

isrf bulletin

Issue XIV

‘So Far, So Good...?’

Conversations on Today’s Future

Edited by Dr Louise Braddock & Dr Fraser Joyce

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EDITORIAL

Dr. Louise Braddock & Dr Fraser Joyce

Why is the future a topic for social science? Why was it one for the ISRF's 2017 Annual Workshop? The theme answers to the focus of the ISRF on 'real-life' problems; the ones we have now, and the ones we might encounter in the future having all too often brought them upon ourselves. As we tell our students, the social world is an object of study for us because we are curious about what happens to us and want to understand things now, and also because we want to act so as to secure or at least to influence the future in our favour. We want, that is, the best possible future we can imagine. From discussion with our workshop partners at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam and the University of Amsterdam, considering how everyday imagining and social scientific predicting might work together led us to the Workshop theme of fantasying and forecasting.

In thinking about new solutions to current problems, and ways to anticipate future ones, a role for the imagination is inevitable. This is so, no matter how scientific social science aspires to be; how much its 'physics envy' leads it to claim predictive power. For in natural science too the imagination is at work, in conjecture, hypothesising, and the use of what the philosopher Max Black called 'as-if' theoretical models. But while the imagination's place in what is called the logic of discovery is incontrovertible, the implications of what is imagined for action must still be controlled by the way things really are in the world. In natural science, this control comes from the experimental testing of hypotheses. But what controls the implications of imagining about the social world is less clear-cut.

One question behind the workshop theme was whether and how fantasying itself might open up or close down what are seen to be available as social 'futures'. Fantasying future social scenarios can on the one hand be restrictive, in bringing about a version of the 'Rosenthal effect' of self-fulfilling prediction. All too often however, the implications of fantasy realised are not what one had envisaged; unintended consequences abound and multiply, with unpredictable

openings-up and closings-down of 'futures'. How can social science address this complexity problem? How far can we trust the imagination as a basis for planning the future?

The ISRF's Annual Workshops are events where we pose the problem and ask those who participate to tell us what they think. Part of what makes the workshops so exciting is the chance to witness a diverse disciplinary range of scholars engaging in conversation with each other. But after the event, when they go their separate ways again, how can we at the ISRF capture the work that took place in the room, and how can the discussions be encouraged to continue? To follow through the collective lines of thought emerging from the most recent workshop in Amsterdam, we re-ran an exercise from an earlier *ISRF Bulletin* and commissioned contributions for an extended 'curated conversation' between a number of those who had attended. They were invited to write responses to a list of the core issues and themes directly and indirectly addressed over the two days, along with a few surprise discoveries that warranted further discussion, and a number of unanswered questions. We asked them to send us their reflections.

Their responses were then dissected and interwoven, paragraph by paragraph, with those submitted by their colleagues, leaving their arguments intact. This curated narrative is something akin to an imagined (*sic*) conversation where passages on a common theme meet as point, support and counterpoint, reflecting perhaps the conversation we were indeed having at a deeper level. It also serves to demonstrate the possibility and value of collaborative interdisciplinary dialogue. It borrows its title, which is also the title of the *Bulletin,* from the dark joke that opens Mathieu Kassovitz's 1995 film *La Haine*, 'So Far, So Good...?'.[1]

This extended conversation on futures leads us on to consider the past, with different perspectives from a historian, an anthropologist and an archaeologist. And, for an analysis of what history can offer the social sciences we are also fortunate to be able to reproduce 'What Historians Know', by Bill Sewell, extracted from his book *Logics of History*. Lastly, for changes of point of view and pace, Josephine Lethbridge (Interdisciplinary Editor at *The Conversation*) considers the role of

1. See Murray Pratt's contribution, gratefully acknowledged.

the imagination in journalism, and Erin Kavanagh (Independent Scholar) presents a poetical piece based on her reflections of 'So Far So Good...?'.

We extend our thanks to all our contributors, many of whom are visible in the photo montage. We hope that you (and they) enjoy the fruits of their labours.

‘SO FAR, SO GOOD...?’

Reflections on the Theme of 2017’s Annual Workshop

Edited by Dr Fraser Joyce

We asked participants in the 2017 ISRF Annual Workshop - *Today’s Future: Challenges & Opportunities Across the Social Sciences* - to reflect on the theme and to expand upon discussions which arose there...

Patrick Overeem sets the scene:

PATRICK OVEREEM: In a way, the workshop theme (‘Today’s Future’) was a risky one for social scientists, as we are notoriously bad at predicting anything about our societies. The fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the USSR, the events of 9/11, the 2008 financial crisis, even Brexit and the Trump election – precisely those events that have the greatest social and political impact on our way of life – were unforeseen and unexpected. And if we did not see such huge events coming, can we be confident that we will do any better for much smaller events? So, it was in a way a risky choice to devote a conference to ‘social science futurology’.

Now one way to circumvent the difficulties of scientific prediction was addressed in the panel discussion I was privileged to chair, titled ‘fantasy forecasting’. Given the difficulty of reliable, theory-based and research-based predictions (‘forecasting’), we can still use our imagination about possible futures, be it in a more optimistic or more pessimistic way (‘fantasy’). And this use of the imagination is crucial for any social scientist, I think, if only to stimulate processes of theorizing and hypothesizing.

We should be careful, however, not to take our fantasies for predictions; they are more free-ranging and less stable than those, and we would be ill-advised to act on our fantasies alone. Hence

the need to always balance them with 'forecasting', however problematic the latter may remain. In other words: fantasy and forecasting enrich and correct one another, and I think it was a great idea to put the two together.

