedness in different ‘modes of engagement’ with the future.

To further deconstruct optimism’s one-dimensionality, we analyze the conceptual distinctions between ‘small’ and ‘big’ optimism, exploring their intricate relationship with ‘small’ and ‘big’ futures. This framework illuminates how optimism manifests with varying meanings in different future engagements. We also integrate concepts like ‘affective atmospheres’ and ‘structures of feeling’ to position optimism within wider cultures of futurity, underscoring its emotional and collective dimensions, particularly its emergence from shared social contexts, cultures and collective affects. While primarily theoretical, the article draws upon existing youth research to illustrate how this refined understanding of optimism can offer richer insights into specific social groups and their orientations towards the future. We conclude by advocating for more empirical research to further investigate the nexus between dimensions of optimism and futures.

**Keywords:** collective affect; futurity; optimism; regime of engagement; sociological approach.

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### *Introduction*

While writing up this article, the international press became inundated with commentaries on the recent outcome of the US presidential election—one of the most important political events of 2024 worldwide—in which billionaire Donald Trump was elected to his second (albeit non-consecutive) term in office. While all elections entail establishing what citizens want for their (personal and collective) futures, the US presidential election has been defined inherently as involving the "politics of optimism" (Rocca, 2024), whereby American citizens were oriented toward constructing a collective future. Perhaps the most recent US election was a one-off; major events such as this attract a great deal of attention to optimism. But we can turn to other national contexts and situations to reflect on optimism. In the summer of 2021, during a specific phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, a "renewed sense of optimism" (Ramella & Sciarrone, 2021) was observed in Italy, whereby over two-thirds of Italians were estimated to express optimism about the future, indicating a clear increase from pre-pandemic times. As the pandemic neared its end, what led to a "hunger for the future" and what elements comprised this collective sentiment? In Italy, an optimistic trend seemed to be captured by the fashion industry: the luxury brand Prada, for instance, launched a campaign based on themes such as utopia and future possibilities, prompting consumers to reflect on what kind of utopia is worth pursuing<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, fashion magazines amplified a narrative of optimism on popular commercial platforms such as Zalando<sup>2</sup>. National train companies and airlines followed a similar trend<sup>3</sup>. Clearly, marketing strategies generally sought to exploit a *momentum*; in the summer of 2021, vibrant enthusiasm for the future and an optimistic affective atmosphere were, even if for a short time, evident in Italy (Mandich, 2023).

A similar need to think optimistically emerged globally around at the same time, when Swedish activist Greta Thunberg—who famously attracted international attention with a negative perspective of climate change—adopted a hopeful rhetoric, balancing nuanced critical messages with new optimism about the planet's destiny<sup>4</sup>. Ultimately, she came to

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<sup>1</sup> The keywords of the Prada campaign are shown [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance [Moda Estate 2021 Zalando: la campagna è un inno all'ottimismo](#), accessed 05 september 2025.

<sup>3</sup> See amongst other: [Offerta estiva FS: Giovannini, in linea con la strategia del Ministero e del Pnrr | Ministero delle infrastrutture e dei trasporti](#), accessed 6 september 2025.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see [this article](#) in the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*.

acknowledge the importance of driving sentiment that resonated with a transformed outlook among societies worldwide as they envisioned moving beyond the challenges of the past. This collective turn towards positivity (although temporary, given the subsequent shift in international events) underscores a broader societal embrace of the future as a domain of potential and renewal.

At different levels and in different ways, the three cases mentioned demonstrate how optimism is embedded differently in diverse national cultures and specific cultural contexts and situations, and convey the idea of some moments rising within specific affective atmospheres as shared feelings. In the summer of 2021 in Italy, for instance, this implied finally being released from the sense of entrapment caused by the pandemic. A specific moment and affective atmosphere also lay at the basis of the public discourse of the post-electoral campaign in the US. However, optimism is entrenched in US culture and emerges clearly in different layers of US society, supporting—at least in public debates—a positive view of the future.

