



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 Sociology degree programmes here at Leeds Beckett University. The reflections 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 such as online content creators and influencers, fast fashion, Covid, and big data. To do this, they apply theory as an interrogative and explanatory tool, tackling these subjects through the lens of, for example, neoliberalism, surveillance, risk society and class, underlining its central role in Sociology.

This collection is a testament to both the students and staff of the Sociology degrees. 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/>

<https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/232738/omicron-latest-research-expert-views-uk/>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumerism>

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/posterboynyc/6413597531/in/photostream/>

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/tattlemuss/7813733606/>

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/zubrow/5516105138/>

<https://sabguthrie.info/reversing-influencer-marketing-backlash/>

<https://www.ecosia.org/images?q=higher%20education%20working%20class&license=public#f=true&id=EC59A1B6AB8881D26E31E737A48088793C7CFF96>



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Editorial

This year's issue of *Critical Reflections* marks the 10th anniversary of our student journal in which third year students' highly original pieces are being published. The backdrop for this year's student cohort has been several years of study which have been marked by disruptions and unexpected aspects of both life and study. These students barely got through 2/3 of their first year before Covid-19 changed life and the world so dramatically and from which we are only just starting to emerge again. It is therefore to the credit of these students that they have persisted and developed their critical thinking skills and embarked upon using the sociological tools from the module Contemporary Society and Social Futures to apply these to a social phenomenon they deemed to be worthy of closer investigation and analysis.

The twelve contributions this year can be found [here](https://ojs.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/index.php/SOC/index): <https://ojs.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/index.php/SOC/index> and we are proud that students develop a range of different themes and below the reader will find an overview of the contributions as compiled by the student authors who were also involved in the editorial process. Continuing our efforts to give voice to our students we hereby hand over to the student editors to describe the contributions.

Dr Darren Nixon & Dr Natalia Gerodetti

The first piece by Sophie Hunt considers the emerging platform *Onlyfans* which is a site on which individuals can post their generally

explicit content for a subscription. *Onlyfans* content production has been identified as a type of craft production whereby the producers create unique content that is tailored for a more personalized experience in comparison to the mass produced *Pornhub*. Hunt explores Beck's idea of risk society, with regards to creating and having an *Onlyfans* accounts. Moreover, she examines how this site can be seen as an example of synoptic surveillance.

Following this is a searing take on societal beauty standards, written by Aishaa Pascha, who explores the rising popularity of aesthetic surgery and its specific impact on the female population. Using commodity feminism to explore the perpetuation of a 'patriarchal consumer capitalism' system, she argues that the gendered reflexivity that popular media encourages in women results in an endless state of self-scrutiny and evaluation. Using Giddens' theory of reflexive modernization, she takes on the debate of whether it is ultimately empowering, or if aesthetic surgery is yet another trap set out by patriarchal, capitalist propaganda for individuals to buy into.

Drawing on postfeminist and neoliberal theories, Ella Riley explores the impact of surveillance on women. She highlights the role of gynaeoptic surveillance in strengthening the 'intimate homosocial policing' that women inevitably become a part of, arguing that society's incessant disciplining and pressurizing of women has led to them



aspiring towards unattainable beauty ideals. Using ideas of forced empowerment and mental illness as a result of coerced surveillance, Riley makes a convincing argument against photographic technology, concluding with a question of whether the freedom of choice experienced by women in postfeminist society may be nothing more than a myth.

In a next piece, Louisa Allen critically explores how in a neo-liberal society, brands are increasingly using micro influencers to market their products. She argues that brands use micro influencers as they have smaller, sub-cultured audiences who have mutual niche interests. This makes the audience feel as though they belong to a community and brands use the influencer-consumer 'friendship' as a marketing strategy. This gives more perceived 'freedom' to the consumer as brands provide them with a false sense of control as they 'chose' to buy the product because their friend convinced them to, despite them not actually knowing each other.

