Reimagining the Methodological Horizon: What Can Social Science Fiction Offer Development Studies?

By Laura Camfield and Andy Sumner

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Abstract: This survey paper examines the potential of social science fiction (SSF), an approach combining social science analysis with narrative and imaginative techniques of science fiction to explore the human consequences of global income inequalities. Although the social sciences' influence on science fiction is well documented, the reverse - the methodological potential of science fiction - is underexplored, due partly to a lack of rigor and systematisation. We pursue three objectives: first, to trace SSF's intellectual genealogy and defining characteristics; second, to outline how SSF methodological tools could be applied in Development Studies; third, to illustrate SSF use across the social sciences. We argue that SSF could enable scholars to develop new conceptual and theoretical ideas about past, present, and possible future social orders. And when applied systematically, SSF offers rigorous tools for conceptual innovation in analysing emergent, complex, or under-theorized phenomena such as the dynamics of global inequalities in Development Studies.

Keywords: social science fiction; development studies; inequality; methodology.

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1. Introduction

This survey paper examines 'social science fiction' (SSF). We use SSF for science fiction that foregrounds humans and the organisation of their societies, and we consider what it could offer Development Studies as a set of methodological tools. [1] In looking at the tools of the social sciences, we understand it as encompassing disciplines and fields such as sociology, anthropology, political economy, education, future and policy studies, and, the focus of this paper, development studies. SSF is used to a greater or lesser extent, and in different ways, as we illustrate. In sociology, the future is a core object. Nowotny (1992) shows that it is not a neutral 'stretch of time' but a socially constructed horizon of expectations that orders daily practices, institutional routines, and policy-making. [2] It's also the object of fields such as Future Studies, Critical Design, or Science and Technology Studies that have developed sophisticated methods for studying it. Development studies has not followed suit, which opens space for SSF to contribute.

The term SSF itself is credited to Isaac Asimov (1953). However, it was used to describe not social science but a mode of science fiction itself. Specifically, for Asimov, social science fiction was science fiction that foregrounded the human condition and the social organisation of society and was less concerned with the technological spectacle characteristic of what he described as science fiction's earlier "space opera" phase. Kingsley Amis (1960) made a similar point in his collected lectures on science fiction, arguing that a satirical and dystopian perspective was more important to science fiction than a focus on technology.

The influence of social science on science fiction has been extensively analysed (see for example, Link and Canavan, 2015; Latham, 2014; Merrick 2012; Sargent 2010; Wagar 1991). However, the reverse direction meaning how science fiction might function as a tool for social scientific research remains little explored, though it does have its advocates, such as Appadurai (2013), Lewis and Miller (2003) and more recently Frase (2016). This caution on the side of social scientists likely reflects broader social science concerns about methodological rigour. Specifically, the onto-epistemological basis of social science in empiricism of some kind. This is often taken to be 'objective' empiricism that can be researched by quantitative research, or 'subjective' and interpretative empiricism and qualitative research. For this reason, SSF has never – to the authors' knowledge - been systematised or codified for use in the social sciences. Finally, concerns of eurocentrism may exist too around the extent to which global understandings of SSF draw equally from Global South and North. This is despite the expansion of literary traditions such as Afrofuturism and indigenous futurism (see prominent milestones such as Eshun 2003; Dillon, 2012; Nelson 2002).[3] Taylor et

[1] In this survey we define 'science fiction' in keeping with Suvin (1979), Jameson (2005) and Csicsery-Ronay (2008) to include a range of narrative that explores imaginative alternative worlds in the past, present or future, and could include literature described as fantasy. The core feature is speculation and some engagement in social critique. While Suvin's definition emphasises excludes fantasy, both Jameson and Csicsery-Ronay allow for conceptual overlaps with fantasy, particularly where speculative narratives challenge dominant realities or imagine radical alternatives.

[2] Paprocki (2021) shows how this works in practice where dystopic imaginings of Bangladesh's Southwestern region create the space for it to be used as an experimental laboratory that converts ecological crisis into opportunities for export driven economic growth.

[3] Anderson (2016, 230) argues that "Afrofuturism is the current name for a body of systematic Black speculative thought originating in the 1990s as a response to postmodernity that has blossomed into a global movement." Colon-Cabrera (2018) notes 'whereas classical science fiction often imagines new civilizations in which to play out narratives of injustice, the authors of color at the forefront of Afrofuturism relate to those themes straightforwardly and explore them using real-world history and imagery'.

al., (2023) recent *CoFuturism* handbook widens the lens with Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, Middle-Eastern, African and African-American futures that rarely reach Western syllabi.

Considering the gap on what 'travels back' to the social sciences, the objective of this paper is as follows. First, we outline the intellectual foundations of SSF, situating it historically and outlining its defining characteristics. Second, we explore how SSF might be operationalised within Development Studies, and pecifically, how SSF might provide a set of methodological tools for research in Development Studies. Third, we provide examples of how SSF-like methodological tools have been used in research in the social sciences. More broadly, our paper asks how methodological tools grounded in SSF might expand the conceptual, theoretical and onto-epistemological horizons of Development Studies.