We believe such elements raise several overarching issues. What does optimism mean, and how does it function? What is the relationship between optimism and temporality, with optimism supposedly being inherently oriented toward the future? These are important questions, especially in the face of the scant attention optimism has received in sociology thus far, perhaps due to the tendency to regard optimism as having an “individual” character rather than being of contextual significance. When it does enter sociological reasoning, this happens either through a mainstream psychological lens or via cultural and literary approaches (Eagleton, 2015). In both cases, optimism is viewed as a dispositional quality and a personal trait—i.e., as a generalized tendency to believe that one will experience good (versus bad) outcomes in life (see Carver & Scheier, 2014)—or as a “primordial stance toward the world” (Eagleton, 2015, p. 5), thereby giving it a unidimensional nature. On top of the individualization and flattening of optimism, another distortion in existing literature is that optimism is often perceived as unrealistic and, as such, a deceptive (if not dangerous) attitude.

In this article, we challenge both these assumptions and show how this helps to shed light on the complexity of optimism. Hence, our primary aim is to promote an understanding of optimism as a multifaceted, cultural, affective, and temporal concept that ought to be understood within larger cultures of the future and forms of collective affect. We use this latter term to refer to concepts such as affective atmospheres and structures of feeling, which have

recently been brought into play in the analysis of futurity. We do so by investigating the role and nuances of optimism, which we preliminarily define (following Bennett, 2011) as a positive attitude toward the future. Our approach is therefore theoretical: it reflects on the scant sociological literature on optimism, to show the potential that the concept has for sociological research. We then expand in the field of the sociologies of the future, also drawing on youth studies, in order to build a more complex understanding of optimism. Due to space restrictions, we do not engage with either primary or secondary data here. However, it is among our aims to advocate for further empirical research to be conducted on the basis of a clarification of the positioning of the concept of optimism in current debates.

### *The expansion of the sociology of the future as a basis for studying optimism*

Looking at optimism implies considering the temporal relationship between the present and the future. The expansion of the so-called sociology of the future (Halford & Southerton, 2023), which we briefly present in this section, suggests that a key challenge is to tackle futurity through the intertwining of multiple dimensions and lived experiences of it. If interest in the future is not new—see, in particular, Adam and Groves' groundbreaking reflections in *Future Matters* (2007) — in recent years there has undoubtedly been a notable trend towards what John Urry described as "mainstreaming the future" within contemporary sociology (Urry, 2016). The study of the future is a thriving area of research, with fresh contributions emerging from diverse domains and encompassing youth studies, feminist studies, the study of emotions and affect, and science and technology studies (STS). In a recent systematization, Beckert and Suckert (2021) suggest that sociological research concerned with future orientations is structured by three discernible clusters that—characterized by different epistemological approaches—have developed at different points in time, influenced by different sociological traditions: (1) the future as a variable; (2) imaginaries of how the future may look; and (3) the "contested processes in which future perceptions are constructed" (Beckert & Suckert, 2021, p. 3). The most recent cluster is associated with an effort to analyze the future in relation to social action and social practices and, in doing so, endeavors to highlight the cultural, material, and social complexity of this dimension. Reflecting on optimism is certainly part of this effort. As a positive feeling towards the future, optimism is inherently intertwined with agency. In critically reflecting on optimism, we were inspired by the thought-provoking work of Tutton (2023) and Coleman (2020). In separate ways, both futurelessness (which Tutton

defined as sensing the lack of a future) and mindfulness (described by Coleman as a practice of being in the present) invite us to examine the intertwining of the future, temporalities, and affectivity. Their call for more empirical research is proposed as a way to avoid the risk of oversimplifying complex realities in the realm of contested neoliberal cultures, which can be particularly important in the case of optimism. From this perspective, in this article we aim to address the role of optimism as a pervasive yet controversial element in public discourse. Despite the recognition of optimism as "being there," the potential of optimism as a sociological tool has yet to be fully unlocked. Such an operation would also serve as an important addendum to studies on the future and temporalities.

