



Editorial

In the midst of the turmoil around Brexit, we are proud to present the seventh issue of our student journal *Critical Reflections: A Student Journal on Contemporary Sociological Issues* (also available at: <https://ojs.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/index.php/SOC/index>). It has been 7 years now that we can present work which originates in an assessment from the module *Contemporary Society and Social Futures*; a module which introduces students to a broad range of contemporary thought about the social world. Drawing on present and emerging phenomena, students were asked to write a 'critical reflection' on a phenomenon of their choice drawing on the core concepts and theories discussed on the module. In doing so, they bear testimony to the concerns of young people in the contemporary world.

The editorial team (as always a collaboration between staff and students) are hereby publishing pieces from the graduating cohort of 2019 who have produced some very engaging and critical work in their final year at Leeds Beckett University. Continuing our efforts to give voice to our students Fostering the critical potential from our students we, the module tutors, do not really want to say much more here other than hand over to the students editors who will introduce this issue.

Dr Natalia Gerodetti & Dr Darren Nixon

This year's issue starts off with an interesting insight into the medicinal risks that we experience in modern society through the contribution by **Georgina Dallas** who explores how medicinal adaptations and new

technological advancements relating to medicine can disregard human concerns in the name of progress. Discussing the many human made risks, Dallas explores the protest to mainstream – or male-stream – medical information and the iatrogenic effects of pharmaceutical products. With most cases of iatrogenesis claiming women as the victim, Dallas points to a gendered analysis of both the hopes and fallacies in both mainstream and alternative medical information.

Also drawing on ideas about information Society is **Marieke Thun** who explores the rise in the knowledge of veganism and the outcomes it can produce through ICTs; for some, having either positive or negative impacts on modern production and consumption practices. Whilst it is debatable that the practice of veganism is a becoming more prevalent in the post-modern society than ever before, individuals are increasingly abstaining from animal products and meat consumption and are following a plant-based diet and lifestyle. This globalising process of information and knowledge on veganism has also created a greater awareness of the risk society that we live in, such as agriculture's contributing to climate change. Thus, we are interpellated into reflexively creating individual consumption identities and choices through both their impact on the present but also the future.

In our information saturated society questions on how this might lead to surveillance are never far away and in a first of several contributions **Josh Crowe** discusses the legitimisation of self-surveillance alongside an

investigation into digital identities in the modern day. He traces the transformations of surveillance over time due to the impact of new technologies and uses which have shifted our subjectivities - no longer are we merely victims of surveillance, we are increasingly consumers. Crowe analyses both digital identities and surveillance alongside risk, the self and consumer culture and investigates social media and its impact on oppression and control, as well as its facilitation of surveillance behaviours.

Whether to understand it socially or politically, it is for sure that surveillance is integrated within our mundane lives. **Jessica Hodgson** suggests surveillance and information technologies have created techniques to control and monitor every citizen, and she analyses the Social Credit System (SCS) which China is adopting for 2020 which will rate its 1.4 billion citizens for their "trustworthiness". Her argument draws on key scholars such as Foucault and Bigo to understand the increasing surveillance and how China's SCS is a renaissance of the panoptic metaphor.

Sophie Dyson's critical reflection explores how big companies employ various techniques to influence the quantified self through mobile applications. This article draws on relevant, contemporary theory such as the information society, risk society and surveillance to highlight important and somewhat concerning correlations between gamification and the quantified self. Dyson explains gamification to be the use of playful design in non-game applications, creating a platform for discussion surrounding the pleasure we gain from game playing and the use of gamification by big companies to entice and maintain the interest of users. This coupled with new forms of surveillance technology raises important ontological questions about safety which the author addresses using relevant examples.

Self-tracking devices and applications are a substantive part of contemporary surveillance methods but their impact and use affects different groups differently. **Humma Parween** explores the new and increasing risks that women face and explores questions of what risks have arisen in the rise of the information society. She explores how self-tracking has become a growing concern within society especially regarding women. Parween highlights the shift from living a private life to us now living out our lives online and she critiques the effects that modernity and surveillance have imposed on women in today's society by contemplating the increased use of social media on female agency.