We propose that SSF enables researchers to imagine very different social orders and not only in the future, in the past and present too. One example of this would be Graeber and Wengrow's (2021) use of historical examples of non-hierarchical societies, backed by archaeological evidence from, e.g. the Trypillia mega-sites in Ukraine, to challenge the convention that humans must always have rules and rulers. In doing this they create 'a kaleidoscope of social possibilities undreamed of in the philosophies of Hobbes and Rousseau' (Wengrow, 2022). The value of this is that it shows the contingency of outcomes - how easily things could have been otherwise - and therefore encourages researchers to look more closely at how things happen rather than taking them for granted. We argue that SSF has the potential to function as part of a rigorous methodological toolkit for engaging with emergent, uncertain, or under-theorised phenomena particularly around global inequalities.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 introduces the concept of SSF, tracing its genealogy and outlining its defining characteristics. Section 3 considers the specific methodological contributions SSF could make to Development Studies. Section 4 presents selected examples of SSF in the social sciences to date. Section 5 concludes.

2. Social Science Fiction: History, Defining Characteristics and Arguments For and Against Its Use in Social Science Research

Writers have long made use of imagined worlds. From the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh to Plato's Republic, literary forms have long served as vehicles for imagining alternative societies and social orders as part of critically examining the present and its inequalities. This tradition continued through the Renaissance and early modern periods notably in works such as More's *Utopia* (1516) and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), both of which offered vivid portrayals of alternative social orders and veiled critiques of their own. In the late 19th century, and during the emergence of industrial capitalism and what was the formalisation of many social science disciplines, authors such as H.G. Wells in *The Time Machine* (1895) began to explicitly incorporate what could be called sociological concerns directly related to inequality. This narrative was the long-term effects of class stratification through the division of humanity into Eloi and Morlocks.[4] This work

[4] Some social sciences have pursued writing using literary forms - this was one outcome of the anthropological crisis of representations in the 1990s with people such as Lindisfarne (2000) arguing that fiction enabled the telling of truths that would not fit in an academic monograph.

was pre-figured by Mary Shelley's (1818) Frankenstein. The book is often cited as one of the earliest examples of science fiction which asked how new knowledge might change human beings' relationship with nature.

These precursors were part of the genealogy for what could now be called 'social science fiction' (SSF). As noted, the term SSF itself was not used until the 1940s/1950s and then it described not social science but a mode of science fiction. Asimov (1953) made a distinction between "social", "adventure" and "gadget" science fiction. He illustrated these three types of science fiction using the example of authors responding to the invention of the automobile. Each reflects a different orientation toward invention. One writer focuses on the technical challenges of building the car and its eventual triumph over the horse or what Asimov called gadget fiction. Another turns the car into a tool in an action-packed rescue plot involving a kidnapped daughter and a heroic assistant. This is adventure fiction. The third writer imagines a society shaped by cars: urban sprawl, oil dependency, and fatal accidents. The narrative questions social consequences and policy responses and what Asimov identified as social science fiction. The distinction made by Asimov marked a critical turn which was later echoed in P. Schuyler Miller's (1957) distinction of "hard" science fiction (as opposed to "soft" science fiction).[5] In short, there is a binary between 'hard' science fiction as concerned with scientific accuracy, grounded in physical sciences and technologically plausible and soft science fiction as more concerned with the social sciences in its exploration of societal change, human behaviour and political or philosophical debates. It reflects on these through speculative narrative with less concern for physical scientific plausibility/accuracy. This hard/soft binary has remained influential in science fiction even if individual works may include both.

SSF pulls science fiction toward classic social-science puzzles such as power, hierarchy, rule-making and allows those forces to play out in invented settings. The idea of SSF opened the science fiction genre to questions central to the social sciences: the dynamics of inequality, of social order and stratification, the structure of collective life and societies and the evolution of political institutions. Although there is limited use of fiction as a formal method by social scientists, there are several examples (see section 4) and its analytical utility has been acknowledged. Mills (1959) for example called for a "sociological imagination," urging scholars to connect individual stories or hardship with structural causes.[6] Furtado (2009 [1998], p. 9), an economist who was central to the development of the concept of the dual economy in Structuralist economics put it thus: 'the motivations of the investigator are numerous. The most fundamental, however, is confidence in one's own imagination and knowledge of how to use it'. Furtado was arguing that imagination is not random or a 'flight of fancy', rather it can be used methodically in intellectual work. For Furtado this meant a capacity to imagine structural possibilities beyond the status quo of global capitalism and the subordinate position of parts of the global south, something that became increasingly difficult to do at the peak of financialised capitalism. This imagination is a vital component of theorising under conditions of historical specificity and uncertainty, such as those found in Latin America. These conditions supported the development of Latino/Latinx or Chicanafuturism which according to Ramírez (2008) challenges the idea that the future is devoid of gender and racial diversity.

