



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 Single and Joint Honours Sociology degrees 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: the quantification of learning, populist politics, the appropriation of activism by big brands, migration, social media, the digitisation of fitness and, of course, the impact of COVID-19. To do this, they apply theory as an interrogative and explanatory tool, tackling these subjects through the lens of, for example, commodification, surveillance, risk and postmodernity, 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.

Dr Matt Badcock

Head of Sociology

Leeds School of Social Sciences

For more information on our sociology courses at Leeds Beckett University see:
<https://courses.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/sociology/>

Pictures:

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<https://cliffordfleming.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/education-is-a-right.jpg>

<https://www.unite4education.org/>

<https://blog.dys.com/global-trends-in-the-pharmaceutical-industry/>

<https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/03/asian-politics-in-time-of-corona/>

<https://www.csoonline.com/article/2367681/liquid-surveillance-privacy-bashfest-brave-citizens-vs-scorched-earth.html>

https://www.salon.com/2012/11/29/fighting_our_new_nanny_economy/

<https://medium.com/@antispeciesistactioncollective/navigating-digital-spaces-in-activism-9e6ba07799ea>



Editorial

Given the continuing challenges and difficulties that Covid-19 has imposed on the social lives and the learning context of our students, we are particularly proud to present this year's issue of our student journal - Critical Reflections: A Student Journal on Contemporary Sociological Issues. This is the 9th issue since we began publishing writings from our graduating students in 2013 (all editions available at: <https://ojs.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/index.php/SOC/index>) and is entirely female authored for the first time.

The origins of these pieces are from 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 2021 who have produced some very engaging, illuminating and critical work in their final year at Leeds Beckett University under particularly trying circumstances. As module tutors our central aim has been to provide our students with the sociological

tools that allow them to develop their voice and critical potential. As ever, we are delighted and proud of the sociological insights their work collectively provides and hand you over to our student editors to introduce the papers in this year's volume.

Dr Darren Nixon & Dr Natalia Gerodetti

This issue begins with **Ellie Fawcett's** piece which critically explores how neo-liberalism and the marketisation of higher education have served to increase the surveillance, monitoring and quantification of university students. She argues that new digital platforms that monitor key student performance indicators (KPIs) to generate an "engagement score" which identify at risk students are fundamentally flawed and unlikely to work; not least because the reduction of students to data is simply unable to grasp the complex sets of relationships, issues and processes that drive contemporary students' mental health and engagement with their studies.

The next contribution examines the dark potential of a postmodernist society which is explored by **Elizabeth Pollitt** through the lens of a sinister campaign that resulted in the US election of a bigoted business tycoon. The Trump campaign took advantage of ontological insecurities that are customary of a postmodern world through the rejection of grand narratives and circulation of alternate 'truths'. Pollitt argues that such ontological insecurity among the white far-right

population seemingly underwent a growth following the election of the first Black man as President of the US. Set against the condition of a postmodern and a network society Pollitt queries the hindrance of the public's ability to arrive at congruent decisions, known as public sphere fragmentation, and a clear abetment to the campaign.

In the following contribution, **Hannah Crossley** casts a critical view at another bleak condition of postmodern society, that is, the commodification of activism. Brands shamelessly virtue-signal whilst profiting from the suffering and systemic inequalities faced by people from minority backgrounds. Crossley interpellates us to be critical and sceptical when brands stick their logo front and centre of carefully curated slogans meant to signal their 'wokeness' which is rarely met with seismic action within the organisation. Crossley explores how Nike benefit from this formula despite poor working conditions and low wages for many minority-background workers. Drawing on their own slogan: Perhaps Nike should just not do it.

In the first of two contributions directly reflecting on COVID-19 **Lucy MacDonald** draws on Ulrich Beck to provide an analysis of reflexive modernity and socially produced risks. The current pandemic has proven to be an extremely challenging time for many, especially those from a lower socio-economic background as they are at higher chances of risk. Here, MacDonald considers the application of Beck's concepts of "Risk Society" to the pandemic, while critically analysing globalisation and our own perceptions of science. This piece also discusses the adequacy of tools to understand our society - whilst still in the midst of a pandemic - through Beck's eyes.

Following this, **Kate Hargreaves** examines the huge effect COVID-19 has had on all aspects of society. This critical reflection also uses Ulrich Beck's concept of risk society and reflexive

modernity to explain how the management of a global pandemic can be seen as "risk making" and thereby forging and exacerbating inequalities. Examples from government, economy and higher education are all used to explore how COVID-19 has been (mis/mal)-managed. Hargreaves then discusses how these strategies relate to wider issues of inequality and globalisation which are increasingly prevalent in today's society.

Keeping with global impact and interconnectivities, in her reflection **Zara Haider** explores the rising numbers of women migrating to other countries in search of employment, focusing primarily on Filipino women who migrate to work as nannies in Western countries, thereby becoming part of the global care chain. Using structural explanations, Haider considers the factors involved in decision making by women to work overseas, and the consequences for their family and themselves. In doing so Haider highlights the sacrifices Filipino women make when leaving their children behind to care for children of middle-class European women, whilst drawing attention to the importance of their migration for the economy of the Philippines.

In a hard-hitting contribution **Esther Wilkinson** examines how the Restavek child slavery system in Haiti, originally intended to provide a safer life for children in poverty, affects 300,000 minors, overwhelmingly girls. Wilkinson explores how migration, gender and commodification collide in this system of child slavery and trafficking. As a result of absolute poverty, parents are pushed to send children into unpaid domestic labour, where exposure to violent and sexual abuse is standard. This reflection investigates the enforcement of power roles and social polarisation among a consumer society through division of the oppressor and oppressed. As Restaveks are ordinarily girls, Wilkinson also explores the subsequent

feminisation of poverty, since women are more at risk of economic hardship.

Drawing from Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism, **Amber Richards** considers the dangers of the latest social networking platform TikTok. Mass collection of data such as facial recognition, IP addresses and biometrics places TikTok users under a constant state of surveillance. We, as consumers, are increasingly becoming the product for sale as our data is constantly being sold to the highest bidding advertising company. Thus, applying Foucault's theory of the Panopticon Richards critically examines the usage of TikTok and how it could be argued that the seemingly harmless platform is used to control members of society and exploit its users for their precious data.

Also investigating the digital world through wearable fitness trackers is **Jemima Ferreira** who examines how these collect data on movement and have become increasingly popular in recent years through

advancements in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Often advertised as lifestyle products which improve fitness, they raise many questions about the relationship between the self and surveillance. Examining and criticising the neo-liberal investment in this, Ferreira draws on theories of power to explain this phenomenon and explores how wearable fitness trackers are affecting ideas of the self and privacy in contemporary society.



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