

## 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 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 issues, including the gig economy, online surveillance and the commodification of information, call out culture and Tinder, and the wide-ranging impacts of consumerism. The application of theory as an interrogative and explanatory tool in many of the chapters in this volume demonstrates the central role it plays 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  
School of Social Sciences

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

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

**Pictures:**

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/jonathanmcintosh/3745037395/>

<https://caligrafiasurbanas.blogspot.co.uk/2015/05/find-me-on-tinder.html>

<http://www.thebluediamondgallery.com/tablet/c/capital.html>

<https://pixabay.com/en/consumer-trapped-consumption-47205/>

## Editorial

We are here proudly presenting the sixth 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>). As previously, the work published here originates in an assessment from the module *Contemporary Society and Social Futures*, which introduces students to a broad range of contemporary thought about the social world. Students were asked to write a 'critical reflection' on a contemporary phenomenon of their choice drawing on the core concepts and theories discussed on the module.

The editorial team (our usual staff-student collaboration) are hereby publishing pieces from students who have produced some very engaging and critical work in their third year at Leeds Beckett University. Fostering the critical potential from our students they have also done the editing again 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.

Dr Natalia Gerodetti & Dr Darren Nixon

This year's issue begins with an attempt to situate the emergence of a new "call-out culture" and frame it as a new disciplinary technology largely specific to the bodies of celebrities. In '**That's Problematic: Tracing The Beginning of Call-Out Culture**', Beth Tucker does this by following a description of the varying apparatus for surveillance and discipline, from Michel Foucault's much celebrated critique of the panoptic dispositif to

developments made by Didier Bigo and Thomas Mathieson. Tucker proposes that such an apparatus (a system of relations) is able to ground itself in our societies due to the most intense state of connectivity our world population has ever experienced, and that such a model could only possibly emerge simultaneously with our (increasingly) intimate relationship with the internet. With the inversion of panoptic values into synoptic values, celebrities are seemingly the beneficiaries of their own surveillance, yet they constantly teeter on the edge of their own crucifixion.

In the next contribution, **Gig economy: construction vs reality**, Megan Wright examines the contemporary phenomenon of the gig economy and its effects on contemporary society. Seemingly flexible and versatile, the rising 'gig economy' is a byproduct of Post-Fordism. The rise of neoliberal capitalism has conjured a whole new world of work, where companies can control our work life, while never claiming to be our employers. ICTs have enabled companies like Uber to create what could be seen as entrepreneurial 'self-employment' to some but surveilled, risky and exploitative employment to others. In this critical reflection, Wright questions the illusion of autonomy in the gig economy and the risks we face in the contemporary world of work.

**Risk in the Age of Information** assesses whether the age of information influences a risk society. Josh Little associates the notion of risk society with wealth, and its use and distribution in society, with technological progression, noting how the internet, as a source of information technology, can be used

as interconnectivity between individuals. In this piece, Little critically examines the notion that positivity is always followed by negativity and he shows this by the increase in exposure to risks in almost every form. The author also considers how the idea of knowledge constitutes a currency and is making society more and more in need of highly skilled and educated workforces, which in turn suggests that this development is attached to capitalism.

In **Surveillance and its Implications for Contemporary Society** Eve Morris asks how private our lives are and argues that they are increasingly less so. The rise of ICTs coincides with the rise in surveillance and the commodification of this information gathered. Not only are aspects of our lives therefore being made public, they are being auctioned off to the highest bidder. Morris identifies some of the implications of the huge scale on which our data is collected not only for us as individuals but also society more widely, identifying the increased ability for us to be controlled.

In **Does YouTube facilitate Knowledge or Surveillance?**, Scarlett Clarke focuses on whether YouTube can be considered a helpful learning tool for education, or a dangerous advocate towards 'spying' on the innocent. The popularity and the overall vastness of the worldwide relation to the website, represents the globalisation and consumption of media content. She argues both for and against the website as part of an information society, and discusses theories such as Webster's five definitions of an information era, YouTube's algorithms, positive educational experiences argued by the owner of TED, to the freely uploadable content as done by some extremist groups. As a result, Scarlett concludes by suggesting that YouTube's intentions may well be educational etc. but will not escape the possibilities that surveillance is inevitable.

Online practices are also the focal point of **'Tinder: The Marketplace for Love'** by Holly Robinson. The explosion of dating apps in recent years has transformed how we navigate love and relationships in contemporary society. Robinson explores how love is discussed in the works of Giddens, Bauman, and Beck, amongst others, who argue that love is becoming increasingly reflexive, open and active and consequently more precarious. She then goes on to explore the impact technology, for example Tinder, has had in enabling this McDonaldised or 'window shopping' system of negotiating intimacy and relationships we see in our arguably post-modern world.

Linking personal practices and global questions Lydia Clarke looks at the links between self-esteem and self-worth and our obsession with consumerism in our current society to examine the impact that these habits which are arguably inherent to post-modernism has on our environment. Whilst sociology has long addressed the effects of our consumption patterns in regard to social class or neo-liberalism, by linking together sociological theories and scientific research, Clarke, in **How the Obsession with the Self creates Global Warming**, provides an interdisciplinary insight into the wider, potentially life threatening consequences of our behaviours.

A further contribution, **Consumer Culture and Post-Fordist Customization**, critically approaches consumer society drawing on Jean Baudrillard who argues that consumer society is constituted by a ubiquitous state of simulation. According to him, the project of modernity has dissolved into a vast abundance of signs and proliferated representations of the "real". Anna Szabo explores the construction of identity and the range of operational capacity that social "agents" (consumers) are able to exercise over their bodily expression. Therefore, it is an investigation into whether or not our

consumptive choices define our “selves” that we attempt to realize, or if instead we exist in a perpetual state of subjectification; as embodiments of power relationships and the values of capital.

In her reflection **Post-industrialism: Theory versus Practice** Kate Brown explores and critiques the way that knowledge economy theorists define transformations in contemporary society, mainly focusing on information, network and knowledge societies. The concern in this reflection is that the advocates of these societies are over emphasising the benefits and as a consequence are rose tinting over the darker sides. The problem, then, is that those areas who are struggling with the transition from industrialism to post industrialism are being ignored and what Brown is calling for is the recognition that the end of manufacturing sectors may mean the end of industrialism but not necessarily the emergence of a new society and suggests that a more holistic view should be taken.

Drawing on key academics of the 20th Century, **Beyond Vicinities: Human Capital and Information in the Society of Control** looks at the parallels in the changing production models and the individual subject. Callum Howe discusses how notions of the subject, and indeed its relation to capital, have changed in light of informational

developments that have, according to some academics, triggered a new kind of society. Through the works of Marx, Kant, and Foucault, Howe also explores the divergent views on individual freedom – from an existential phenomenon to an oppressive means of control.

Surveillance returns again in Phoebe Goulding’s reflection **Data Harvesting or Tyloring our Needs? Life in the Surveillance Society**. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century surveillance was ceaselessly revisited as a source for critique and as a discursive tool for analysing the way in which disciplinary power is exercised over the bodies of society’s inhabitants. In her reflection, Goulding traces the consequences of the deployment of such technologies and asks whether we can accept surveillance at all as a source for greater individual freedoms. Using both the example of multinational technology company Google (specifically their attempts to distribute housing for their workers) and an analysis of the changing face of power the questions is posed; can we expect to see a return of localised Feudalism in the wake of a rapidly mutating social dynamic?

Kate Brown, Lydia Clarke, Scarlett Clarke, Callum Howe, Megan Wright

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