Furtado believed that economists should not merely interpret the world but help societies imagine and construct better futures. His call for researchers to have 'confidence in one's own imagination' carries an anti-colonial undertone. Thus, it seeks to affirm the legitimacy of intellectual production from the Global South and invites Southern scholars to theorise creatively in dialogue with economic realities. In a similar vein a volume edited by Davies (2018) sought to bring together speculative fiction with economic analysis, arguing that the imagining of alternative economic realities is essential to challenge economics' orthodoxy.

[5] The term was first coined in a book review by Miller in Astounding Science Fiction (Westfahl, 1993).
[6] See also Bourdieu's (1999) exercise in life history.

International relations (IR) scholarship often separates work that maintains the system from work that seeks to transform it (Cox, 1981). That distinction leaves room for IR to imagine alternatives to existing state relations. These examples from diverse fields show the value of imagination in the social sciences.

How do these examples connect with social science fiction? Suvin (1979) argued that science fiction works by presenting something new ('a novum' - i.e. a new technology, or new social system that does not exist in the real world) in a way that is different enough to seem strange ('estrangement'), yet logical or plausible enough ('cognitive') to be taken seriously rather than dismissed as fantasy. In other words, a novum is introduced with enough internal logic or realism that it seems credible within the story creating "cognitive estrangement". Introducing something new and strange in a world that feels realistic serves a purpose. Specifically, by making the familiar look odd, a *novum* jolts readers into re-examining norms they take for granted. This could include forms of inequality. The novum de-familiarises entrenched norms, values, and systems (in the sense they appear 'strange', prompting the readers to question them).

The use of social science theory in science fiction became increasingly evident from the 1960s onwards. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) interrogates gender binaries through the imagined physiology and social customs of ambisexual beings. The novel builds worlds rooted in anthropological and anarchist traditions that function as 'ambiguous utopias' (Theall, 1975). And others added intersectional critiques of race, gender, and sexuality to this genre, broadening the thematic and analytical scope. For example, Butler's *Kindred* (1979) uses time travel to examine race, gender, and power. Delany's *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984) explores non-normative racial, sexual, and familial formations (Foster, 2015). Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) presents a feminist utopia that critiques traditional gender roles and patriarchal structures. And Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016) is an imagined history of the 21st century – now 5,000 years in the past – when women became the dominant gender after developing the power to emit electricity from their hands. These are social experiments in fictional form, illustrating how imagined worlds could be used to surface, complicate, or reconfigure social scientific categories. From the same period onwards, some sociologists and anthropologists started using fiction into the classroom and in research (e.g. Lindisfarne, 2000). Anthologies such as *Sociology Through Science Fiction* (Miller and Smith, 1974) and *Anthropology Through Science Fiction* (Mason, 1974) used speculative tales to illustrate core disciplinary concepts. Lackey (1994) reported on a pedagogical exercise in which students wrote sociologically informed short stories, finding that this method deepened their grasp of theoretical concepts.

Recent decades have seen further elaboration of such ideas. For example, Levitas (2013) proposed "utopia as method," positioning utopian speculation as a reflexive and dialogic practice through which to interrogate the present. Appadurai (2000) too called for an expansion of the "research imagination" in an age of global uncertainty, arguing that social scientists must be capable of thinking speculatively as the world they study is unpredictable. Feminist theorists in Science and Technology Studies (STS), such as Haraway (2016) advanced "speculative fabulation" or a form of 'world-making' that challenges binary logics and static epistemologies (see also Stengers, 2018; Vint, 2009). There is a set of methods (see section 3), such as counterfactual histories, scenario planning, and simulation. These make use of imaginative scenarios to interrogate real-world structures and dynamics, and these are already drawn on within Development Studies. For example, in the epilogue to *Bad Samaritans*, Ha-Joon Chang (2008) presents a fictionalised portrait of Brazil in 2037 to show the social consequences of a commitment to neo-liberal policies.

What distinguishes SSF within this is twofold. First, its grounding in narrative prose and second, its reliance on science fiction themes or devices such as utopias and dystopias (albeit that this is a wider literary tool,

not exclusive to science fiction) or future technologies as tools for social inquiry.[7] Frase (2016), which we discuss in-depth on the following page, blends fictional storytelling with empirical and theoretical insights. The book constructs plausible futures that are analytically rigorous and politically charged, presenting contrasting social orders. Frase, a sociologist, gave his own definition of SSF as "an attempt to use the tools of social science in combination with those of speculative fiction to explore the space of possibilities in which our future conflicts will play out" (2016: 24). Gerlach and Hamilton's (2003) 'History of Social Science Fiction' similarly maps a genealogy of SSF that connects sociological analysis with narrative imagination, in keeping with Le Guin's 'world-building' and Frase's 'futures of capitalism'. SSF thus occupies a specific space at an intersection of speculative fiction and social theorising. SSF aims not to extrapolate technological futures per se, but to construct alternative social orders that illuminate the dynamics of inequality, power, governance, and societal transformation (Pyyhtinen, 2019; Watson, 2022).