Staying with the theme of consumption the next piece is interested how the ease in restrictions following the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a resurgence in the mass-consumption of fast fashion from online retailers, such as SHEIN. Josh Holmes critically explores how the largest global fashion retailer, SHEIN, uses a combination of Fordist and Post-Fordist methods through its production and marketing processes in order to maximise profits. Holmes also explores how valuable consumer data is in contemporary society for big corporations, such as SHEIN, and how it is exploited to manipulate consumer behaviour for self-serving purposes, such as profit.

Exploring the intersection of tourism and consuming practices Chloe Brighthouse enlightens us about a pressing issue within the New Forest National Park and the devastation the wildlife and ponies of the park are facing as their home's ecosystem crumbles and struggles to rejuvenate. These effects are projected onto the ponies as a consequence of contemporary commodification and tourism, which have led to the risks of air pollution and significant overgrazing due to overpopulation of the ponies. The ponies of the New Forest National Park have become a commodity for the tourist, resulting in their home suffering irreversible consequences.

Drawing on Campbell's work on craft consumers in a post-modern society, Ciaran Callaghan applies this to a group of consumers referred to as "sneakerheads". He argues that "sneakerheads" are the archetypal craft consumer due to four key aspects, all of which are argued by Campbell to be recognised as a craft consumer. The article ends by analysing how social media, specifically YouTube, is key to demonstrating the final aspect of a craft consumer, collecting. There are several popular YouTube series in which famous rappers show off their sneaker collection.

Covid-19 reappears in Ellen Brereton's contribution who explores Covid-19 in the UK as a late-modern risk by explaining that the risks it brought were unequally distributed and dependent on social class. She argues that we live in a reflexive society where we are able to choose our own identity which weakens class identities. However, through the individualisation of risks, individuals become responsible for their own actions which fails to acknowledge structural inequalities that exist in society, such as class and place. The



importance of both structures has been highlighted through the impact of Covid-19 and how this has affected those from lower social classes more severely.

Discussing the rigid stratification of social class in post-industrial society, Leah Williams conveys the ramifications of such a deeply entrenched oppression within the education system. Arguably, higher education is perceived as an equal opportunity for academic progression, yet Williams highlights the inevitable social and cultural limitations working class students encounter when considering university. Three fundamentally contrasting concepts emerge: knowledge society, neoliberalism and risk society and these are utilised by Williams to unveil and consolidate her argument that universities covertly assist the aspirations and prosperity of middle-class students.

Taking on the neo-liberalisation of care work, Olivia Insley describes how developments in contemporary society have affected the care workforce in the UK. Insley argues that the privatisation and marketisation of the healthcare sector and the changes to flexible contracts alongside the exigencies of emotional labour put on carers have had a negative impact on the wellbeing of the UK's care workers. Insley concludes with a moving question with which everyone should concern themselves, stating who is caring for our carers?

In the only contribution looking at representational issues in a novel, Mishani Ketheswaran critically explores the realities of male teenage suicide through the character of Theodore Finch in Jenifer Niven's novel *'All the Bright Places'*. Ketheswaran argues that suicide ideation is a result of societal actions, suggesting that the concept of belongingness, social isolation and rigid categorisations of gender stereotypes increases one's vulnerability to negative experiences which eventually results in suicidal ideation and self-harm. Ketheswaran adds that the dissolution of enforced gender roles and stereotypes must be acted upon to allow men to live authentic, individualised lives.

In the final piece, Leah Oldfield discusses the development of the surveillance society by examining the rise of Zuboff's surveillance capitalism, Bentham's panopticon and Foucault's metaphoric adaptations. Oldfield critically explores the impact that surveillance capitalism and big data has on democracy and our political systems. She demonstrates this through Cambridge Analytica's use of data harnessed without consent to influence voters and their voting behaviour. Corporate global companies, Oldfield concludes, emerge as the masterminds of electoral manipulation jeopardising the very foundation of democracy that we assume to be operating.

Editors: Louisa Allen, Ellie Brereton, Ellen Brighthouse, Josh Holmes, Sophie Hunt, Liv Insley, Mishani Ketheswaran, Aishaa Pasha, Ella Riley