In this perspective, optimism would enter into the field of futurity in a deep relationship with a wide range of diverse concepts, such as aspirations, expectations, hopes, dreams, and the capacity to aspire. Some existing problematization of optimism is related to its relationship with hope. Sometimes the two have been strongly opposed (as in Eagleton, 2005); more often they are not easily discernible and are in fact used interchangeably—indeed, both imply a positive attitude towards the future. We will mention a few examples. For Bloch, hope is not just a mixture of beliefs and desires about possible things or facts, but a "militant optimism" that overcomes the existing horizon in the direction of "the horizon of the future"—a future already prefigured in the objective potential of reality (Gili & Mangone, 2023). Bennett, on a different route, states that "[Optimism] can be seen as a stronger version of hope" (Bennett, 2011, p. 303) and describes "small optimism" as more personal hopes and desires. Optimism has also been understood as "a key emotion of hopefulness" (TenHouten, 2003, p. 79). Coleman (2018) states that hope and optimism have in common that both operate as modes or regimes of feeling and are oriented around the future, through which more specific affects, emotions, and feelings (as we shall see later on) are generated. We will return to this later on to further discuss the affectivity of optimism. Referring to recent literature, we can summarize that hope is triggered at the individual level by specific events or affects (Anderson, 2006); optimism, instead, ought to be viewed as a disposition that is part of broader cultures or socio-historical moments, and emerges in a certain "structure of feelings" or affective atmospheres. Hope remains more situational, for instance related to health or other forms of distress (see also Cook and Cuervo, 2019), while optimism has stronger potential coming from more general cultural and affective frames.

*Modes of engagement with the future and optimism*

In this section, we go deeper into the possible projections towards optimism, and better identify the role it can take within a sociological approach, challenging the widespread notion that optimism is unreal. Psychology—and especially positive psychology—advocates for the positive role of optimism in individual agency (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Outside of this approach, however, a wide range of discourses within critical literary studies portrays optimism in negative terms; for example, as a naïve attitude (Eagleton, 2015). Famously, optimism has been labelled a "cruel fantasy" that deceives individual aspirations in the context of neoliberal societies (Berlant, 2011; Sellar & Zipin, 2019). These latter positions define what may be called a "pessimistic turn," which has recently been contrasted with a "disposition that anticipates a hopeful sociology" (Back, 2015). Back pointed to the fact that "blind pessimism is the reverse of the often-repeated adage about sightless optimism" (2015), a view shared by Willow (2023). Although different explanations have been offered for various optimistic attitudes in contemporary society, in our view, they mostly imply the idea of optimism being somehow in opposition to factual reality. As such, optimism would be unrealistic. Eagleton very bluntly highlighted the unrealistic nature of optimism (2015). In the initial pages of his well-known book, *Hope without Optimism*, he argues that "there may be many good reasons for believing that a situation will turn out well, but to expect it to do so because you are an optimist is not one of them. It is just as irrational as believing that all will be well because you are an Albanian, or because it has just rained for three days in a row" (2015, p. 1). The aforementioned American scholar Lauren Berlant (2011) also famously addressed the gap between optimism and reality. To understand how people make sense of the adversities brought about by neoliberalism, Berlant elaborated on the concept of "cruel optimism" and defined it as the tendency to keep believing in "the fantasy of the good life" and the promise of "mass upward mobility and meritocracy" (Berlant, 2011, p. 21). For Berlant, optimism is cruel "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (p. 1). Berlant thus criticized theories that underscore futurity because they "enable a concept of the latter to suspend questions about the cruelty of the now" (2011, p. 28). Cruel optimism, she added, emerges in the disjuncture between officially sanctioned realism (normative realism) and the affective experience of reality (affective realism); thus, not all optimistic relations are inherently cruel. Indeed, optimism is neither unrealistic nor negative in itself. As we contend later on in this article, Berlant's work is helpful in complexifying optimism as part of a structure of feeling and as a tension between different layers of reality.

The unrealistic nature of optimism can also be deconstructed by looking at the different regimes of reality within which optimistic attitudes can be framed. Indeed, in using and expanding upon Thévenot's theory of regimes of engagement (2007), different modes of engagement in the future (Mandich 2020) have been identified. The modes of engagement devised by Thévenot (2007, p. 409) are rooted in the idea that engaging with the world within a certain regime orients "how reality is grasped and specifies the format of what constitutes relevant information" (2007, p. 409). Once applied to the field of the future, different forms of anticipation that build on optimism are realistic insofar as they are properly embedded in different "modes of engagement with the future". In this approach, the future can be differently "made and measured" within a logic of probability in the regime of the plan, within a logic of possibility in a regime of justification, within a logic of practical anticipation in the regime of familiarity, and finally within a logic of discovery in the regime of exploration (Mandich 2020).

