

Editorial: Theorising Futurities

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'Theorising Futurities', the July 2012 edition of the Graduate Journal of Social Science, is inspired by the degree to which concerns regarding 'the future' have gained a pressing importance. This has been accompanied by the concurrent presence of both a language and material conditions of 'crisis.' Frequently, one finds that talk of crisis and 'the future' appears intrinsically coupled; to speak of a 'broken' present seems to encourage one to extrapolate from the situation of today to consider the terms of the impending future. Of course, it could be argued that the 'crisis' and 'loss' found in the discursive landscape of the social sciences are nothing new. They are visible in Jean-François Lyotard's (1984) influential argument that we are living amidst the loss of grand religious and ideological narratives with the advent of post-modernism (a claim cogently discussed in the paper of Anneke Sools and Jan Hein Mooren), in the nineties debates surrounding an apparent 'crisis' of masculinity (see Robinson 2000; Morgan 2006), in growing fears surrounding climate change, and in Wendy Brown's (1999) exploration of 'left melancholy' within left-wing movements

that are increasingly marginalised by the rise of neo-liberalism. Yet, despite these pre-existing sites of perceived instability and loss, 'crisis' and social change seem to have gained palpable meaning following the global financial crisis of 2008 that has continued to dominate discourse across Europe (and beyond) from the level of the everyday to national and international policy and governance.

As well as intruding upon multiple layers of contemporary social life, the landscape of 'crisis' has also become particularly implicated in discussions surrounding recent changes to the University as an institution (see Calhoun 2006). While many of the structural changes to the University find their roots in the rise of neo-liberalism in the eighties, the economic recession and austerity measures recently imposed by many European governments have been accompanied by – and have arguably even legitimised – extensive budget cuts, the growing intrusion of government into academic research and funding as well as the increased precariousness of academic labour. Indeed, the implications of this changing climate are so great that Paul Mason (2012), in

a Guardian article published earlier this month, saw fit to describe the 'typical' student of today as a 'graduate without a future.' While this phrase was used by Mason during a lecture at Birmingham University, it nonetheless speaks to the rising number of unemployed graduates across Europe and beyond.

However, as a number of papers included in this edition highlight, the precarious status of graduates is not only something that lies in the future of students after they finish university. It has also entered the academy as an economic reality for many graduate students and their academic colleagues. This transformation of the University consequently threatens to further entrench class hierarchies within the academy by greatly increasing the financial burdens placed upon those entering academia, whilst concurrently affecting the research and working conditions of many currently situated in the social sciences and other related fields. Such a discussion draws upon a dialogue that has woven a course through recent editions of the GJSS under the editorship of Gwendolyn Beetham and Melissa Fernández Arrigiotía in 'Interdisciplinarity and the New University' (Vol. 8, Issue 1) and by special editors Alexa Athelstan, Cassandra McLuckie, Liz Mills, Angelica Pesarini and Mercedes Pöll in 'Thriving on the Edge of Cuts' (Vol. 8, Issue 2). The implications of such changes to the conditions of academic

labour were also brought powerfully into the spotlight by Linda Lund Pedersen and Barbara Samaluk (2012) in the previous edition 'Critical Whiteness Studies Methodologies' (Vol. 9, Issue 1). Responding to Lund Pedersen and Samaluk's timely provocation to direct attention to the unpaid labour increasingly normalised within the academy, one of the aims of this edition has been to continue this dialogue. This has been enabled by the reflections of **Gwendolyn Beetham and Melissa Fernández Arrigiotía** in their essay '**Precarity and Privilege: A Response to Linda Lund Pedersen and Barbara Samaluk**' and **Jenny Thatcher** in her position paper '**PhDs of the UK Unite! Your Future Depends On It**'. Writing in reaction to Lund Pedersen and Samaluk, Beetham and Fernández Arrigiotía draw attention to the activities of those seeking to challenge the institutionalised silences around unpaid academic work. Highlighting similar issues, Thatcher's article particularly discusses the formation of the Postgraduate Worker's Association (PGWA) across a number of British universities as an emergent site of student activism and protest against the growing exploitation of labour within the academy. **Sam de Boise's** article '**The Coming Crisis? Some Questions for the Future of Empirical Sociology in the UK**' offers additional insight into the manner in which these changes – in particular the growing emphasis

upon 'impact' as a crucial criterion for research excellence – are also affecting the status, study and methodologies of empirical sociology in the UK, giving a valuable concrete example of the kind of disciplinary transformations that are being engendered by recent changes to University structures.