Such imagined futures could be instrumental to understanding our world, but as Ian Loader, Nina Moeller and Murray Pratt argue, their utility depends on our ability to consider them with a measure of scientific detachment:

IAN LOADER: Digital and communications technology is re-casting what it means for people to be and feel (in)secure in the world today. So are patterns of migration across borders and the social and governmental responses to rapid population flows. So too is the revival of nativist sentiments across large swathes of the globe, and the return to the corridors of power of a xenophobic politics of protection. So too is economic austerity and climate change. These trends are likely to be fateful in their effects upon the landscapes and netscapes of in/security in coming years. We cannot though be certain how – which is precisely why these effects demand patient, careful enquiry, not brash or motivated prediction.

NINA MOELLER: The problem today is not that we cannot imagine the apocalypse, but that we cannot imagine a way out of it. Today's future looks bleak/rosy/messy. That is an outlook, the perception of possible, probable trajectories of continuity and disjuncture from where 'we' stand, whoever that we may be. It says more about 'us' than about the future. I say: 'the future looks scary, scary in so many ways'. And I know I don't stand alone. But then, it seems that we cannot give in to that fear, and so we lower our gaze. We seem to live in this cognitive dissonance, schizophrenia even. Business as usual in the face of imminent collapse. Yet of course we cannot be sure to know the future until later, and so maybe the simple, blind-folded plodding on is also a kind of hopefulness, a recalcitrance of spirit.

MURRAY PRATT: What would it mean to think of futures as already present in reflexive mode today? To the extent that so much of characteristically human endeavour is forward facing, involves

planning and projecting, there is a sense in which looking to the future might play a foundational or structuring role in what it means to be social, cultural, political. But then again, how wise would we be to build preparations so firmly on foundations yet to be tested in tomorrow's world, given that the future reflexive could only be informed by forms of knowledge or verifiability available from our known experience. I am reminded of one of the key moments from Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine*, the anecdote about someone falling from a high building and repeating all the way down, 'So far so good'.

IAN LOADER: There are several reasons to be wary about 'the future'. Zygmunt Bauman once opined that social science ends where predicting the future begins, and I think he had a point. Too often forecasting future trends is simply a projection of the hopes and aspirations, or fears and anxieties, of those who are doing the predicting. Forecasting the future is part of an effort to bring a certain preferred version of that future into view or being. There may be nothing wrong with that – but we should see future-gazing for the motivated activity it so often is.

Our engagement with the environment provides a timely object lesson in how forecasts (the scientific findings of climatologists and oceanographers) can become entwined with imagined futures (encompassing everything from minor upheavals to cataclysms):

NINA MOELLER: I felt the ecological got short shrift at the workshop (a rather huge elephant in the room). When I say ecological, I mean the human, too: that complex web of life that includes people and their increasingly awesome and unfathomable inventions, sustained by digital technologies, electricity, light, and fossil fuels. We dig and we churn, we burn and we compress, we move and we boil, we pile and we stick, we fumigate and raze, transforming landscapes, participating in climate, making storms, floods, famine, war. We are co-participants in, on and of this planetary system, and all of it seems to be getting increasingly hostile.

MURRAY PRATT: It's clear that human impact on the environment

is near-cataclysmic. Climate change, far from an isolated threat, shares in its modalities with those other late-anthropocenic alterations that we have miraculously co-conjured out of the nothing that is unfettered capital. I am thinking, for example, of the destruction of natural habitat, mass extinction events and the plasticisation of our oceans, and the depletion of the planet's resources (most obviously carbon fuels) but equally our squandering of various mineral resources and any remaining reserves of human ingenuity on crucial devices that enable us to laugh at cats, or keep up to date with celebrity brunch trends.

Their cultural power means that imagined futures can be appropriated to other ends; from the commercial...

NINA MOELLER: While social movements have been warning about ecological destruction and lamenting widespread inertia at least since the 1960s, the mainstreaming of environmentalism with the 1987 Brundtland Report has spelled a commercialization of eco-threats. The dominant framing of humanity's current predicament emphasizes 'planetary limits' and impending environmental collapse: the apocalypse makes it into our consciousness daily. We are force-fed resource shortages, hurricanes, droughts, floods, wildfires and, say, Zika. Electric cars, photovoltaic roof tiles, bioplastics and zero carbon holidays get sold by peddling dystopian imaginaries. But where to from here? We need to ask fundamental questions. We need to examine the way we metabolize the world, the way we reproduce our everyday every day.

...to the political:

JAY WIGGAN: At least in relation to future social welfare policy in the UK, drawing a distinction between concrete and abstract when we talk about 'futures' is problematic as the abstract and concrete are closely entwined. Policy makers frequently draw upon abstract concepts (fairness, social cohesion, economy) to convey referred future reality as the desirable and/or inevitable path or destination. An appeal to the abstract works to concretise a desired future, which in turn legitimates and makes rational the enactment of reforms to bring the proposed future into being as a present reality.

SHERRILL STROSCHEIN: One of the policy items in the news since the conference has been the question of how universities should be funded; there is now a large price-tag attached to universities for students in the form of tuition fees. Whether they pay the whole price-tag, and whether they take out loans from the government, depends on the kind of future earnings they have. The entire university policy discussion currently rests on students' futures, with the notion that universities should give them good ones. Unless universities do this, they are not seen as providing value for money (measured in terms of the 'longditudinal educational outcomes'). Indeed, there are recent calls for universities to justify their price-tags in terms of these strong futures. Is this all that universities are for, or should be for?