The fact that optimism has usually been seen as confined to a single logic (namely, the logic of probability) has strengthened the tendency to see it as unrealistic, also because forecasting the future in times of uncertainty is a very difficult task, and the nature of life is highly uncertain. However, optimism could function as a driving force if one adopts a logic of exploration, which is important in such diverse areas as creative work, IT—particularly the attempt to search for the terrain of the future, to find something new typical of Silicon Valley professionals—but also for understanding youth futures (Auray, 2011).

Alternatively, it can be viewed as a way of feeling "at home" in the future in the logic of practical anticipation, similarly to how Berlant referred to affective realism. According to Berlant, cruel optimism is characterized by a tendency to remain anchored in the present rather than projecting oneself into the future. It creates the illusion of progress while one is still "cradled by the present". A powerful quote that Berlant uses drawing from the Dardenne brothers' film *Rosetta* effectively illustrates this concept. Each night, to help her fall asleep, Rosetta repeats a phrase that resembles a lullaby, soothing her into slumber:

You are called Rosetta; I am called Rosetta. You have found a job; I have found a job. You have found a friend; I have found a friend. You have a normal life; I have a normal life. You will not end up in a black hole; I will not end up in a black hole.

Through repeating this mantra, Rosetta does not project herself into a desired future; rather, she makes her present liveable.

Lastly, optimism can express the belief in change within a logic of possibility, as in Gramsci's optimism of the will. He described a political sensibility that "never despairs and never falls into those vulgar, banal moods, pessimism and optimism ... my mind is pessimistic, but my will is optimistic" (Gramsci, 1975, p. 159). This logic brings us to the public debate on futures issues today. From a constructivist angle, in Mische's *Futures* (2014), forms of collective anticipation are fundamental elements in coalition formation, forms of mobilization, the consolidation of institutions, and reform policies (2014, pp. 457–458). In each of these different regimes, the general positive attitude towards the future takes on different meanings and is differently embedded in wider "cultures of the future."

### *Strengthening the concept of cultures of optimism*

In this section, we move towards constructing optimism as a category that is more grounded in sociological reasoning. As mentioned, one of the few scholars dealing with optimism as a cultural dimension from a sociological angle—as in the aim of this article—is British scholar Oliver Bennett. For him, optimism is "a particular mode of viewing the future, whose function can be considered separately from the variety of its expressions" (Bennett, 2011, p. 34). In this direction, he distinguished optimism in its modern sense from an older idea of optimism, seen as a philosophical position. Bennett underlined how optimism has been applied through different frames over the years (Bennett, 2011). In his reading, the optimism of the Enlightenment, closely associated with the idea of indefinite human progress, was followed throughout the 20th century by the literature on pessimism (to an overwhelming degree), which stresses negative outcomes in society (Bennett, 2011, 2015).

Bennett examined the "optimism of everyday life", which performs a number of very significant social and cultural functions. In general, this is embedded in culture, and its meaning must be understood in relation to the specific context in which it emerges. Cultures imply "an attitude towards an uncertain future, which can only be imagined; and how this future is imagined, whether on a large or small canvas, will at some level be inflected by a tendency—or disposition—towards optimism or pessimism" (Bennett, 2011, p. 304). Optimism is thus a way of addressing the future that—while being an individual stance—is mediated by society and social contexts. What counts is not the distance from which something is supposedly going to happen in the future, but its meaning in the present and how it is related to prospective social

agency (Andersen et al., 2020). Optimism thus has no single or absolute content but will always be relative to the hopes and desires it expresses (Bennett, 2015).

In this direction, a positive stance towards the future would be actively promoted by "cultures of optimism" in various forms of institutional action (Bennett, 2015). Thus, Bennett (2015) highlighted how all forms of secular politics are somehow based on a positive view of the future, and most of all, "democratic promises" represent the promise of a better future. Additional examples developed by Bennett are human resource management, parenting, models of salvation, and psychotherapy: through different languages, they all perceive the future in optimistic terms.