Mason's article seems to confirm that a whole swath of young graduates are part of a generation being written off as just another additional cost of the continued recession. Nonetheless, this edition is wary of positing the experience of a particular environment, institution or social group as having a singular, universal or prioritised relation to the future that can be generalised to apply or stand in for all segments of society at once. In other words, as self-reflexive academics, we need to be aware of how such experiences fit into a broader social context. Mason (2012) himself provides some evidence of this when he suggests that 'the graduate without a future is a human expression of an economic problem: the west's model is broken', thus putting forward a very specific experience of impending 'crisis' as paradigmatic of a broader systemic collapse. Yet, the suggestion that the graduate forms the 'human expression' of the recession not only risks obscuring the privileges that can be found in academia. As Beetham and Fernández Arrigiotía highlight, it may also elide the complex ways in which precariousness

can be compounded by intersecting collisions of racial, classed and gendered positionings and histories. We consequently need to interrogate any self-evident or totalising narratives of 'crisis' to ask instead how futures – rendered necessarily multiple – are represented, debated and played out across the contemporary social world.

Certainly then, this edition asks how social scientists theorise futurities in times of social change and how these dynamics affect our epistemological and methodological approaches. However, **Yvette Taylor's** article '**Future Subjects? Education, Activism and Parental Practices**' suggests that the very ability to discuss 'the future' and participate in narratives of future being, becoming and belonging (however thwarted they may currently seem) are themselves bound up in intensely real nexuses of power and privilege. Turning her critical lens on the University itself and the position of the mobile academic, Taylor draws attention to the intricate class hierarchies that must be unpacked in order to uncover the pressing economic and material conditions which cut subjects off from access to the future as a site of meaning. **Gerald Koessler's** article '**Precariousness and Futurity: The Example of Subcontracted Cleaning Workers in the Banking and Finance Industry in London**' provides such an exploration by analysing interviews with cleaning staff in the

City of London and Canary Wharf, whose precarious working conditions and low wages make it difficult to plan for the future. **Thomas Allen's** discussion of Margaret Archer in dialogue with Lars Von Trier's (2011) film *Melancholia* in his paper **Melancholia and the Radical Particular: Against Archer's Realism** offers an imaginative collision of philosophical critique, filmic analysis and discussion of the experience of 'crisis' for a range of 'real-world' subjects. Allen parallels Von Trier's apocalyptic narrative with the way in which relations of alienated capital heavily impact – if not outright tear asunder – many people's ability to find meaning in a conceivable future. These authors thus draw attention to narratives that operate along exclusionary grounds whereby the future is always-already curtailed for subjects marginalised along intersecting lines of class and ethnicity. These discussions are furthermore complemented by **Christian Rojas Gaspar's** review of Jerry Hollingworth's (2008) **Children of the Sun: An Ethnographic Study of Latin America**. Rojas Gaspar's exploration of Hollingworth's study of street children in Mexico and Peru may well provide another concrete site through which to consider such temporal exclusions. This prompts us to consequently suggest that networks infused with power, privilege and precariousness need to be examined in order to understand how notions of 'the future' and ac-

companying discourses of 'crisis' are available to some subjects at the expense of others.

While dialogue surrounding 'crisis' often positions it as something inherently to be avoided, solved or 'made better' through future action, this edition also seeks to break open debates about the kind of futures that are seen to be productive and, indeed, the very notion that it is only 'productive' futures that we must strive for. The so-called 'anti-social turn' found in the work of a number of contemporary queer theorists (see Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2005) has, for instance, involved explicit explorations of 'failure.' Arguing that queer subjects are always-already seen as having 'failed' according to dominant heteronormative narratives, Sara Ahmed's (2010) recent work **The Promise of Happiness**, reviewed here by **Julia Downes**, examines what it means to 'fail' to be happy or pursue happiness according to heteronormative paradigms. Furthermore, Judith (Jack) Halberstam's (2011) **The Queer Art of Failure**, reviewed by **Marianna Szczygielska**, uses an imaginative bricolage of cultural texts that fail to pursue (re)productive pathways integral to the functioning of Western capitalist structures. While not explicitly drawing upon this work, Allen's contribution to this edition shares Halberstam's attentiveness to the link between capitalism and futurities by suggesting that a relation of 'negativity' towards the fu-