EMANUELE LOBINA: Futures have much political utility because the future is the political battleground of today and the struggle for power between competing advocacy coalitions can, in the absence of reliable crystal balls, only be fought with the ammunitions of past collective experience. The assumption underpinning this proposition is that, because no social group is all-powerful, all advocacy coalitions are forced to compete for the support of other coalitions and the broader public with a view to expanding their alliances and pursuing their agendas. The tougher this competition, the higher the stakes, and the more likely that the terrain of contention (whether or not the contestants include professional politicians and other policy practitioners such as technocrats, businesses, civic organisations and social movements) will move from a narrow focus on technical indicators and objectives towards bold visions of collective transformations and, ultimately, a better future for society. For the collective psyche finds less excitement in the reproduction of the mundane than in the promise of greener pastures.

If futures can be commercialised and politicised, how do stakeholders represent their narrative of choice to others? Ian Loader, Jay Wiggan and Emanuele Lobina offer some suggestions:

IAN LOADER: Those of us who study crime – or in my case the ways in which 'crime' shapes and reshapes social relations and

governance – have reasons to be wary of future-talk. Crime has long since been a prime site for the working out of a nostalgic cultural reflex wherein social actors imagine a more cohesive or orderly past and contrast it with gloomy prognoses about a supposedly disorderly trajectory into the future. Variants on this posture are common on the political right (the collapse of social authority creates conditions for future chaos) but also appear on the political left (the withering of solidaristic welfare ushers in authoritarian and/or privatized control).

JAY WIGGAN: A pertinent example of the contestation of imaginaries can be found in competing narratives of 'welfare reform' over the last 6 years. Since 2010 Conservative-led Governments have advanced a problem solution narrative that journeys towards a future 'stronger more cohesive society' by way claiming that the Broken Britain they inherited from Labour (the past cast as present problem) warrants particular social, economic and political reforms.

In Scotland this is counterpoised by an alternate future welfare imaginary rooted in abstract notions of a social contract between people and state to prioritise social justice. In relation to social security and employment programmes, for example, this has led to the UK Government's pejorative use of the term 'welfare', together with invocations of dependency being replaced by the term 'social security', explicitly framed in terms of citizens' interdependence, and the promotion of respect, dignity and recognition of the diversity of social contributions.

The reforms enacted by UK governments to bring into being a future welfare imaginary organised around social impact investing have absolved the public sector from the delivery of social welfare, and relieved the state of the costs of intervention. Instead, the resources to support various interventions aimed at achieving desirable improvements in society (social impact) are sourced from philanthropic or for-profit investors. In exchange the achievement of intended social outcomes triggers payment by the state or other commissioner of a pre-agreed rate of return to the investors, thereby delivering a positive economic and social

impact. Supposedly this encourages efficiency and gives the state access to private capital currently beyond its reach. But markets require continual intervention by the state. In the case of the impact investment market, UK Governments' have introduced reforms to build the necessary infrastructure to make a future financialised welfare state a more feasible reality. This has included pursuit of an 'open public services agenda', where a vision of a future financialised welfare state becomes the justification for promoting a new impact investment market in the present.

EMANUELE LOBINA: We can understand why the utopia/dystopia binary persists in public discourse. More precisely, the utopian vision of advocacy coalitions and the dystopian depiction of their opponents' agendas are at the same time inherent components of the social and political struggle and, by differentiating between 'them' and 'us', strengthen the internal sense of shared identity and the internal cohesion of each coalition. In a pluralist society where diverse views of the world are tolerated, the struggle for power will inevitably extend to the struggle for defining transcendental and universal principles and controlling discourse. These principles – including sustainability, development, governance, democracy and participation among others – are transcendental and universal as they invoke the ability to go beyond society's redistributive limitations in a way that benefits all in society. Controlling the meaning of these principles affords power and that explains why competing advocacy coalitions should be expected to contest their definition.

All this leaves us, however, with a host of unsettling doubts. If in a pluralist society no worldview has the monopoly of legitimacy, and assuming that we reject the despair of moral relativity, whose future can be regarded as a better or even acceptable future?

Could these 'alternate futures' lead us towards something more constructive?

JAY WIGGAN: I find the Cultural Political Economy approach of Sum and Jessop useful in thinking about the fixity of futures, and how the weaving together of distinct discourses and material

changes to policy work to both close down and open up what the future can or will be. Their approach situates 'futures' as 'open' in the sense that they are inherently contingent. Not all possible futures have an equal chance of being brought into existence, but rather depend upon the political and economic capacity of actors to promulgate and successfully enact their 'imaginary'. The question then is which futures achieve 'hegemony', which futures become the 'roads not travelled', why, and what happens to the latter.

I'd argue that the futures not taken up do not simply become lost possibilities, but rather haunt the future that is now the present, providing alternate imaginaries at the margins of the prevailing social settlement. When the present reality (the once preferred past future) becomes unstable, unable to any longer hold together socio-economic and political tensions within it, these (re)appear as insurgent counter narratives, conjuring anew visions that further disturb the fixity of the existing settlement. Given the complexity of the social and economic environment future imaginaries provide actors with a conceptual tool that helps to narrow down how present problems are interpreted and how they can be resolved in keeping with preferred ideational orientation.