From this, we can identify core characteristics of SSF. Mengozzi and Wacquez (2023) refer to the "fictionalisation of theory" and the "theorisation of fiction" or a dual process through which fiction becomes a mode of critical theorising and social science becomes a generative resource for speculative narrative. The characteristics of SSF can be said to include the following: First, narrative as method. SSF employs storytelling as a heuristic device for generating hypotheses and foregrounding social problems. The narrative structure enables complex theorisation to unfold through character, plot, and setting, transforming abstract theory into experiential insight of the characters (Kleining and Witt, 2000). Anthropologists use ethnographic vignettes for similar ends. Oppel (2025), for example, draws on Tsitsi Dangarembga's debut novel to interrogate meritocracy through the life course of a Shona girl from the 1960s to the early 2000s. The narrative method tends to entail the 'world-building' of internally coherent fictional societies that serve as 'testbeds' for exploring social order. World-building therefore becomes a way to probe the implications of particular institutional arrangements, value systems, or structural inequalities. For example, in *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* (2016), Peter Frase outlines four possible post-capitalist worlds using a 2 × 2 matrix structured by two key dimensions: ecological constraint (abundance vs. scarcity) and technological development (high vs. low automation). The resulting scenarios (Communism, Rentism, Socialism, and Exterminism) reflect different combinations of these conditions and the associated social and political orders. Frase draws on both Marxist theory and science fiction to explore how class, inequality, and power might evolve under each future. His work serves as a speculative thought experiment about the trajectory of capitalism and its possible successors in the context of climate and automation. While thought experiments are here used to critique capitalism, they have a long history within management thinking as a form of strategic planning, and through this have informed development management. For example, Action Against Hunger's (2017) 'Future of Aid: INGOs in 2030' report uses foresight analysis to critically examine the future role of INGOs in a more inclusive humanitarian ecosystem.

Second, SSF entails analytical ideas or lenses drawn from science fiction such as utopian and dystopian framing of social orders. In the context of inequality, utopian narratives propose alternative social configurations with aspirations of fairer societies and dystopian narratives offer cautionary tales of societies that are deeply unfair (see for discussion, Jameson, 2005; Sargent, 2010). Third, SSF has a number of heuristic devices. These include 'world building' as a method or thought experiments that seek to stretch the conceptual boundaries of social science and allow researchers to explore how existing social forces might evolve under different conditions (see for example, Suvin, 1979; Levitas, 2013).

SSF should be seen as a set of methodological tools though, to date, not standardised in its contents. SSF tends to function as a form of representation or as part of a suite of methodological tools in the social

[7] It is worth noting that Dystopian and utopian framings are relative, they depend on the perspective embraced by the narrator and the place occupied by the main characters in the imagined social order.

sciences. However, this does not fully capture its potential, especially in relation to hypothesis or question generation. For example, by imagining social systems under altered conditions, novel questions and propositions for inquiry may become evident. Or it could surface implicit norms and social structures or institutions, for example, the widespread alienation from physical decay in Huxley's *Brave new world*. In doing so, this leads researchers in social science to critically re-examine accepted norms, structures or institutions (in keeping with Suvin's estrangement). Estrangement also features in ethnography. Early in fieldwork, researchers have not yet normalised local norms and institutions, so they are better placed to see and to question them.

Why would social scientists use SSF? As we've already indicated, SSF is good at revealing latent norms, structures and institutions, and most importantly, can be created using participatory methods. Conventional methods in social science may not capture what SSF could if the phenomenon is not directly observable or can only be made so through directive questioning that might create bias. For example, how would you capture the multidimensional effects of 'algorithmic inequality' in a household survey instrument? Further, SSF can embody the experience of fictional characters who may experience racial injustice, ecological collapse, or gendered labour regimes in more visceral and empathetic terms than abstract models allow (Leavy, 2020). The use of vignettes in both qualitative and quantitative research is evident and can mean for example, anchor vignettes to improve cross-person comparability in survey responses (King et al., 2004), and composite vignettes to explore sensitive topics without requiring personal disclosure (Barter and Renold, 2000). These suggests that researchers have long recognised that story-based techniques can elicit richer and more candid data than participants might otherwise offer in conventional questionnaires or focus group discussions (Finch, 1987; Jenkins et al., 2010). This point matters for global inequality research as it is a field which is often abstract and based on big-N datasets. SSF can also be used to test the boundaries of dominant paradigms without requiring data to be generated, thereby making room for new conceptual frameworks (Mengozzi and Wacquez, 2023).

