We find ourselves in our third edition of Critical reflections from the module Contemporary Society and Social Futures! The pieces collected in this volume emerged from a third year sociology undergraduate module called ‘Contemporary Society and Social Futures’, which introduces students to a broad range of contemporary thought about the social world. Students were asked to write a ‘critical reflection’, reflecting on the core concepts and theories discussed on the module. In this third edition we – the students and the module tutors – are publishing pieces from students who have produced some very engaging and critical work for this module’s assessment at Leeds Beckett University. Fostering the critical potential from our students they have also done the editing again this year and because of that we, the module tutors, do not really want to say much more here other than give the editorial voice over to the editorial committee who will introduce this issue.

Dr Natalia Gerodetti & Dr Darren Nixon

As contributors to the Critical Reflections student journal, acknowledgment and praise must be given to the Sociology team and tutors who have provided such a great opportunity. This module has provided multiple opportunities, giving us the chance to critically (and rather creatively) engage and reflect on contemporary society and its future, whilst also presenting the empowering opportunity to publish academic content.

At the beginning of the module we had been shown previous Contemporary Society and Social Futures issues to read and help to begin thinking about our work, with the strong probability that it could be our critical engagement and reflections producing the 2015 issue. The content presented here is drawn from those reflections which best encapsulates the philosophy of the module to critically reflect on the external social world; from its organisation and trajectories, as well as the advances in technology and their impact on human relations and the social/political thoughts which are driving this society. In terms of Sociology, to critical reflect involves three dimensions: the individual social agent, the social structures/institutes and the social reality they interact to formulate.

Such a mode of thinking is required to make sense of contemporary society, particularly in its increasingly unstable and insecure form. Paradoxically, it seems overwhelming insecurity and manipulations are just about the only stable constants that the contemporary social world can rely on to reproduce itself. Advanced capitalist contractions of social exclusion, political disillusionment and economic crises tower over the citizens of contemporary society and dominate the horizon of an increasingly global society. Obscurity and distortion of truth are now the only truths available for the forthcoming generations of society to strive to understand. Technical advancements and the explosion of information have fragmented our understandings of reality to the extent that individuals feel disempowered and disengaged. With so many apparent gospels of truth and messiahs claiming to be prophets of our times, locating and tackling the problems we face can be an overwhelming task.
However, contemporary society’s position provides fertile ground for serious critical engagement and creative thinking, and lets us push the boundaries of what is deemed possible by the social actors who compete for the control of the future. What is required is major social transformation, across vast realms of society from culture to politics, economics and technology. What, in this context, counts as progress? Whilst this may seem overwhelming, individuals in contemporary society hold the ability to think critically and engage with the insecure and unstable present. We need to grasp it to avoid the tragic possibility of history repeating itself and altering the trajectory towards a better, more social future. Economic growth of unprecedented scale seems to have massively outpaced the moral boundaries of our society, and the task of reconvening this warrants a different frame of mind. Sociology can provide us with great tools here, and the critical reflections in this journal cover a range of high profile, important issues which we should not ignore or blindly accept.

The first reflection in this issue covers the important concepts of “freedom” and “control”. Driver’s argument explores how consumerism has replaced previous forms of identification such as class, work, gender, or race. This phenomenon is explored in relation to the growing information age and increasing governance by data. As governments and corporations infiltrate the private lives of the “free” individual, they monitor and collect data to build social profiles and manipulate consumer habits. The reflection considers the effect such a form of freedom is having on social growth and collective action.

Greenwood’s contribution introduces additional sociological concepts in his exploration of the effects of globalization on the culture of football. The presented story of David, a lifelong Manchester City fan, is used to demonstrate how risks taken by clubs is having detrimental impacts on the composition of the English football leagues and alienating the supporters of clubs that were built on the back of fans. The concept of the information society arises in the discussion surrounding how technological advancements have facilitated the growth of the sport.

Continuing an understanding and assessing globalization is Stevenson’s work on space, time and communications. This reflection examines the process of industrialisation and how the technology it brought about has impacted upon society. Out of this we have seen the development and acceleration of transport and witnessed the rise of (mass)tourism. With the growth of information technologies, the construction of space, time and communications have been altered drastically and it is important we interpret and understand these changes.

Returning to the concept of freedom, Morton‐Rowe investigates the impact of power dispersion in prisons and the effects this has on the psyche of individuals. The contribution goes on to investigate how segregation, the class system and poverty intertwine in contemporary society. Finally, she uses the concept of Panopticon to evaluate its impacts on society.

The effects on globalization on the everyday aspects of life are becoming increasingly apparent in today’s society. K. Johnson highlights how the consumption of food is no exception to this by examining the products available in modern supermarkets. Discussing the consequences of the variety of global products and goods on the indigenous workers that produce them, the piece poses poignant questions surrounding food waste that are arising as a result of globalization.

Next in this Social Futures issue is Iggo Milne’s dynamic reflection on contemporary society’s fixation on purging its undesirable attributes.
Using the example of eating disorders and unhealthy addictions, this work explores the extent to which these phenomena are an integral aspect of consumer fuelled capitalism. Again, Bentham’s panopticon provides the framework of analysis, assessing the concept against self-surveillance and dominance of social media in regulating and deciding what behaviour/action is socially acceptable and what should be purged out.

The following contribution is Bainbridge’s enquiry into the prominent and ethical debates surrounding the increase of surveillance and state power. He looks through the lens of the popular 2008 movie “The Dark Knight” to make arguments surrounding ever more expanding surveillance technologies and its deployment against presumed threats. He draws in particular on the recent NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden who leaked crucial information exposing America and Britain’s powerful data communications technologies.

Continuing the theme of surveillance is Lavington’s work, who critically draws on the comparison between contemporary Britain and George Orwell’s dystopian novel “1984”. This reflection explores how the scope of the state through totalitarian like surveillance and data collection is widening. Yet importantly, it is not just the “big institutions” who do it but drawing on the concept of self-surveillance Lavington’s points to how we partake which can be seen in social media and data collection.

The penultimate reflection in this issue acknowledges and examines the growing tourist industry and its social impacts. Evans’ work explores the concept of a “tourist”, what it is and how this phenomenon has come about. The work then continues by reflecting on the homogenising effects of globalisation facilitated by the tourist industry. This is important if we are to make sense not just of the tourist gaze, but the consumptive behaviour it warrants and the global impact this has on our world.

To conclude this year’s issue Robinson take the reader on a journey into a dystopian future a mere two generations away. The tale features an educational conversation between two family members who discuss how risks, technologies and environmental dangers our current societies produce are impacting upon the whole world and have contributed to a future where they remain the only living humans. A stark warning to the world about the future consequences of their current behaviour, the piece captivates the underlying message presented throughout this journal.

Global society is currently riding a roller coaster of risks in which the “climbs” come in the form of consumer participation and technological advancement and the “drops” are found in the control of individual identities and behaviours that contribute to the degradation of the environment. Unfortunately for society, this ride may not end in the safety of the departure terminal but catastrophically derails off the track towards destruction. The world, and its inhabitants, are on a collision course of our own design and it seems we are too occupied with its thrills to notice.

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