Along these lines, we could also consider the "techno-optimism" of Silicon Valley agents, who express confidence in technological innovations as making positive social change (Tutton, 2021). On top of Silicon Valley techno-optimism, several pieces of work have underscored a re-enchantment in technology. For instance, Cook (2016) stressed how, in her study, respondents' narratives revealed a complex interplay between pessimism about humanity's future and optimism about technological progress. While societal issues and human actions foster a bleak outlook, the potential and promise of technological advancements offer a counterbalance, providing hope and a sense of progress independently of societal norms and moral stagnation. Thus, a sense of re-enchantment with technology returned, as described in prior reflections related to the once new "computer revolution" in advanced industrial economies (Tiryakian, 1992; Alexander, 1993). Cultures of optimism or pessimism are not good or bad in themselves and would not produce per se either optimism or pessimism at the individual level. However, collective action can be hindered by reinforcing fatalistic or pessimistic attitudes towards the future (Lukes, 1974). The case of climate activism is telling: dystopia can empower engagement (Claisse & Delvenne, 2015) and engender optimism, even if based on pessimistic visions of the future (Cattel, 2021).

### *Cultures of Optimism in youth research*

This section strengthens the discussion on how optimism can enhance studies of the future, specifically drawing from youth research. Among a variety of groups, young people are generally considered "optimistic" on the assumption that they do not really know what is "out there." Franceschelli and Keating (2018), for instance, drew upon Festinger's (1962) theory of

cognitive dissonance to explain the divergence between cognitions (bodies of knowledge, beliefs, and opinions) and actual experiences of youth in Britain. Their finding was that youth have faith that hard work will pay off. On this basis, to interpret the largely positive view of the future that young people talk about—at least compared to that of adults—they deployed the argument that being young is a transitional phase characterized by a moratorium; it is detached and protected from "the real world." This finding is not surprising if compared to a survey in Italy, which, focusing on the traits of Generation Z, suggested a "bubble effect" among the youngest cohorts of youth surveyed, in order to give an explanation about positive orientations towards the future (Benasso & Cuzzocrea 2019). In this case, the authors highlighted the protective role of institutions, such as the family and the education system, which are characteristic of Italy. This ends up fostering optimism despite the fact that these young people live in a context of fewer opportunities compared with other countries. Again in Italy, a qualitative study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic on mobile young people, which made use of visual methodologies, described the future as "a positively felt experience" (Mandich, Satta & Cuzzocrea 2024). Also in this case, optimism is not unreal, nor is it an optimism linked to resolving into the expectation of specific positive outcomes. Rather, it is a feeling that expresses the possibility of looking towards the future, and potentially of exploring it in the sense suggested by Auray (2011), Mandich (2020), and Appadurai (2005).

What we called the "bubble effect" does not apply to everyone: socio-cultural resources impact the probability of being optimistic. For instance, in a recent survey on young people and the future in Italy, while optimism was mostly present in views of the future, pessimism persisted among the most disadvantaged youth, those with lower levels of socio-cultural capital, and therefore, in groups corresponding to youth in NEET (Not in employment, education or training, Mandich 2024). Thus, individual resources, agency, and individualism each have an independent effect on young people's optimism (Keating & Melis, 2022). Other surveys on youth have revealed different levels of optimism across national cultures and explained them through correlations with, for instance, trust in institutions, which can be seen as a belief that one is not alone in dealing with the future (Stellinger, 2008). Quantitative research has therefore shown a nexus with social variables.

Moving to a different approach, Lupton (2024) studied adults in Australia and summarized existing literature on the topic by stating that respondents' assessments of the future changed

in response to specific temporal contexts amidst the pandemic. Studies such as this indicate how optimism is sensitive to different situations and affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2006). In these views, far from being unrealistic, optimism expresses the social positioning of individuals and reveals the centrality of different kinds of capital (as in Atkinson, 2013). A great deal of attention to optimism could therefore be functional for studying inequality further: optimism is indeed part of the capacity to aspire that Appadurai and his commentators understood as being unequally distributed.

However, the opposite—i.e., that youth somehow resist optimism—may also be claimed when the approach taken to study them is that of youth subcultures (see Hall & Jefferson, 1976). Indeed, today there is great attention to how nihilism may be a dominant trait for some groups of youth, from traditional subcultures like punks to more recent Emo (Mortara & Ironico, 2013), and then Hikikomori (Goodman et al., 2012) and Bai Lan (or "Lie flat," Zhou, 2023), which are very often mentioned as evidence of the spread of the phenomenon of social withdrawal, respectively in Japan and China, based on social separation from those societies' broad goals. The aspect of resistance towards society at large that youth subcultures bring with them, while not eliminating agency, freshness, and authenticity, is indeed related to a basic contraposition to the very spirit of these societies and the meanings of their directions of development. However, pessimism is an identity trait, one that constitutes the sort of resistance at the basis of subcultures, as in a sort of "pessimism of the will," to somehow recall Gramsci again (1975). We conclude this section by stating that bodies of research on youth offer interesting material for discussing optimism.