What are the limitations of SSF? One central concern relates to rigour in the sense of validity or truthfulness. Kleining and Witt (2000) argue methodological tools must be accompanied by appropriate data verification procedures and procedures that respect the nature of the method while maintaining analytical integrity. Unlike empirical data generated through interviews, ethnography, or surveys, speculative scenarios such as world building cannot be directly tested against observable reality and may be subjective in nature. However, the data is not the fictional stimulus, but the way people respond to it and that can be tested, for example, across different contexts, or by varying key aspects of the story. See, for example, Kerr at al's (2025) use of different narratives or 'frames' in a survey experiment to shape survey responses to questions about wealth inequality.[8] The way in which these SSF stories might shape responses is less well understood than, e.g. order effects in survey questionnaires, as this technique is relatively new. This leaves a question over how seriously to take the findings generated by SSF. A second rigour related concern is one of confirmation bias. Given the creative autonomy there is a risk that SSF simply reproduce participants' or researchers' existing worldview or unconscious biases. This is not unique to SSF though as many methods and all forms of analysis face similar risks. The response to this lies in transparency in how SSF was used and in an iterative process of validation with research participants. This might include getting people with known biases, but very different ones, to craft stories and then comparing them.

A third concern is who gets to tell the stories and who is written in and out. Speculative worlds, like the real world are shaped by cultural assumptions and normative frameworks where some stories are foregrounded and others silenced. One example of this is the eurocentrism inherent in older science fiction which newer forms have tried to challenge. This highlights the importance of using SSF reflexively

[8] The frames were 'Unfair Influence', 'Anti-Meritocracy' and 'Hoarding'.

and with an awareness of whose stories are being told and how. This is especially important in Development Studies whose researchers try to remain alert to the knowledge hierarchies inherent in the social sciences. One approach is participatory design: to invite marginalised writers to co-author the worlds they know well. This is challenging to do well, but not without precedent (e.g. Armijos-Burneo et al, 2024).

Several practical steps can limit bias. SSF can be grounded in empirical trends—for example, demographic, environmental or technological data (Frase, 2016). Plausibility checks can assess theoretical consistency, internal logic and resonance with observed processes (Macgilchrist et al., 2020). Studies can then be repeated in other settings and with other groups. Finally, participatory design can generate and validate scenarios with communities affected by the themes (Leavy, 2020). But perhaps a better response is to step aside from positivist notions of rigour, and assess SSF using the standards of qualitative research and the concept of 'trustworthiness' developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose four criteria for trustworthiness. Credibility concerns whether findings reflect participants' experiences and rest on evidence. Transferability refers to providing contextual detail that allows readers to judge relevance elsewhere. Dependability requires a transparent research process that others could reasonably replicate. Confirmability asks that findings be grounded in participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's. Another way to look at it is through Tilly's (1999) analysis of 'standard stories'; he characterised these as commonsense tales where causality resides in the conscious actions of a small number of protagonists and argues that they are a pervasive form that sociologists need to challenge. This can be done through advocating for superior, contextualised or generated stories, with the latter exposing the 'non-story causal processes at work in social life' (p. 270) in a similar way to SSF.

3. The Potential Use of Social Science Fiction in Development Studies

What would the methodological tools of SSF be used for in Development Studies? As a starting point, we distinguish three groups: narrative methods, analytical techniques, and heuristic devices. Table 1 summarises these groupings and their potential functions.

3a. Narrative Method

Conventional research methods in Development Studies tend to rely on observational or retrospective data (e.g. surveys, interviews, ethnography). SSF can be used by researchers to construct fictional scenarios and both the process and the product of storytelling can be used to generate and then test ideas. In this sense, narrative can be a form of structured imagination through which to model complex social dynamics. For example, in SSF, the fictional vignette means constructing a short story or scenario that encapsulates particular trends, tensions, or theoretical propositions of the social world. Through participating in the writing of such scenarios, the researcher is compelled to consider how institutions, norms, and actors might evolve under altered conditions. The resulting narratives can then be analysed to surface implicit assumptions or serve as prompts for further discussion (Clough, 2002; Aicardi et al., 2025).
A second approach draws from the field of participatory scenario building, particularly as developed in speculative education research. In such workshops, participants are invited to collaboratively construct narratives about possible futures. For example, Macgilchrist et al. (2020) describe the use of "empathy-

based storytelling" in workshops where teachers co-authored short fictional pieces envisioning the future of digital education. These narratives, often utopian or dystopian, became forms of qualitative data, reflecting participants' hopes, fears, and normative commitments regarding educational change. Participants report storytelling enabled them to consider more radical alternatives (see discussion of Facer, 2011; Gidley et al., 2009).

