



Preface

Sociology sets out to develop the sociological imagination of those who study it, allowing us to think critically and reflexively about the social world around us and make sense of the relationship between our personal experiences and wider society. This approach to interrogating the world is embodied in this collection of critical reflections written by final year students on the BA (Hons) Sociology degree here at Leeds Beckett University. The essays in this volume underline both the breadth of the subject and its power to shed light on the familiar and the taken for granted. They tackle a wide range of contemporary issues: mail order brides, anorexia nervosa, occulture, genetic testing, service work, mental illness, fast fashion and voluntourism. To do this, they apply theory as an interrogative and explanatory tool, tackling these subjects through the lens of, for example, commodification, self-surveillance, risk society and post-colonialism, underlining its central role in Sociology.

This collection is a testament to both the students and staff of the Sociology degree. For the students, each of the reflections emphasises the knowledge and skills they have developed individually – in applying the tools of the social sciences to analyse and interpret current trends and developments and, just as importantly, communicating incisive, critical commentary; the end product is also a collective editorial effort. Each essay also underlines the strong commitment the course team have to developing students as active producers of knowledge and the support that they provide as part of this to enable them to develop their intellectual skills and abilities.

I hope that readers of these reflections enjoy the perspectives offered, and are themselves further challenged, encouraged or inspired to reflect on the contemporary social world.

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For more information on our sociology courses at Leeds Beckett University see:

<https://courses.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/sociology/>

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Editorial

In the midst of the historic surrounding Brexit and the global Covid-19 pandemic, we are proud to present, during these most testing of times, 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>). 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 interests and 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 student editors who will introduce this issue.

Dr Natalia Gerodetti & Dr Darren Nixon

The graduating cohort of 2020 completed their modules and edited this journal under the unprecedented condition of 'global lock-down' due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Following the great tradition of sociology in analysing contemporary social change, I would like to present a challenge to the graduating cohort of 2021 - to use the concepts and theories within the *Contemporary Social Futures* module, to critically reflect on and analyse the contradictions, controversies, crystallizations, and constellations of behaviours and social relations that have characterised, perhaps contributed to or are consequences of, the Covid-19 pandemic.

Living through a prolonged period of (physical) disconnection within a globally (IT) connected world, the only thing we feel sure about is that we have never been through anything like this before. The spectre is both haunting - in terms of global recession and unemployment but teases new possibilities also - in heavily reduced traffic and pollution, in bird song and in the realisation of different ways of living. Yesterday's unthinkable(s) are today's Furlough schemes and tomorrow's, as yet unwritten, social futures.

Katie Miles (Chief Student Editor)

This year's issue starts with two pieces that consider how personal lives, experiences and practices are situated within wider social structures by linking changes in health with wider social, economic and political developments. Firstly, **Kyle Shea Minta** explores the commodification and individualisation of mental illnesses within neoliberal societies by investigating how the demand for mental health medication is stimulated by both information and consumer society. But whilst information society fundamentally undermines the physician-patient relationship, consumer society has posited patients as revenue-producing potentialities. The contribution examines the extent to which free market beliefs have fundamentally commodified mental health, and how this is proving increasingly detrimental to patients.

The second contribution explores the interconnections between food and health. The 2010s saw dramatic increases in NHS hospital admissions for Anorexia Nervosa and Obesity-related admissions. With a focus upon self-surveillance and patients as the 'clients' of healthcare, **Katie Miles** explores the links between Anorexia Nervosa and risk society, while contrasting these themes with the pre-modern 'hazards' identified by Beck. Miles explores how the growth of both illnesses can be seen as a reflection of the nature of our current times.

The next two contributions share an interest in exploring the contemporary search for ontological security; In attempting to interpret people's turn to finding meaning in occulture and occultism, **Charlotte Hackett** asks that classic sociological question: are these practices personal problems or public issues? In her paper, Hackett argues the rise of the Risk Society, with its fears and catastrophes, combined with the uncertainty of late capitalism, leads people to seek solace in the stars to explain the turbulent landscape of late modern life. Yet even our search for peace and hope has been commodified.

Lucie Samaniego also explores the search for meaning and security, but by examining how the increase in genetic testing might be linked to dealing with the uncertainty and change occurring within contemporary risk societies which threaten our sense and knowledge of self. Deep forms of uncertainty threaten people's identity and individuals strive to obtain stable, known and perhaps routinised identity. Samaniego argues that genetic testing provides such routinization and the rise in routine DNA screening allows individuals to access insight into their body, thereby offering the possibility of ontological security.

The essays in the second half of the journal turn their attention towards issues around global commodification and consumer society. **Joelle Donaldson** points to the inherent tensions and increasing inequalities evident in contemporary consumer society. Within such societies he argues, it is proficiency in consumption that constitutes a "normal" or "desirable" life. However, we are confronted with an increasingly perverse irony that has been further highlighted by our experiences during 'lockdown' - low wage service workers often find themselves in the precarious circumstance of providing to others, what they themselves cannot afford or lack.

Continuing the exploration of consumer capitalism, **Harriet Green** examines whether 'Fast-Fashion Feminism' is an oxymoron and whether late modern capitalism has commodified feminist rhetoric of liberation and empowerment through clothing. The reflection examines the feminisation of the labour market in sweat shops in the global south and contends that the mistreatment and desperation of garment factory workers simply cannot be equated with the same feminism that fast fashion outlets preach.

Furthering the examination of the contemporary global economy, **Mairead Ashford** explores the business model behind

Amazon's phenomenal success in recent years. While Amazon may appear to be the quintessential contemporary informational company, Ashford argues that, in fact, Amazon's growth reflects the continued utilisation of Fordist and Taylorist principles developed in the early 20th century that generate huge profits through extreme control and hyper-exploitation of workers.

Taking a very different approach to thinking about the global economy, **Hannah Middle** explores the interconnections between global intimacies, inequality and the commodification of love. The industry in mail order brides is dependent on the same ICTs that enable globalisation and expansive migration and mark the current era as a global information society. However, global structural inequalities like poverty and

patriarchy are pivotal factors in why brides register to these websites, which result in the commodification of women within consumer society and the rise of a global consumer market for brides.

The final contribution examines the rise of volunteering in tourist settings, or voluntourism. **Jude Cowden** argues that although this may look charitable from the outside, these practices have some deeply problematic connotations if read against a historical legacy of colonialism and a postcolonial critique. The contribution attempts to examine how popular understandings of the differences between how both "First" and "Third" world countries work and explores the unconscious privilege and unequal race relations bundled up in the "selfless" acts that we call voluntourism.



Contents

Neoliberalism and the Commodification of Mental Illness in Surveillance Society

Kyle Shea Minta

Anorexia Nervosa: A Late modern Mind Game

Katie Miles

Written in the Stars? The occult as risk management in the Age of Aquarius

Charlotte Hackett

Genetic Testing: Certainty in a World of Uncertainty?

Lucie Samaniego

In-work poverty in consumer culture: a contradiction of our times?

Joelle Donaldson

Is 'Fast-Fashion Feminism' an oxymoron?

Harriet Green

Amazon Flexed: Delivering Smiles (and Exploitation)

Mairead Ashford

Mail Order Brides: Choice or Constraint?

Hannah Middle

New Colonialists of Africa? - Tackling the White Saviour Complex in Contemporary Voluntourism

Jude Cowden