Social media is also contemplated by **Kanwal Ateeq** who examines whether the line between work and leisure has become blurred in a late capitalist society the, making it difficult to separate one from the other. Within the rise of new technologies, such as the internet which hosts social media sites, and 'robots', corporations are increasingly grasping the opportunity to exploit their customers for their labour power. This takes place, for example, in the form of consumers scanning their own products at self-service tills, thus saving companies the cost of staffed tills. Another example is that of digital labour, in which companies utilise their users' labour power to sell advertisements. Ateeq cohesively examines the concepts of the information society, commodification, McDonaldization and risk society, in order to posit the question: "Will there ever be a distinction between work and leisure"?

Inequality is always at the forefront of sociologists' concerns and **Vicky Smith** explores whether the neoliberal knowledge economy has created risk for working class students. She draws upon UK government policies, the education system, the influence

of the knowledge economy, and increasing numbers of students attending university to draw attention to working-class students and the difficulties they face. In doing so she argues that the emergence of the neoliberal economy has played a key role in creating risks for students from working-class backgrounds. Smith explores and examines the concepts of the knowledge economy, neoliberalism and the risk society so as to postulate the question, "In reality who is the knowledge economy for?"

Equally posing questions about fairness is a piece which examines our contemporary welfare system and how it has changed due to recent neoliberal regulations. Critically examining welfare to workfare programmes **Vicky Swailes** highlights the profit driven nature of current day neoliberalism and its sacrificing of disability welfare provisions which are increasingly difficult to obtain. Swailes reveals how this also contributes to maintaining stigmatised views of disabled people who are perceived as being a burden and inconvenience to society. In addition, she points out that the nature of the welfare benefit application system is highly demeaning. The criteria for being classed as disabled and so unfit for work has been completely redrawn due to neoliberalist changes, leading many to be miscategorized and put in insecure areas of work.

Foregrounding contemporary issues around consumption, the critical reflection by **Lois Fergie** highlights how consumer culture within Western capitalist countries presents the "good life" to individuals across all social backgrounds in society. Fergie states how this ultimately results in many reaching for an unreachable goal; this creates significant stress and anxiety for many individuals in the lower classes who are unable to keep up with our socially constructed consumer culture. This also spreads the metaphorical Affluenza virus thought of by Oliver James, through

society leaving people feeling in competition with others to appear prestigious through lavish consumption. Not only does this provides an explanation for why even the wealthy suffer common mental disorders despite being able to afford the "good life" but also why people are never satisfied with the goods they own. Neoliberalist values help to drive consumerism and therefore the spread this virus. The concept of Risk also further demonstrates how capitalism uses consumerism to exploit individuals, which can significantly contribute towards poor mental health.

Examining gender practices and effects of global consumption patterns in 'Paying the Price for Sexual Gratification', **Sophie Clark** explores the rise of a sex tourism industry within the context of globalisation. As travelling for leisure and pleasure has become more common, the demand for purchasable sexual services, and therefore the number of sex workers, have increased. Although this may present an opportunity for women in the global south to secure monetary means for survival, the growing demand for sex workers also conveniences sex traffickers to grow their businesses. Clarke critically examines the cost, and the exploitation of women and minors, of commodifying bodies.

Chloe Stirrup's piece is a critical analysis of the role of neoliberal politics in Western society, the piece assesses the impact neoliberalism has on societies sense of freedom and morality. The pieces touches on contemporary case studies where neoliberalism is at play, such as Brexit and the Iraq war, is an economic, political and ideological project pursued by certain groups to construct a reality, a reality that exploits the many to help the few.

Editors: Kanwal Ateeq, Sophie Clarke, Josh Crowe, Georgina Dallas, Lois Fergie, Jess Hodgson, Humma Parween, Vicky Smith, Chloe Stirrup, Vicky Swailes, Marieke Thun