IAN LOADER: Suspicion about how 'the future' operates in public and political discourse about crime does not mean abandoning hope that the shape of any actual future remains open to willed human action. The idea that the world we currently inhabit is not the only plausible world, that it remains feasible to imagine, debate and advance, better alternatives, is what gives future thinking about questions of crime, order and security its enduring appeal. We cannot and should not give up searching for, thinking about, and deliberating upon, practices of just ordering. But such a hopeful, worldly, realistically utopian orientation to 'the future' entails that we – in the here and now – can do better than motivated forecasting, nostalgic yearning, or throwing in the towel in the face of technological innovation. It demands further that we hold on to – and seek to renew for our times – an enduring feature of the criminal question that is too often suppressed or forgotten. When we think about and act upon crime, we are always also

having to debate the meanings and priority we give to ideas such as order, justice, legitimacy, freedom, rights, democracy and so on. It was ever thus. But we need more than ever today to remind ourselves that conversations about our future security are political conversations about the quality (and qualities) of our institutional arrangements and the terms by which we live together.

NINA MOELLER: How could we live together – with other humans as well as non-humans – in a world even more ravaged by extreme weather, pollution and consequent shrinking of habitable and fertile land? How would we feed, shelter, heal, enjoy? How would we raise our young? It is of course crucial to realize that 'we' are not only citizen-consumers in over-industrialized countries; 'we' are also subsistence farmers, indigenous forest dwellers, nomadic pastoralists and fisherpeople, neo-rural activists and others whose lives purposefully or inadvertently contribute to the continued existence of a world 'outside' of capitalist technocracy. I think that it is through a head-on, full-on, total engagement with 'their' lifeways that we might find guidance on how to proceed toward a world in which humanity has a future.

If we recast our imaginations as instrumental resources for the purpose of future-oriented story-telling, we can consider whether these stories carry within them something worth aspiring to, or worth avoiding. In so doing, imagined futures have the capacity to become something more substantive and thus constructive:

ALESSANDRA GRIBALDO: In the last few years the strain to compose meaningful narratives focuses on diverse futures, or we may say 'futures' diversity': layering and frictions as proposed by Tsing, or 'returns' and what Clifford has called 'traditional futures' by minorities and marginal voices. Non-hegemonic views can interrupt common sense on futures and world making, showing that different futures overlap. Within anthropology the recent growing interest in science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin's work (herself daughter of anthropologists), conveys the need for different stories, a shift towards alternative worlds, and an attention to minor narratives not only in content but also in genre and style.

MURRAY PRATT: Writing in a genre often described as speculative fiction, Neal Stephenson's 2016 novel, *Seveneyes*, envisions a future where, following the shattering of the moon, Earth cannot sustain human life. To some extent, his protagonists have time to prepare, and a select few humans, through a combination of engineering, imagination and sheer grit, manage to piggyback on a gothically-modified International Space Station and ensure the survival, if not of humanity *per se*, then of a range of genetically mutated versions of the race, evolving many millennia into a future. The novel contrasts the preparations the humans make with the eventualities they cannot envisage but do encounter (not least a series of unpredictable events that results in them temporarily running out of males). That we/they are able to muddle through somehow could be seen as testimony to humanity's survival instinct, or perhaps just to wishful thinking and the drive for closure of a novelist and his readers.

One aspect the of future science-culture nexus that Stephenson emphasises throughout is the importance of 'amistics' (defined by The Urban Dictionary as 'the study of the choices made by different cultures as to which technologies they would embrace or spurn'). The choices his survivors make require prioritisations that may make no sense today, but could become urgent or life-sustaining in the future. An analogy might be, even if we were to spread our eggs as evenly as we could across as many baskets we could find, who's to say that omelettes will be on tomorrow's menu?

IAN LOADER: Future-talk about crime is beset by another common cultural predisposition – one that collapses thinking about future trends into a story about technological innovation and domination. The 'forecast' here points towards a crime and crime control landscape shaped by drones, algorithms, electronic surveillance, artificial intelligence, and great leaps forward in genetic science. Once again, the future being anticipated conjures – and is oftentimes designed to conjure – social hope or anxiety.

Crime has long been a site for the building of utopian dreams and dystopian fantasies. To take skeptical note of these enduring cultural patterns in sensibilities towards crime is not to deny that

crime trends, and the institutions that are mobilized by or in response to them, are being shaped and re-shaped by large-scale economic, social, political and technological change.

Stories of change form one of the pillars of historicism:

PATRICK OVEREEM: What struck me in the panel discussions was that to say anything meaningful and imaginative about the future, we cannot but look back to the past as well, for instance through meaningful references to the communist past in Hungary (as discussed by András Bozoki) and to aristocracy (as discussed by Naema Tahir).

ANNELIEN DE DIJN: If you want to be able to say something about the future, you need to know a lot about the past. This is true not because history repeats itself in any mechanical way, but because human nature, despite the major social changes of the past few centuries, remains more or less the same. From that perspective my own discipline, political science, is in trouble. Political scientists nowadays tend to focus almost exclusively on the present and on the very recent past; they have stopped being interested in longer-term developments. This development can to a large extent be attributed to a methodological bias toward quantitative research, which typically depends on sources that have only become available in the late 20th century.

This turn to a narrow presentism, I would argue, has undermined the capacity of political scientists to contribute to an understanding of the political challenges we face today. If you look at democracy from a historical perspective, it immediately becomes clear that this is an incredibly fragile and exceptional form of government. Now, the exceptional nature of democracy might not be that obvious if we look around us today. Since the 1990s we have been living in a world where the majority of states have democratic regimes. But this is a historical anomaly: For thousands of years, human beings have been ruled by autocrats or small elites.