One more experimental model involves direct collaboration between social scientists and professional fiction writers or with indigenous writers and communities. At Stanford's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioural Sciences, the 'Imagining Adaptive Societies' project paired social scientists with speculative fiction authors. The teams co-developed narratives on climate adaptation. In a similar vein, Mishra et al. (2024) integrated an original short story (written by author Phoebe Wagner) into an academic article on higher education and climate futures about a university as it grapples with ecological upheaval. The fiction is followed by analytical commentary connecting the narrative to organisational theory and higher education policy. Yet another form, or this one taken to a kind of limit, is when the social scientist is also the SF author and swaps caps in a reflexive manner (see Aicardi, 2023).

Narrative methods can show what is, for example, Penfold-Mounce et al.'s (2011) analysis of the US TV series 'The Wire' treats it as sociological storytelling. Parker (2014) characterises it as an example of the 'social science *of* fiction' (our emphasis) because it illuminates obscure aspects of urban poverty when the state withdraws and capital disinvests. They can also be used as thought experimentation to model counterfactuals through narrative. In Development Studies researchers could take the real-world data on global income inequality and reimagine it under the conditions of a universal basic income. The resulting data estimates and stories of lives transformed could become a mode of speculative modelling, narratively scaling up the results of small pilot studies. SSF offers a textured, human-centred dimension to research that is often lacking in conventional academic outputs, as noted by scholars who advocate for narrative and arts-based methods (Clough, 2002; Leavy, 2020; Mishra, 2025). It can therefore extend the methodological toolkit of Development Studies by enabling imaginative engagement with social theory.

3b. Analytical techniques

SSF offers a range of analytical techniques derived from science fiction literature for use in Development Studies. These concepts serve as lenses through which to reframe existing social problems or generate new theoretical insight. SSF, in this sense is a conceptual 'archive' or a repository of frameworks, metaphors, and worldviews that can be drawn on for social analysis. Estrangement, utopian/dystopian visions, and world building are examples of this. These are not necessarily new to social science, as discussed earlier in the context of ethnography, but could be used more widely. For example, in research contexts, estrangement allows for the reframing of existing empirical and theoretical concerns. Feminist scholars have used alternate histories or imagined futures by imagining both patriarchal (Atwood's 1985 The Handmaid's tale) and matriarchal worlds to articulate conceptual tools for normative critique (e.g. Bartkowski, 1989; Moylan, 2000; Baccolini and Moylan, 2003, Alderman, 2016). Science fiction has already supplied enduring analytical metaphors such as Orwell's "Big Brother," which is central in surveillance studies, or the analogy of Huxley's Soma with expanded use of opioids and anti-depressants in global health. These narratives bring the language, imagery, and registers of dystopia to theorise on control and subjugation and resistance.

SSF can also offer analytical metaphors to Development Studies. For example, the 'alien', and 'the cyborg' are motifs from science fiction. In Haraway's (1985) 'A Cyborg Manifesto', science fiction imagery is used to theorise hybridity, the breakdown of binaries, and the politics of technology. The "alien encounter" in

science fiction can be read as a metaphor for the disorientation and estrangement experienced when confronting radically different social worlds. This aligns with Fanon's (1952 [2008]) analysis of colonial encounters, in which the colonised subject is constituted through the gaze of the coloniser and rendered as Other. Just as the alien functions as an object of fear or fascination, so too does the colonised figure in Fanon's work. Eshun (2003) and Bould (2007) extend these insights, showing how science fiction, especially Afrofuturism, explores identity, alienation, and decolonial possibility through speculative engagement with the Other. Mishra et al. (2024) too argues that fiction reintroduces the "human element", meaning the lived experience, moral dilemmas, affective resonance is often absent from technical analysis. Engaging imaginatively with fictional characters or societies encourages researchers to view the world from unfamiliar vantage points.

3c. Heuristic Devices

SSF can also offer development studies a set of heuristic devices. Researchers can use these devices to test hypotheses and to stress-test theories by pushing them to a logical end point (for example, a society of self-interest-maximising *homo economicus*). The same devices help examine future-oriented questions that resist conventional empirical framing and widen the range of considered policies (the 'Overton window').

There is also the construction of thought experiments. Research could explore how a universal basic income shapes family life, education, and employment across multiple generations. The focus would be secondary effects, feedback loops, and emergent dynamics that may not appear in the first generation. In this way, thought experiments can generate new lines of empirical or theoretical inquiry. A character's diminished reliance on wage labour in a basic income world might prompt research into the meaning or value of work or even, what value is determined to be. SSF draws analytic force from radically speculative 'edge-worlds'. As scenarios move further from empirical plausibility, they can expose the social dynamics at stake with greater clarity. This approach parallels techniques already used in political science (e.g. counterfactual history) and economics (e.g. parameter sensitivity analysis), but SSF allows researchers to integrate multiple variables simultaneously, effectively enabling multivariate thought experiments. The extensive work with counterfactuals in philosophy, history and economics has reached development evaluation. For example, Shaffer's (2012) mixed-method impact assessment of the Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction (HEPR) programme in Vietnam, which generated near identical results to propensity score matching, and Copestake's (2025) more recent work with the Qualitative Impact Protocol (QuIP).