### *Big and small futures, big and small optimism*

To better capture what cultures of optimism may entail, and keeping in mind the possibility that differentiated regimes of engagement with the future may enter into play, we now suggest delving into the distinction between small and big optimism, on the one hand (Tiger, 1995; Bennett, 2011), and small and big futures on the other (Michael, 2017). By highlighting these distinctions and contrasting them, we are able to offer a typology that may show how optimism can take different forms and have different meanings, hopefully enhancing the "use" of optimism in sociological research on the future. Firstly, big optimism (Tiger, 1995; Bennett,

2011) refers to a positive attitude towards big issues, such as the future of the economy, the environment, or society, while small optimism expresses a positive disposition about one's personal future and biographical events (such as when parents nurture the growth and development of their children, as in Bennett, 2015, p. 168). Big optimism, according to Bennett, looks openly outward at the conditions of the wider world, while small optimism looks inward at the conditions of one's own life. As many studies have shown, particularly in the domain of youth studies, the two dimensions of optimism are not necessarily related. Indeed, being positive about one's personal life does not necessarily mean believing in a bright future for society. This distinction, which sometimes implies a value judgment of the two attitudes, also emerges through a perception of the future as constituted by an opposition between long-term and short-term thinking, which is intertwined with the idea of a personal future compared to the social (Cahill & Cook, 2020; Cook, 2018). Reflecting on the interactions between small and big optimism in contexts such as workplaces (Bennett, 2015, p. 58) or educational settings (Brunila, Vainio & Toiviainen, 2021; Rasmussen, 2015; Macgilchrist, 2019) can produce deeply intriguing insights.

Secondly, to add a layer to our reflection and better explain the complexity of optimism in real contexts, we also draw upon the distinction between small and big futures regarding the performative effects of the imagination of the future (Michael, 2017), to which optimism is related but whose connections have not been articulated thus far. More precisely, big futures imply meaningful, substantial, and qualitative changes that are widespread and far-reaching (e.g., "epochal ruptures"), which we can associate with large-scale space-time horizons. Small futures, on the other hand, involve smaller and limited changes, the impact of which is defined by a limited space-time horizon. In particular, the term "small futures," as used by Michael, is intended to indicate the social and technological practices of daily life and the emergent processes linked to them. In this case, the distinction between big and small futures is measured quantitatively rather than qualitatively. Michael's considerations contribute to the understanding of how futures are constituted in the relationship between large scenarios and everyday realities.

Small and big futures can be situated in relation to small and big optimism. Below, in Table 1, we outline these relationships, showing the intertwining of the definitions that originally emerged in separate bodies of work:

\*Table 1 here\*

In modality A, a positive disposition about one's personal future is usually related to changes in everyday life, which are made possible and perceived as if they could encourage agency. An example is what Bennett (2015) calls "parental optimism". Indeed, the conception of a child, whether planned or desired, is invariably an optimistic act in itself, predicated on the expectation that the creation of a new life will in some way have positive consequences. Regardless of the specific content of desires and expectations that different parental cultures imply, they all involve optimistic expectations.

Modality B, resulting from the crossing of big futures and small optimism, takes us to consider the problem of power. When people have the power to change societies based on individual choices, the same positive disposition can produce big futures, as in the case of the tycoons of Silicon Valley. Their optimistic view of their enterprise does not only produce their personal success, but it goes far beyond: it has the power to shape both materially and culturally societies, for instance contributing to promoting what is called techno-optimism.

In modality C, somehow in an opposite vein, faith in the positive future of society can help realize individual goals. This is typically the case of Enlightenment optimism that greatly influenced agency in modern industrial society. A similar role today is played by positive psychology for the impact it has on self-help practices (Kelsey, 2022). In a different direction, the notion that big ideas can be enacted in everyday life is present in the case of Davina Cooper's (2014) "everyday utopia." Everyday utopias enact conventional activities in unusual ways. Instead of dreaming about a better world, participants seek to create it.

Last but not least, in modality D, faith in the positive future of society can produce big changes, as in the case of the social movements of the 19th century. However, the same kind of power to activate collective action in order to change society is today mostly due to pessimistic views of the future, as in the case of green movements. Considering this nuance, it is important to note that climate change dystopias can empower collective engagement to produce better futures.