These comments aside, the field of History had but a minor role to play over the course of the Workshop. To redress the balance, we

asked an historian, an anthropologist and an archaeologist to make a case for an historically-informed approach to today's futures. We present their contributions here in their entirety:

HANSJAKOB ZIEMER: If historians are the bearers and interpreters of the past, they are best equipped to reflect about the functions of 'future' in that past and how it was used at any given historical moment. They can ask question such as how contemporaries shaped certain futures and for what ends. Think, for example, of the significant increase of utopian visions that were published in popular cultural journals in the decades around 1900 where contemporaries outlined ideal futures and pasts in order to come to terms with present day issues. Journalists, public intellectuals, politicians or academics envisioned ideal situations in which the crisis of the present day were solved and they offered assumptions about the futures imagined. They imagined utopian societies in which alcoholism and housing problems were extinct, in which equal distribution of wealth was achieved, in which all members of society had equally access to the institutions in society, or in which the arts governed social life.

But similar methods of projecting the solution of everyday problems into the future could also lead to apocalyptic visions as well in which the decay of society was predicted and in which present problems could not be solved. One famous example is Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1921) but recent historical research has shown how widespread such apocalyptic and utopian visions were in German society and to what extent they were a reaction on the perception of an imagined and manifest crisis in Central Europe at that time. This crisis was often imagined as a crisis of values that failed to govern and to offer guidance in social life, but it even became manifest in a crisis of the institutional basis of community life, especially in the years following the aftermath of World War I and the inflation period.

If we use Reinhart Kosselleck's definition of crisis as a moment in which a decision is due but not yet reached, the analysis about the functions and usages of 'future' in such historical moments of crisis offers a way to understand the motives, concerns and

ideals of contemporaries at this point in time in order to come to terms with existential problems. Yet, it is important to bear in mind that the discourse on the future cannot be separated from the discourse on the past. Both visions of the future relied on notions of the past that were often infused by the emotion of nostalgia, a sentimental yearning for the past. As a recent conference of historians, psychologists and literary scholars at the German Historical Institute in London on this subject revealed, people tend to turn towards seemingly simpler, better ways of life in the past when they were confronted with problems in their own existence that proved hard to solve. Around the 1920s, such a flight into nostalgia was, for example, achieved by imagining a return to the village of the German middle ages, in which German craftsmanship governed social life and social hierarchies, which was – in the imaginary view – based on moral standards and merits rather than on such faulty developments in the contemporary world as commercialism, urbanism or democracy. Historians have revealed how such seemingly stable, ideal, and homogenous futures never arrived in the past and yet retained a power to establish social groups and shape identities.

CHARLES STEWART: The discussions of the rise of illiberalism at the ISRF Workshop in Amsterdam were among the most compelling for me. I think everyone was trying to make sense of the shocking turn our world has taken; the rise of the far right, the resurgence of racism, antisemitism and the drive to build border walls in Europe and America. The tone was set by the opening conversation with András Bozóki and Jeroen de Kloet, moderated by Pál Nyiri. This became the *leitmotif* of our meeting: what kind of future will we have granted these currents; how long will these movements endure; what can be done to defuse them?

In reflecting on these questions the image came back to mind of a man explaining on British television why he had voted for Brexit. Dressed in worker's overalls and standing before a lorry or farm vehicle, he said words to the effect: 'We're Great Britain. That's what we do.' (My silent ironic response to this was, 'Yeah, that's right, it says "great" on the tin. That's surely what we are.') By this point in 2016 people in Britain were largely familiar with the

Trump campaign slogan 'Make America Great Again.' It was curious, nonetheless, that both of these statements had landed on the word 'great', and done so in a nostalgic mode. For these troubling new movements, the future will resurrect an idealized past.

In their professional thinking social scientists subscribe to the different view that the future is not predictable and that the past does not repeat. And that is before we get to more specific doubts about the return of manufacturing jobs or the feasibility of disengaging from globalization. The modern view of history arose in the wake of the French Revolution, which showed that the future was not necessarily dictated by the past. It was, rather, to be viewed as largely unpredictable, a realization that informed the understanding of all eventuation. In other words, we arrived at modern historical understanding of the particularity and contingency of events via thought about the future. Furthermore, granted the rapid innovations in science and technology already in the 18th century, the general assumption within historicism was not only that the future would be different; it would also most likely be an increment better than the present. Historicism gave rise to a society highly exercised by the future, living toward it, even in its accounts of the past, written to be read by future audiences.

What we have to consider now is how it has become appealing to a large portion of the population to vote for the restoration of a past which few, if any, have ever experienced. This is not so much nostalgia as fantasy. The multiple passing personal temporal fantasies that overcome all of us from time to time (nostalgia, hopeful utopianism, premonitions, hauntings) stand apart from the current illiberal political turn which is an act of faith, an exclamation point; people committed to it, voted for it, and defend it. This runs counter to the committed temporal orientation of social science, government, science and, of course, history. Thus we have two large sections of society that differ on the nature of historical process and in their visions of the future. A counter French Revolution is underway, advocating the return of authoritarian rule (the gilded Louis XIV décor of Trump's penthouse cannot go unremarked). As Ernst Bloch, surveying German society in 1932, put it, 'Not all people exist in the same now.' Examining the same

sort of cleavage that we are currently witnessing, he observed that fascists successfully exploited the pent-up anger of those idealizing the past.