SSF can also contribute 'scenario visualisation', particularly through its application in foresight and futures studies. Narrative world-building has been used in corporate and policy settings including the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s Shared Socioeconomic Pathways (SSPs). This is in order to explore how different constellations of trends might play out over time (O'Neill et al., 2017). Researchers use fictional scenarios to explore interacting variables and parallel futures, supporting analysis, critique, and strategic thinking. Freed from data gaps, a fictional world works like a living analogy: it lets researchers trace causal paths and institutional ripple effects that real cases may hide. SSF can also contribute directly to empirical research design in development studies. Fictional narratives can be used in workshops to prompt reactions, stimulate dialogue, and elicit both community and policymaker perspectives on contested futures (see Macgilchrist et al., 2020). Fictional vignettes could be inserted into surveys or interviews to test stakeholder responses to hypothetical concepts or policies, thereby generating attitudinal data.

In these examples, SSF enhances not only the methodological but also the conceptual range of development studies. SSF can function as a form of ideal-type construction. This offers simplified or exaggerated fictional societies that isolate conceptual ideas or intersections. It also aids in the articulation of emergent concepts. Terms such as "climate apartheid" or "algorithmic governance" gain traction when visualised in narrative form (for example, in John Lanchester's *The Wall*). In this respect, SSF aligns with Lewis' call for "development humanities" (Lewis, 2025). Moreover, SSF can potentially enable more mid-range theorisation through world-building approaches as these generate detailed scenarios that embody the outcomes of theorisation in a way that makes them amenable to testing (in the same way as realist evaluators create Context-Mechanism-Outcome configurations to think imaginatively about causality (Pawson and Tilley, 1997).

Table 1: SSF elements of Relevance to Development Studies

SSF methodological tool	**Potential function in Development Studies**
Narrative method	
Fictional vignettes and scenarios	Hypothesis generation through imagined case studies; scenario elicitation.
Participatory scenario workshops	Collective storytelling to challenge norms, structures, normative values.
Fiction-research collaborations	Juxtaposition of fiction and analysis to enrich conceptual reflection/developments.
Analytical techniques	
Cognitive estrangement	Defamiliarising the present to surface norms and assumptions.
Utopia/dystopia generation	Critiques of social order by imagining alternative orders, especially ones that might flow from current actions.
'World-building'	Constructing interconnected systems to explore interdependencies.
Science Fiction metaphors (e.g., 'alien')	Theoretical development on social differentiation and identity.
Narrative reflexivity	Ethical reflexivity; exploring researcher positionality.
Heuristic devices	
Thought experiments	Exploring policy consequences and dynamics.
'Extreme case' reasoning	Testing concepts or theories in exaggerated conditions.
Visualization through scenario planning	Comparing future social change pathways via plausible fictional worlds

Source: Authors.

4. Social Science Fiction: Examples of Existing Uses in the Social Sciences

SSF has to some limited extent already been used in social science research, notably in sociology (notably, STS), anthropology, education, political economy, futures studies, and policy analysis. Across these areas,

SSF has been used as a narrative device, a mode of conceptual experimentation, and a form of participatory inquiry. This section surveys the use of SSF methods in social science and Table 2 summarises these.

In sociology, SSF has been used both as an object of analysis and a generative method. Hinchliffe (2021), for example, draws on dystopian and utopian fiction in the sociology of surveillance to examine how imagined societies, particularly those beyond the West, reveal localised understandings of control, resistance, and subjectivity. Fiction as a method provides language and imagery to articulate the phenomenology of being surveilled, and a heuristic device for exploring sociological concerns such as collective resistance.

Anthropologists have long experimented with ethnographic fiction or "ethno-fiction" using narrative to convey cultural complexity that may elude formal ethnography. More recently, 'speculative ethnography' has emerged as a method for examining future or imaginary cultures to destabilise disciplinary assumptions and explore alternative social imaginaries (Anderson et al., 2018). Examples include fictional anthropological reports on alien species or future human societies, as well as teaching practices that use extraterrestrial encounters as mirrors for interrogating epistemic diversity (Harris and Robb, 2012). These methods advance both theory-building and pedagogical innovation.

In political economy, Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) is often read as a speculative policy document. The novel examines governance responses to climate crisis and inequality. The novel itself has been mined for ideas such as carbon quantitative easing (Krogstrup and Oman, 2019) and geoengineering governance (Hulme, 2022; Low and Boettcher, 2020). Further, it has inspired discussions around radical institutional reform, post-growth economics, and global coordination mechanisms (Beckert, 2016; Milkoreit, 2017). Robinson's book has thus become viewed not only as fiction, but as a basis for interdisciplinary imagination about policy.