Big optimism pertains to broad societal issues like the economy or the environment, reflecting an outward focus on major changes, while small optimism relates to personal circumstances or individual futures. This differentiation further shows how cultural contexts influence the

expression of optimism, with each form serving distinct social functions. Together, they underscore the interplay between personal dispositions and broader cultural narratives, revealing how optimism can both propel individual agency and reflect societal conditions. Embedding optimism and futurity implies not only the different degrees to which optimism comes to life that must be considered, but, more importantly, the intertwining with small and big futures (Michael, 2017). To further illustrate how these differentiated categories are used, we can think of social scientists who have not shied away from predicting major future changes, such as the risk society, postmodernity, liquid modernity, the surveillance society, and the network society. Furthermore, with the depiction of dramatic changes in migration patterns, the increasingly widespread evidence of global climate change, and the spectacular consequences of the global financial crisis, we are presented with a series of futures: the age of migration, the Anthropocene—even the futures of austerity that form the backdrop to our experience and our way of seeing the future.

#### *Forms of collective affect and optimism*

We have briefly addressed the affectivity of futurity while exploring the relationship between hope and optimism. In this section, we further explore the dimension of affectivity, focusing on forms of collective affect as emerging elements in cultural and social contexts, which are particularly relevant for addressing the nature of optimism. Tiger's definition of optimism as a "mood or attitude associated with an expectation about the social or material future" (1995, p. 18) underscores that optimism is not solely a product of rational thought; it is, in fact, deeply intertwined with emotions. Bennett (2011) further stressed this point, suggesting that optimism involves more than just cold cognition—it has a strong emotional component. Thus, from a sociological standpoint, optimism develops a reference towards either a "more-than-rational" or "less-than-rational" attitude (Anderson, 2006).

This awareness has certainly expanded in more recent thinking on the affectivity of time and futurity. Coleman stated the following:

Affect [...] refers to sensations and forces that are felt in the body and that move or orient that body in certain ways. As forces, sensations, and movements, affect is in some ways evasive and uncontainable. [...] The future can be understood as affective—it is a temporality that is felt and around which

present action is oriented, but it is not quite tangible or fully actualized, in the sense of being made actual. (Coleman, 2018, p. 42).

In exploring the concept of affective temporality, Coleman's work offers a nuanced understanding of how we relate emotionally and socially to time. She delineated two key frameworks for understanding affective futurity (i.e., potentiality and intensity) alongside two affective regimes (i.e., anticipation and pre-emption). Coleman's theoretical framework offers a profound commentary on how affect, time, and social structures interact, urging us to reconsider how we conceptualize and engage with time beyond linear constraints. Emphasizing the embodied and emotional dimensions of temporality, her work calls for reconceptualizing the future as an ever-present potential that influences our lived experiences in profound and complex ways. As Coleman further theorized:

...an affective temporality complicates or confuses linear temporality, so that the future is not (only or so much) a distinct and/or far-off temporality, separate [from] the present (and past), but is (also) experienced and felt 'in' and as the present. (Coleman, 2017, p. 3).

Moreover, optimism is an affective dimension that must be understood as emerging from different forms of collective affect (informing our general attitude towards the future) as much as from different cultures of optimism. The importance of collective affect (either an affective atmosphere or a structure of feeling) is quite evident in the examples mentioned in the opening of this article. In addition, viewing optimism through its emotional ties to social and cultural contexts, as exemplified by Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, allows us to point to the idea of collective affect. The two concepts (structure of feeling and affective atmosphere), while developing from different theoretical traditions, have been used, sometimes interchangeably, to analyze temporality (as in Coleman, 2022), as they strongly express the shared nature of affectivity. In the 1970s, Williams coined the term structure of feeling as "a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period" (Williams, 1977, p. 131). Gradually, the author consolidated the idea that beyond the normative and symbolic aspects of everyday culture (stabilized and linked to the past), there are more complex elements that imbue experience with "moods, attitudes, [and] emotions" (Highmore, 2016). This lends a particular tone to experience, producing a more complex temporal structure. Only recently has the idea of the

structure of feeling encountered the contemporary thematization and theorization of affect (Sharma & Tygstrup, 2015). Paying attention to the various layers of emotions and feelings embedded within the historical context of culture is especially effective when it comes to engaging with the future. Cruel optimism is thus a specific encounter with a structure of feeling and structural conditions that can emerge in neoliberal societies (Berlant, 2011; see also Coleman, 2020).