Perhaps the past is returning in dystopian form rather than the idyll envisaged by the supporters of Trump and Brexit. I don't think historians are comfortable placing a bet on either one of those, precisely because of the nature of historicism. In this sort of current situation historians function as social scientists and the main purview of social science is limited to the near future. Social scientists diagnose the present, assess unfolding situations, and devise courses of action to deal with looming problems. At the ISRF meeting we were largely working within this paradigm as it strikes us as the most real and practical temporal framework. Social scientists – take social anthropologists, for example – acquire their wisdom from their own empirical research (ethnographic fieldwork) and from their deep immersion in the ethnographic record. Historians acquire theirs from comparable exposure to the historical record. Practitioners of both of these closely related disciplines have vast repertoires of contexts, events and scenarios to draw on when looking at any given case; they have a sense of how things might go, but they would be unlikely to predict how the future will turn out. They know the limits of historicism, social science and everyday reason.

Historians do, however, have an advantage over most social scientists because their discipline systematically looks at 'futures past' (Reinhart Koselleck's famous phrase). We are at this moment the future of some past plan and/or chain of events. Someone designed the spaces we now occupy. It is not a question of how the past will return in the future, or even explain the future, but a general sense of the multiple ways that things have gone in the past and been realized as futures in the past. This is where historians can be very useful in present discussions of how worrying present situations might play out.

Those who engage with the historical record do not seek to merely recount the past, but instead attempt to define the conditions that allow (and have allowed) us to conceptualise the here and now:



Photo Credit: Matt Smith

Clockwise from top left: Dave Elder-Vass (*ISRF Political Economy Fellow*); ISRF Residential Research Groups Discussion Panel (Jayne Raisborough, Martin O'Neill, Sarah Amsler, Julie Parsons); András Bozóki (*Professor of Political Science, Central European University*); Bill Sewell (*ISRF Academic Advisor*); Alessandra Gribaldi (*ISRF Independent Scholar Fellow*); and workshop delegates.



Photo Credit: Matt Smith

Clockwise from top left: Charles Stewart (*ISRF Academic Advisor*); Lina Molokotos-Liederman, Charles Dannreuther (*ISRF Flexible Grants* recipient) and Emanuele Lobina (*ISRF Political Economy Fellow*); Maria Fernanda Cuellar Ruiz; Jay Wiggan (*ISRF Early Career Fellow*) and Nishat Awan (*ISRF Early Career Fellow*); Ivano Cardinale (Co-PI, *Economics: Past, Present & Future*); and Jurgen De Wispelaere (*ISRF Political Economy Fellow*).













Photo Credit: Matt Smith

Clockwise from top left: Jayne Raisborough (*ISRF Mid-Career Fellow*); an Improvised Research Proposals group; Patrick Overeem (*ISRF Early Career Fellow*); Murray Pratt (*Dean, Amsterdam University College*); Lula Ning Hui (*Chief Europe Reporter, Globus, Caixin Media*); and the Feminism, Gender, Law and Environment Panel (Danielle van den Heuvel, Jeroen de Kloet, Alessandra Gribaldo, Naema Tahir, Annelien de Dijn, and Nina Moeller).













Photo Credit: Matt Smith

Clockwise from top left: Julie Parsons (*ISRF Mid-Career Fellow*); Josephine Lethbridge (*Interdisciplinary Editor, The Conversation*), and photographer Matt Smith's *Exist to Resist* project; James Symonds (*Professor of Historical Archaeology, University of Amsterdam*); the workshop venue, Het Scheepvaartmuseum, Amsterdam; Pál Nyíri (*Professor of Global History from an Anthropological Perspective, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*); and Alessandra Gribaldo, Naema Tahir and Annelien de Dijn (*Assistant Professor in Political Theory, University of Amsterdam*).

JAMES SYMONDS: Archaeology has traditionally served nationalism and modernity by informing individual and collective identities. In this way it helped to fill the perceived 'black hole' that exists between the past and the present. But in recent years postmodern theory has removed the sense of loss and nostalgia for the past from our work. Some would say that there has been a 'loss of antiquity'. It has also been realised that archaeological techniques can be used to study and understand any form of material culture, from Stone Age tools to 21st century objects. The American archaeologist Bill Rathje was one of the first to point this out with his 'garbage project'. He reasoned that archaeology could be about more than connecting the present to distant pasts and argued that it was possible to study 'the interaction between material culture and human behaviour, regardless of time of space'. His famous 'garbology' project succeeded in producing a socially-embedded critique of consumer society. It is therefore possible to re-position the discipline of archaeology and free ourselves from temporal parameters, as any material may be subject to archaeological inquiry.

But is it still useful to see the past as 'then' and the now as 'now'? Recent archaeological theory has attempted to overcome the arbitrary division of past and present by noting that the past 'percolates' or to put it another way, you could say that, 'There is no archaeology of the twenty-first century, but only an archaeology of the twenty-first and all its pasts, mixed and entangled'. This stance re-positions archaeology to look around, in a panoptic way, rather than simply gazing backwards. It also shifts the purpose of archaeological work from justifying or validating nation states and the status quo, to a way of probing and challenging assumptions and apparent truths. A flourish of contemporary archaeologies has emerged in the last 17 years. Some archaeologists have argued that studying the entanglements of contemporary materialities has 'social relevance and meaning in ways that may not exist for archaeologies of earlier time periods'.

