Welcome to our second edition of Critical reflections from the module *Contemporary Society and Social Futures!* We are very pleased to see a second edition – with a bigger number of contributions yet! – being published from our students who have produced some very engaging and critical work during their last year at Leeds Metropolitan University. Fostering the critical potential from our students they have also done the editing 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.

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The pieces collected in this volume emerged from a third year undergraduate module in the social sciences called ‘Contemporary Society and Social Futures’, which introduces students to a broad range of the most cutting edge contemporary theory about the social world. Students were asked to write a ‘critical reflection’, reflecting on the core concepts and theories discussed on the module.

The module leaders began publishing some of the best work from this module last year, and again this year decided that the high quality of student work warranted a broader readership than just the few academic staff marking them. The fifteen pieces selected for this volume consist of some of the most outstanding student papers amongst what (we are promised by our tutors) was a large quantity of excellent work. We were encouraged to complete this piece of work by approaching the module’s content both critically and creatively, and the pieces selected here reflect a great deal of innovation, critical thinking, and reflexivity. As students in the social sciences we have learned to engage critically with the world around us, from the overarching social structural formations dealt with by some of these reflections, to the localised microcosms of everyday life that some others chose to consider.

Theoretical reflection about the contemporary social world is often about considering the effects of social change. Our modern, globalised world is one in which changes occur at a faster pace and with a broader reach than ever before, and getting to grips with these transformations and situating them within the framework of everyday life is a key concern for the pieces collected here.

However, change is never straightforward, and necessarily always entails a tension, whether between the institutions of the past and those of the present, or between those enacting change and those affected by it. Social theory reflects this, and there is often a tension between different approaches to explaining such changes. So, for example, the lauded possibilities for creativity and the mobilisation of affect encapsulated in theories of post-Fordism are contradicted by the increasing technological rationality and uniformity of ‘McDonaldisation’ in contemporary forms of work. Similarly, theories of the highly skilled ‘knowledge economy’ must come to terms with the prevalence of the low-skilled and low-paid work that often constitutes such ‘knowledge’, such as call centre and clerical work.

The production of knowledge, too, is a contradictory process. Technology provides an almost infinite array of possibilities, flexibility, and choice, and enables everyone to be creative contributors through the production of social media, but at the same time we have become one of the most known-about, surveilled, and controlled populations in history. As the contemporary world
enables flexibility, specialisation, and individuality in our lives, it also allows us to be controlled and coerced in increasingly specific and individualised ways.

The globalised world, the product of vast historical transformations in social, political, economic and cultural forms, is one in which ‘communities of interest’ and ‘global citizens’ can interact and move across enormous distances, but simultaneously the importance of locality to identity, life chances, and political possibilities comes more sharply into focus. Indeed the transformative process of globalisation, which enables greater horizons of possibility and greater mobility than ever before, may well be eroding the possibilities of some localised communities to enjoy even the standards of life they have enjoyed historically, whether this is considered in the context of neoliberal economics, global trade chains, or travel and tourism.

Perhaps reflecting something of a contemporary zeitgeist in the post-recession social world, many of the critical reflections adopted a dystopian stance, pessimistically envisioning both the present moment and ‘social futures’ as increasingly subjected to control. Serrant’s opening paper (p. 6) compares the contemporary world with the imagined world of dystopian science fiction series ‘The Hunger Games’. Highlighting the similarities between that fictional world and our own, the piece draws on contemporary issues such as the recent NSA controversy to discuss notions of surveillance, unemployment and consumption.

Surveillance was an especially popular theme, and a number of papers draw on Michel Foucault’s notion of the Panopticon, a social metaphor of power and surveillance based on a prison design in which the inmates are subject to an invisible gaze. Redman’s piece (p. 9) discusses this in depth, using Foucault’s ideas of panopticism, surveillance and power to diagnose contemporary society and point out how we are disciplined to become ‘useful subjects’ and how we might learn to ‘love’ the gaze and use it against ourselves, before questioning whether we might escape the panopticon at all.

Also drawing on Foucault’s ideas of surveillance and self-surveillance, Gardner (p. 13) critically evaluates the social networking site Facebook, to examine the ways that social media have reconfigured social life. With social media such as Facebook becoming a central part of many people’s social lives, the way that we manage our identities online becomes increasingly subject to processes of reflexive self-surveillance, in which we are not only watched in a ‘top down’ mode but also participate in a ‘synoptic’ nexus of surveying our peers.