In education, SSF has gained attention under 'critical futures literacy' and 'speculative pedagogy'. Facer (2011) proposed narrative-based foresight to help educators and students explore preferable futures. Selwyn et al. (2020) developed fictional scenarios depicting AI-dominated classrooms to facilitate stakeholder reflection on emerging education governance trends. In this context, fiction served as both data and catalyst. It elicits ethical tensions and surfaces latent pedagogical values. As noted earlier, Mishra et al. (2024) extended this approach by embedding a fictional vignette, within their peer-reviewed article. The story was used as a mode of theorisation by evoking emotional and normative dimensions that academic analysis then unpacked. Additionally, as noted, SSF is increasingly used in participatory education as a critical literacy tool.

In foresight and futures studies, SSF is frequently operationalised in scenario development. Interdisciplinary teams have used world-building to produce scenarios, with social scientists ensuring conceptual coherence and fiction writers crafting engaging narratives. Policy-oriented uses of SSF have also proliferated. The OECD's Education 2030 initiative has invited fictional "letters from the future" authored by students and teachers as part of its Learning Compass framework, which promotes future-oriented competencies through imaginative engagement (OECD, 2019). Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Media Fellowship (launched in 2024) has invited journalists to use imaginative narrative form and scenario-based reporting to stimulate public engagement. (see UNDP, 2025). The World Economic Forum (2017) used speculative trajectories of inequality. This work was shaped by sociologists and political economists who embedded historically informed dynamics into narrative futures. The scenarios moved beyond abstract modelling by weaving in social processes such as the return

of neo-feudal economic relations, mass protest movements, elite fragmentation, and welfare-state erosion. By doing so, they highlighted how deeply entrenched patterns of wealth concentration, political exclusion, and social resistance might evolve over time. The result was a set of plausible futures designed to provoke debate and guide long-term strategic thinking about inequality. The exercise was highlighted in policy and academic circles as an innovative example of using narrative-based tools to foreground structural and political dimensions of inequality (see Wright, 2019).

SSF can expose hidden premises; it can bring new concepts to life; it also allows for the imagination of societies that do not currently exist.

Table 2. Examples of Social Science Fiction Use in the Social Sciences

Discipline of social science	**Examples of SSF use**	**Methodological Function**
Sociology (e.g. Hinchliffe 2021)	Analysis of dystopian fiction; fiction as qualitative data; defamiliarising the familiar.	Conceptual critique and theory generation; narrative-based sociology.
Anthropology (Harris and Robb, 2012; Boellstorff, 2016).	Ethnofiction and speculative ethnography; use of alien encounters and future societies to challenge assumptions.	Epistemological reflexivity; pedagogical tool for cultural analysis.
Political Economy (e.g. Beckert, 2016; Hulme, 2022; Krogstrup and Oman, 2019; Low and Boettcher, 2020) Milkoreit, 2022).	Narrative modelling of global climate governance; scenario analysis using fiction.	Policy scenario testing; narrative-enhanced economic modelling.
Education (e.g. Facer, 2011; Mishra et al., 2024; Selwyn et al. 2020).	Participatory futures workshops; embedding vignettes in academic outputs.	Pedagogical innovation; participatory narrative inquiry.
Futures Studies and Policy Studies (e.g. OECD, 2019; UNDP, 2024; WEF, 2017)	Scenario co-creation or narrative foresight with interdisciplinary teams in for example the use of fictional future news.	Strategic foresight; world-building; anticipatory scenario design; policy communication; policy testing; participatory scenario elicitation.

Source: Authors.

5. Conclusion

This survey paper has examined the methodological potential of SSF for use in Development Studies, building on experiences in other social sciences. SSF is not a method in the conventional sense but rather a set of methodological tools that are trustworthy, in the Lincoln and Guba sense. They enable researchers to formulate hypotheses, generate novel concepts, and engage in anticipatory inquiry where they consider possible future trajectories, particularly in contexts marked by uncertainty, complexity, and systemic

change. For that reason, they have great potential for use in the social sciences, beyond the examples we have provided here.

SSF can function most productively as a complementary methodological device rather than a wholesale substitute; its narrative constructions interweave with interview evidence or statistical estimates instead of supplanting them. The purpose is not to replace traditional social science methods. The aim is to broaden the horizon of Development Studies. SSF offers researchers the means to explore counterfactuals, construct ideal types, and analyse emergent or under-theorised phenomena such as global income inequality. The capacity of SSF to link theoretical abstraction with narrative concreteness makes it particularly relevant for Development Studies as a field concerned not only with explaining the social world, but also with imagining a different social world. The particularity of development studies' concern with and way of thinking about the future means it benefits from having its horizons expanded creatively through imaginative methods.

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EADI e.V
Kaiser-Friedrich-Straße 11
53113 Bonn, Germany
Email: postmaster@eadi.org
Website: https://www.eadi.org