ture may be essential for subjects in order to emancipate themselves from the alienation of wage labour found under contemporary Western capitalism. The works of Ahmed and Halberstam, taken alongside Allen's article, prompt one to ask: must one always strive to produce 'positive' or 'progressive' futures in the social sciences? Moreover, if a 'positive' relation to the future is seen as interwoven with the tenets of neo-liberalism and its accumulative reproductive drives, what can come out of a social science driven by 'negativity'? As evidence of the highly dialogic nature of this edition, the work of Taylor and **Yi Xing Hwa** seeks to temper the idea that the divisive and alienating nature of capitalism necessarily demands a turn towards absolute negativity. While she discusses the influence of theorists such as Lee Edelman (2004) and Halberstam in her essay **Holding on to a Lifeline: Desiring Queer Futurities in Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods***, Hwa remains focused on queer futurities as enabling orientations that can open up new horizons of desire, possibility and community. Taylor moreover suggests that the privileged mechanism of choice involved in 'opting out' of certain futures can contrast deeply with those already positioned as outside of the system and thus peripheral to these discourses of 'the future.' The papers brought together in this edition thus offer varied investments and traversals

of these 'positive' and 'negative' futures.

While this edition certainly places emphasis upon 'the future' as the site of inquiry, many of the authors featured invite us to consider how the future functions as one temporal trajectory among others, necessarily in dialogue with both the present and the past. This need to carefully interrogate the narratives that one tells about the past in order to engender a particular conceptualisation of the future is found in Clare Hemmings (2011) book **Why Stories Matter**, reviewed by **Allison Kinsey Robb**, which focuses particularly on the way in which the history of feminist theory has been framed by feminist scholars. **Caitlin Boland's** and **Tracey Walker's** articles also suggest that the process of thinking through futurities is not merely rooted in extrapolations from the present in a forward-flung line of motion; rather, they look at the ways in which our histories – more precisely, the telling of these histories – can be instrumental in how we position and make sense of the present and the future. Bringing Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida into dialogue in her article **'(De/con)structing Political Narratives: Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida on crafting a positive politics'**, Caitlin Boland suggests that meaning is actively constructed, rather than inherently and passively present, in the stories we tell. This indicates that we must acknowledge respon-

sibility when choosing the narratives that we wish to propel us into various futures. Tracey Walker's article **'The Future of Slavery: From Cultural Trauma to Ethical Remembrance'** shares Boland's investment in the role of literature, yet her discussion of the legacy of slavery in contemporary Britain highlights the need to become more critical of the attachments we make to certain narratives concerning this history. Walker argues that we need to move beyond a paradigm of trauma and its related trappings towards an ethical remembrance of slavery grounded in alternative narratives and practices: vital in a society that still seeks to clothe the most painful legacies of the imperialist past in silence. In addition, **Anneke Sools'** and **Jan Hein Mooren's** article **'Towards Narrative Futuring in Psychology: Becoming Resilient by Imagining the Future'** discusses a narrative psychology project currently being undertaken in the life-story lab at the University of Twente, the Netherlands, which invites participants to write letters as a means of cultivating 'resilience' to crisis and social change. These essays consequently share a focus on narratives and stories as an illuminating and vital means of considering the available framings of the future.

Inspired, then, by the feeling of an overriding 'crisis' and the accompanying drama of social change, this edition seeks to place this seemingly palpable 'broken' reality under

the spotlight in order to unpack the assumptions that lie behind this interwoven discourse of crisis and futurity. Admittedly, such discussions include their omissions, gaps and silences. This edition, for instance, does not feature articles that relate to the ecological 'crisis' and environmental considerations of the future that form a particularly pressing parallel to many of the issues explored in this edition (see Ackerman 2009; Donovan and Hudson 2011). Other such omissions may also be noticed by our readers. Yet, if the current landscape of crisis seems to impact upon our relation to our histories, our research, to society and to each other, we hope this edition shall prompt us to ask how we can look at and examine this elusive, but nonetheless intensely present question of 'the future' in order to fundamentally reshape these very relations.

To conclude, we would furthermore like to invite readers to continue dialogues surrounding questions of precariousness in academia and beyond. If you would like to contribute a short essay or position paper, please contact the editors at editors@gjss.org.

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