Similarly, Keywood’s personal reflection (p. 16) confronts the implications that social networking can have when our personal information is made available online to almost anybody at the click of a button. His account of how self-surveillance can be applied to social media presents a theoretical understanding of how we present and regulate our self-image to others, and how social identities and intimate relationships are shaped by this pervasive new form of technology. Continuing the theme of self-surveillance and technology, Darley’s personal account of fitness centres (p. 20) intertwines diary entries with contemporary explanations of how fitness centres and the media present particular idealised gender and body images, and how fitness centre members may internalise them and yet be oblivious to their machinations, to make the argument that self-surveillance and technology are becoming increasingly efficient and optimal in contemporary society.

Indeed, technology has become an integral part of our society, and as Wyatt (p. 24) shows, we have adapted certain social practices to reflect this change. Her piece utilises Manuel Castell’s ‘Network Society’ to explore the impact that mass communication technologies have on the formation of online identities, and the consequences this has for our friendships and romantic relationships.

A number of reflections also considered the impact of globalisation and consumption on the modern world. Melaugh’s diary extracts (p. 27), taken from a month spent travelling around Europe by train, provide a first-hand account of the effects of globalisation, migration, and tourism. Critically interrogating her own role as a tourist, her piece provides a sociological reflection on travel and the commodification of place. From a similarly personal perspective, Armstrong (p. 30) uses a supermarket visit to explore the processes of globalisation, consumerism and Fordism. Investigating the journey that food takes in the chain of production, the piece considers the impact that this global process has on the food we consume and the workers that produce it, how the process of consumption might shape our identity, and the Fordist production model that supermarket workers are governed by.

In another personal account, Slater (p. 35) uses her voluntary work at The Food Bank as a basis from which to explore a wide range of sociological theory, incorporating notions of surveillance, consumption, the ‘information society’, the ‘risk
society', the political economy of poverty and voluntarism in the UK, and even the commodification, value and ‘calculative intent’ of the volunteer herself. Marshall’s piece (p. 40) explores, through the eyes of his younger self, what artefacts of the Christmas period, such as the ‘Coca-Cola truck’ and his choice of presents, can tell us about consumption and consumerism in the modern world, including the transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism, and what it means to live and consume in a society subject to the rationalised process of McDonalisation.

Moving from consumption to work, Hunter’s piece (p.44) explores post-Fordism in the context of contemporary work practices in the service sector. Discussing the sector’s pervasive surveillance, regimentation and uniformity, and its utilisation of immaterial and emotional labour, the piece points out how workers are increasingly subject to control and discipline while the labour force simultaneously becomes more flexible, precarious, and vulnerable to risk.

Focusing on the ‘immaterial’ labour of service work in the post-Fordist economy, Joubert (p. 48) uses an advertisement for a charity fundraising job to explore the nature of affective labour in the contemporary workplace, and incorporates a discussion of the ‘society of control’, wherein power is spread throughout society and operates through the bodies of individuals, in order to argue that social life is ever more subsumed under the logic of capitalism.

Selig Chauhan’s critical reflection (p. 52) explores the notion of the desirous but often unobtainable ‘green identity’ to discuss issues of environmental sustainability, migration, waste, and climate change. Incorporating both a critique of the contemporary consumerist world, and of individualist lifestyle notions of environmental sustainability as an identity, the piece warns of the magnitude of the global danger we face in the future.

Taking up this warning by returning to a dystopian theme, Gunn’s piece (p. 56) presents a narratively-led vision of a future shaped by environmental collapse, centred on the destructive features of capitalist principles and the environmental harm of a wasteful economy. Commenting on the different modes and meanings of contemporary consumptive practices, the piece provides a critical environmental perspective of the contradictions and inhumanity of capitalism.

Finally, Bradburn (p. 60) offers a dystopian narrative in reverse, analysing the present of ‘Ancient Britain’ from the perspective of a future society uncovering its strange workings. Encompassing a reflection on consumption, post-Fordism, globalisation, and surveillance, the piece presents a critical overview of the contemporary world, in all its absurdities and contradictions. The piece also suggests a sense of reflexivity, calling the sociologists of the past-present the ‘critical ones’.

The critical reflections collected here are examples of the power of sociological thinking, and represent the students’ commitment to inquiries that might form the basis for understanding contemporary society and actively constructing a better social future.

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