This is a bold and potentially liberating stance. For if we accept Paul Connerton's argument that forgetting is a characteristic of modernity then our efforts to document contemporary life may

be making a valuable contribution to future society. That said, what kinds of stories should we be telling in our work? Matthew Johnson, following Haydn White, has observed that 'by definition our work serves to ironicize master narratives... we walk in a uniquely dangerous place of the human past, a space between often very powerful 'master narratives' of cultural and social identity and much smaller, stranger, potentially subversive narratives of archaeological material. Archaeology... [has] the ability to render familiar things strange and revel timeless things as transient'. Here we can perhaps refer to Freud's idea of the uncanny or *unheimlich*. The act of archaeology reveals that which should have remained invisible. Michael Shanks has likened this to a therapeutic encounter where a patient is asked to reflect and consider the relationship between past experiences and present behaviour. Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas observe that the act of archaeology deals with an absent present. It is far more than a 'serendipitous and somewhat passive notion of discovery' and that 'archaeologists constitute things in the present, not only conceptually but materially as well. This is a creative materializing intervention, which has redemptive and therapeutic powers which help individuals and communities cope with painful contradictions that otherwise would remain unarticulated'. But what about the question – and the writing of history? I like this quote from the American folklorist Henry Glassie: 'History is not the past. History is a story about the past, told in the present, and designed to be useful in constructing the future'.

So where does this leave us?

JAYNE RAISBOROUGH: Ever since my first Sociology lecturer boomed that the point, according to Marx at least, was not to interpret the world but to change it, my work has been future-orientated: better worlds, better futures. 'Better' was tied to heady ideals of fairness, liberty and vague notions of an end to social oppression. But mainly 'better', like 'future', was often left a little unspecified; it was, after all, more an orientation than a destination. But of late the future has seemed to step from obscurity: it's getting rather nearer and what the workshop gave me was a sense of its presence; not in shadowy patterns but deeply trodden paths made by countless feet fleeing famine or war to seek 'better'; in

threats and perils of walls, divisions and isolations; in 'eco' initiatives destroying the environments they are meant to protect; and in the steady rise of water levels. The urgency can be overwhelming – all the more reason to hold tight to our commitment to ethical, reflexive work lest social justice and human dignity get lost as we fight fires on all sides.

ALESSANDRA GRIBALDO: We can't think of the future without taking a stance that provides a perspective. Situatedness is at the centre of feminist theories: considering how ideas of history and time are contested and translated gives a wider meaning to the term 'contemporary'. The very concept of future is imbricated in our capacity to think time: feminist scholarship has questioned teleological male grand narratives (from Hegel to Marx and Freud) projected towards future and progress, counterposing the present as the time of feminism. If history is multidirectional we may think of future as a (though limited) plurality of possibilities. But how can we think about future without narratives of modernization and progress? Rethinking 'the' future means rethinking the notion of the origin, not as a preceding source but rather as a non-uniform, impure and contaminated time, where threshold and transitions reveal extant traces.

EMANUELE LOBINA: As historic peers of future generations do we have a moral duty to leave certain futures for ourselves and others? Here I would like to suggest a simple rule of thumb for navigating these dilemmas: always strive to open up opportunities for the emancipation of the many, not the few.

SHERRILL STROSCHEIN: Those of us teaching at universities have to be concerned with now. How do I explain the elections of 2016 to my students, or better help them to understand them with reference to the ideas of great thinkers? How do I get them to think about matters of inequality that we currently face, and the nature of current societal problems? Certainly one would hope that my students can then have a strong future, but I am most concerned with getting them to understand today. Thinking about 'now' means asking other questions. Are the students able to connect great ideas from the past to the present? Are they able to think now

about the current problems we are facing? Can they see progress in their ability to make these connections?

The policy decision to place a high price tag on universities for students has come with the expectation that our goals in teaching them should change. To provide value for money, we should be able to demonstrate each learning outcome has been met, and that students can jump off of the class conveyer belt into employment well-tailored to their studies. But this would not be education as most of us practice it. The notion of education as a value for itself may be forgotten by all but those of us trying to practice it. It turns out that Enlightenment progress could be killed by the policy requirements of The Future. Who would have anticipated that?

JAYNE RAISBOROUGH: Interdisciplinary dialogue bought the world crashing into the crisp white building dedicated to the past. A sense of scale seemed impossible but it came, and with it came connections, imaginings, even optimism as we went back to assumptions – what is/was democracy – does it still work – is it fit for purpose? These dialogues also bring the supports of our work to account, yet allows optimism and renewed purpose to flood in. As usual the ISRF workshop jolted me from my comfort zone. My questions about anti-ageing were always and already about the awful violence enacted when one is expected to deny a self that one must inevitability become – but in the workshop I saw wider, shared concerns with vulnerability, care and compassion that were expressed in participation, sensory and creative relations and dialogue. My impressions? Mostly wonder, always urgency.

MURRAY PRATT: From the perspective of the humanities too, it is worth considering whether our blithe trust in culture's ability to mend is misplaced, or if instead the emergence of post-truth and fake news as the structural forms of un/democratic civil society can ever be put back in Pandora's box. A reflexive futurity in the present, rather than something we take for granted in its current forms (futures markets, growth premised on only one planet, an untrammelled investment in the virtualisation of the social), might actually be an urgent global responsibility, something we need to interrogate, but also nurture more, promote, educate for, as newer

generations come ever closer to the walls that we have already been building, so close that they risk not being able to see over them, or even realise that they are walls at all.

Thank you to all our contributors:

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WHAT HISTORIANS KNOW[1]

Professor William H. Sewell Jr.