As Coleman (2020) underlined, essential to understanding the structure of feeling is the concept of pre-emergence, i.e., everything that is dynamic and pressing but not fully stated (Williams, 1977, p. 126). Similarly, an affective atmosphere encompasses feelings, ambience, tone, and other ways of naming collective affect that (to refer to the Marxist revolutionary atmosphere) "envelop" and "press upon life" (Anderson, 2006). According to Anderson, atmospheres serve as the shared foundation from which subjective states, along with their associated feelings and emotions, emerge.

In this direction, optimism is one of the different ways in which affective futurity can be conceived of, sensed, and experienced. One way in which the future evokes emotions is through a vision or belief that it will improve. In this sense, the future is conceived of and approached with an optimistic perspective. It operates as a mode or regime of feeling oriented around the future, through which more specific affects, emotions, and feelings (such as alertness and vigilance) are generated (Coleman, 2018). For Coleman, optimism might, together with hope, underscore the importance of understanding temporality as non-linear and characterized by multiple dimensions. In the figure below we offer a visualization of these elements altogether, simplifying the interrelation of the elements of the discussion:

*\*Image 1 here\**

### *Conclusions*

Reframing optimism sociologically goes well beyond a "critique of the pessimistic turn" (Back, 2015) that has rightfully emerged today in sociology. On the one hand, it implies recognizing its analytical value for sociological theory, and particularly in the expanding field of the sociology

of the future. On the other, it offers a valuable starting point to conduct empirical research on optimism in the interplay between cultures and affective atmospheres.

We started off the article by making reference to three episodes that happened at particular times in which optimism emerged as a salient argument in public discourses. They suggest how cultures of optimism and affective atmospheres intertwine in the emergence of optimistic attitudes and feelings. We felt urged to develop a theoretical journey aimed at clarifying the nature of optimism as a dimension that is far more complex than the commonly used definition of a positive expectation about the future, as broadly used, for instance, in global surveys such as the *Ipsos Predictions Survey (2025)*<sup>5</sup>. If such surveys are based on exogenous variables (for instance, trust in institutions) to explain optimism, we instead suggest embracing the understanding of optimism as a part of futurity, seen as a complex field intertwining temporal, social, cultural, and affective dimensions. More empirical analysis is envisioned, especially qualitative research, with approaches that are attuned to capture meanings not yet understood. In this article we do not elaborate "new theories of optimism"; however, building on different and somehow separate bodies of literature, we suggest an integrated and reworked theoretical and analytical frame that may be useful for further empirical research. We particularly urge the need for qualitative research.

This suggested frame is composed of a series of concepts and dimensions through which optimism as a sociological construct discloses an analytical character and heuristic potential, especially in investigating some of the central features of contemporary societies related to the future. Pushing further the concept of cultures of optimism developed by Bennett—and in particular the difference between small and big optimism—and putting it into dialogue with Michael's definitions of small and big futures, we advance the notion that optimism, agency, and temporality are differently related according to different social situations. Cultures of optimism affect politics, work, family, and religion (Bennett, 2015). At the same time, what happens in these contexts impacts the way optimism is felt, so that it becomes key to take into account how optimism enters into individual experience and agency. In this perspective, following Coleman (2018, 2020), we underline the complex affective nature of optimism as a feeling that emerges from affective atmospheres and structures of feeling. We contend that the turbulent times in which we live—with values, attitudes, and aspirations being

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ipsos.com/en/ipsos-predictions-2025>

continuously shaken and reshaped by disruptive and at times dramatic events—underscore the centrality of such an awareness.

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Appendix

Table 1:

	<b>Small futures</b>	<b>Big futures</b>
<b>Small optimism</b>	A. A positive disposition about one’s personal future is usually related to changes in everyday life**, which** are made possible and perceived as if they could encourage agency	Small optimism can produce big futures, for example when practiced by successful people who have the power to transform the future with their choices.
<b>Big optimism</b>	B. Faith in the positive future of society can help in the realization of individual goals.	C. Faith in the positive future of society can produce big changes.

Image 1:

