

What If We Are the Last Generation to Decide? AI, Irreversibility, and the Sociology of Foreclosed Futures

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Abstract

Every generation likes to believe its choices are provisional, correctable by the next. This paper asks whether that comfort still holds. Certain decisions being made right now, about artificial intelligence, ecological thresholds, and biotechnological capability, are not choices in the ordinary sense. They are closures, once an AI system is embedded across a society's institutions, once a climate threshold is crossed, once a genetic or biological line is engineered, there may be no 'the next generation' positioned to revisit the decision at all, only generations who must live inside its consequences.

This paper treats irreversibility itself as a sociological object, not merely a technical or environmental risk. It asks what happens to concepts of consent, representation, and democratic deliberation when the people most affected by a decision, those not yet born and have no seat at the table, no vote, and no vocabulary with which to object. Sociology has long theorized who is included and excluded from power; this paper extends that question forward in time, asking whether the unborn constitute the last true excluded population, and whether any existing social or political mechanism is capable of representing them. (Weiss, 1989; Jonas, 1984).

This paper does not claim catastrophe is certain. It asks something quieter and more urgent, whether we are equipped, as a species organizing itself through institutions built for reversible problems, to knowingly make irreversible ones. The path forward may begin not with better technology, but with the sociological humility to admit we may be deciding for people who cannot yet answer back. back (Jonas, 1984; Weiss, 1989).

KEYWORDS: *Irreversibility, Artificial intelligence, Intergenerational justice, Consent and representation, Sociology of the unborn, Ecological thresholds, Foreclosed futures*

Every generation carries around a quiet, comforting assumption about itself: that whatever it gets wrong, someone downstream will eventually set right. Bad laws get repealed. Bad habits fall out of fashion. Bad technologies get retired, regulated, or simply outgrown, the way societies eventually outgrew leaded petrol or asbestos insulation. We like to picture history as long editing process and ourselves as one draft among many imperfect but revisable. For most of human history, this has even been roughly true. Institutions were built on

self-adjust, laws are amended, technologies are superseded by better ones. Reversibility was never just an optimistic hope; it was a design assumption quietly embedded in how modern societies imagine time itself. This paper is concerned with the decisions for which that assumption has stopped holding. Some choices, once made, are no longer choices in the ordinary sense at all, they are closures. Once an artificial intelligence system becomes deeply enough woven into society's institutions, it stops being tool that anyone can simply switch off: it becomes the substrate that other systems are built on top off. Once climate threshold tips an ecological system into new stable state, that system does not wait patiently for future parliaments to reconsider the matter. Once a germline is edited or a biological lineage engineered, there is no do over waiting on the other side. These are not merely stories about moving too fast. They belong to different category of act altogether, and what makes a closure different from an ordinary mistake is that it does not only constrain what comes next, it can eliminate the very position from which anyone might have objected. There may be no next generation standing by in the way the old story requires. There will only be generations who inherit the outcome and have to build life inside it. (Adam, 1998; Jonas, 1984).

Framed this way, the problem refuses to sit neatly inside either of the categories usually offered to it. It is not simply a technology story, although it wears that costume most often, nor an environmental one, although it borrows that vocabulary too. At its core it is a sociological problem, because it is finally a question about who gets included in a decision and who is left outside it. Sociology has spent well over a century refining its instruments for exactly that question, tracing the lines along which power, voice, and recognition get distributed and withheld: class from class, coloniser from colonised, citizen from the stateless. What this paper wants to do is push that same instrument forward in time rather than sideways across it, and ask a version of a very old question that feels newly uncomfortable: are the unborn the last population that every existing framework of inclusion still fails to reach?

Consent is a useful place to begin, since it is the concept doing the quietest and most load-bearing work in how such decisions currently get justified. Consent, in its familiar liberal form, presumes a subject capable of weighing a proposal and either accepting or refusing it. Every safeguard built around risky technologies, informed consent in medicine, environmental impact review, public comment periods, assumes there is a person or a public somewhere who can, at least in principle, say no. But the people who will live longest with an embedded AI system, a crossed climate threshold, or an altered genetic line are precisely the people who cannot occupy that position, because they do not yet exist to be asked. This is not a loophole that better drafting could close. It is closer to a structural blind spot, the point at which the whole apparatus of consent simply stops functioning, because it was never built to accommodate a subject who has not yet arrived. (Parfit, 1984; Jonas, 1984).

Derek Parfit noticed a version of this problem decades ago, although he came at it from philosophy rather than sociology. His non-identity problem complicates the very idea of harming future people, since the choices made today also determine which future people come into existence at all, alter the policy and you alter who is born, not merely what happens to whoever is born. Parfit's real contribution was to show how conceptually slippery intergenerational harm becomes once you accept that future persons are not a fixed population waiting

offstage for their cue. What his account leaves comparatively unexamined is the political question sitting just behind the philosophical one: granted that harming the unborn is a strange kind of harm, who exactly is doing the harming, through which institutions, and under what claim to legitimacy? That is a question about representation and exclusion, and sociology is better equipped to ask it than moral philosophy on its own.

Ulrich Beck gave the discipline its vocabulary for a world in which danger is no longer simply natural but manufactured, a byproduct of the very systems built to deliver safety and progress. Risk society, in Beck's account, names a condition in which the old question of how goods get distributed is joined, and sometimes displaced, by the newer question of how bads get distributed: pollution, nuclear risk, technological disaster, none of which parcels out along the familiar lines of wealth and class in any simple way. Beck's answer was reflexive modernisation, the idea that modern society, having generated its own dangers through science and industry, develops the capacity to turn around and examine them. It is a genuinely useful idea, and it is easy to see why it became load-bearing for an entire generation of risk theory. But it rests on an assumption so basic that it nearly hides in plain sight: that there will be a "later" from which the reflecting can happen. Reflexive modernisation presumes a future self, a future institution, a future public capable of standing at some remove from the original decision and asking whether it should be undone. That is reasonable when the subject is pollution levels or labour law, messy, revisable, argument-shaped problems. It becomes far shakier when the subject is a threshold that, once crossed, forecloses the very standpoint reflexivity needs. A decision cannot be reflexively revised from a position that the decision has already erased. (Beck, 1992).

Barbara Adam supplies something Beck's account lacks: a sustained argument that futures are not empty space waiting to be filled, but are actively structured, imagined, and foreclosed by present institutions. Adam is not writing with artificial intelligence specifically in mind, yet the architecture she describes fits contemporary AI development almost too well. Systems are built, deployed, and normalised on timelines far shorter than the institutional horizons over which their effects will actually unfold, and the mismatch is not accidental so much as structural; it's what allows closure to pass itself off as progress. (Adam, 1998).

Shoshana Zuboff's account of surveillance capitalism adds a further piece, showing how technological infrastructure, once embedded, does not merely reflect existing arrangements of power but actively produces new ones, and does so at a pace that outstrips whatever regulatory or democratic response might otherwise check it. Apply that logic to AI systems folded into the institutional bloodstream of healthcare, education, and governance, and the surveillance-capitalism story becomes a story about lock-in as such. The relevant question stops being whether a given deployment is good or bad on its own terms, and becomes whether deployment forecloses future institutional configurations that no one currently alive will ever get the chance to choose between. (Zuboff, 2019).

Michel Foucault's notion of the "author-function" offers a different angle on this problem — especially once we stop asking who is affected by a decision and start asking who can actually be said to have made it. In *What Is an Author?* Foucault pushes back against the easy assumption that an author is just individual who originated a text. Authorship, for him, is something produced function generated within discourse, law, institutions, and interpretation, and one that quietly governs how a piece of discourse gets classified, circulated, attributed, and

intelligence. When an AI system produces a recommendation, a diagnosis, a policy draft, an educational decision, an administrative classification the responsibility doesn't sit in one place. It scatters across developers, data providers, institutions, users, the algorithm itself, and the organisational rules the whole system runs on. So the question "who decided?" stops being a matter of finding whoever pressed the final button. It becomes something much harder to pin down.

Foucault's deeper point is that attribution is never neutral but it's a form of social ordering. The authorfunction is what lets us say where discourse starts, who it belongs to, who answers for it. But in AI-mediated environments, the "author" we'd normally point to can get displaced by a long chain of computational and institutional processes that no single actor really controls. The trouble isn't just that AI can generate text without being a human author. It's that institutions can now act through these systems in ways where authorship, agency, and accountability stop being singular things and become distributed ones. (Foucault, 1977).

Hans Jonas anticipated the ethical shape of this problem before most of these later theorists were writing, arguing that the sheer scale of modern technological power demands a correspondingly enlarged sense of responsibility, one that extends to future beings who cannot reciprocate or object. Jonas gives the argument its ethical spine, an obligation owed to those who cannot yet answer back, but his sense of responsibility remains largely individual and philosophical rather than institutional. Edith Brown Weiss, writing from international law, moves the conversation onto firmer institutional ground, framing intergenerational equity as a kind of trust relationship in which the present generation holds the planet in trust for those who follow. Her model is valuable precisely because it is legal rather than merely aspirational; it asks what obligations look like once written into treaties rather than left as sentiment. But even a trust model assumes a beneficiary who can, at some future point, call the trustees to account. The unborn cannot yet do even that. (Jonas, 1984; Weiss, 1989). None of this is an argument that catastrophe is certain, or that artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and ecological transformation ought to be halted outright. The claim is narrower, and in its own way more unsettling: that our institutions were built for a world of correctable mistakes, and we are currently using them to make decisions that will not be correctable at all. Consent frameworks presume a subject who is not there. Risk frameworks presume a hazard that can eventually be priced and contained. Even the most future-oriented legal instruments presume a beneficiary capable of eventually calling in the debt. (Jonas, 1984; Weiss, 1989). What would it look like to build institutions that took the absence of that subject seriously, rather than treating it as a gap to be talked around? The question has no tidy answer, and this paper does not pretend to offer one. What it offers instead is a reframing. The unborn are not a sentimental flourish at the margins of policy debate; they are a genuine population, structurally excluded from the decisions that will set the conditions of their own existence, in a way sociology already has the vocabulary to name, if it is willing to turn that vocabulary forward rather than only sideways and backward. (Adam, 1998; Beck, 1992). The first step is not a new technology of representation. It is the harder, more basic sociological humility of admitting that we may already be deciding for people who cannot yet answer back.

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