Emeritus Professor of Political Science and History, University of Chicago; ISRF Academic Advisor

WHAT HISTORIANS KNOW

What historians generally think of themselves as knowing about are their topics of research - the Russian Revolution, the Italian city-state, the Indian Ocean trade, the New Deal, the Ming Dynasty bureaucracy, the Boer War, Brazilian popular culture. This includes, of course, knowledge about how to use and interpret the relevant published and archival sources. But historians, whatever their particular topic, also know something else: how to think about the temporalities of social life. The common topic of historians is the unfolding of human action through time. Our thinking about time tends to be implicit rather than explicit, to be embodied in specific narrative accounts of particular series of events or particular transformations of communities, states, or fields of discourse. We don't think of ourselves as having a theory of social temporality. Yet I am convinced that most historians actually share a set of assumptions about how time is implicated in the organization and transformation of social relations and that these assumptions can be stated abstractly. In other words, historians have implicit or working theories about social temporality. Moreover, these theories are of considerable subtlety and sophistication, far superior, in my opinion, to the rather clumsy temporal assumptions that plague most theorizing in the social sciences. It is precisely as theoreticians of temporality that historians can most usefully participate in social theoretical debates.

How, then, do historians think about social temporality? First, and most fundamentally, I think we believe that time is fateful. Time is irreversible, in the sense that an action, once taken, or an

1. Reproduced with permission, from Sewell Jr, W. H. (2005). *Logics Of History: Social Theory And Social Transformation*. University of Chicago Press.

event, once experienced, cannot be obliterated. It is lodged in the memory of those whom it affects and therefore irrevocably alters the situation in which it occurs. Although I might make a promise and then retract it, the fact of my having made the promise is not obliterated by the retraction. I become, both to myself and to others who know about the incident, a different person, one who has made and retracted a promise. Most of our actions, of course, do not transform the situation in which they are undertaken. By nodding to my co-worker when we pass in the hall, I merely reaffirm our common employment status. Yet this simple gesture is itself significant for the ongoing history of social relations in my work unit (in my case, a department of political science). That this is so becomes immediately obvious if I fail to produce the acknowledging nod. If I simply walk by with no acknowledgement, this might be read as an ominous act, as a sign that I have entered a hostile faction of the department or that I have decided to vote no on his upcoming promotion. Especially if repeated, failing to give the expected nod will result in a chilling of social relations between me and the snubbed colleague. Either act, the nod or the lack of a nod, leaves a historical residue; it inflects the social relations between me and my colleague and potentially those of my department as a whole. And it goes without saying that more dramatic actions - denouncing a colleague at a faculty meeting, arguing vociferously against making new hires in one of the department's rival sub-fields, or inviting a previously nodding acquaintance to co-teach a course or collaborate on a paper - will generally have considerably more powerful effects on the course of social relations in the department.

Although individual actions can be shown to have fateful social effects, it is also true that every act is part of a sequence of actions and that its effects are profoundly dependent upon its place in the sequence. My relations with my nodding-acquaintance colleague will be more profoundly ruptured by my non-nod if I have failed to nod to her the past three times we've passed in the hall, or if she has recently been snubbed by one of my known friends and allies, or if I have recently said disparaging things in a department meeting about the kind of research she does. By contrast, the effects of my non-nod will be decreased if we have recently been on the same

side in a struggle to reform the department's voting procedures or if she has just gotten an article accepted in one of the field's leading journals. Historians believe that we cannot understand why things happened as they did without figuring out the sequence in which things happened. As this implies, historians assume that the outcome of any action, event, or trend is likely to be contingent, that its effects will depend upon the particular complex temporal sequence of which it is a part. The effects of a given happening may be nullified, magnified, deflected, compounded, channeled, or broadcast by previous, subsequent, or simultaneous happenings. The fact that the outcome will be contingent upon not only a wide range of other actions, trends, or events, but also upon the precise temporal sequence in which these occur, means that historical happenings are extremely unpredictable.

It is of course true that social scientists also recognize the fatefulness of time in their personal lives. Sociologists or economists are just as aware as historians that having a baby, deciding to take a new job, being left by one's spouse, making friends with a colleague whose ideas transform one's own, or learning that one's child has a life-threatening disease have major and unpredictable consequences for one's life. The difference, as I see it, is that while social scientists recognize temporal fatefulness as a truth of everyday existence, most of them bracket this truth out of their scientific consciousness. Although they see these every day or personal experiences as fateful and existentially wrenching, they view them as essentially random, as noise, from the point of view of the whole. As social scientists, they see their task as rising above the contingency and messiness of everyday life to find the lawful regularities that actually govern the whole. Historians' practices imply a rejection of this partitioning of everyday life from the social totality and claim instead that temporal fatefulness we experience in our personal lives is replicated at every level of social life.

The conceptual vehicle by means of which historians construct or analyze the contingency and temporal fatefulness of social life is the event. Historians see the flow of social life as being punctuated by significant happenings, by complexes of social action that somehow change the course of history. Historians constantly

talk about "turning points" or "watersheds" in history and spend much of their conceptual energy dividing the flow of history into distinct eras that events - the establishment of the Han Dynasty, the Crusades, the rise of printing, the Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, the Russo-Japanese War, the Nazi seizure of power, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the rise of electronic media, the fall of the Berlin Wall - mark off from each other. Historians see events like these, which transform the histories of entire human collectivities, as having the same sort of fatefulness and contingency as the smaller events - divorces, new jobs, angry breaches in department meetings - that inflect the course of our personal lives. As usual, historians haven't engaged in much abstract theoretical reflection about how events have such dramatic, historically transformative effects. They have, rather, given countless narrative accounts of how particular sequences of happenings have indeed changed the course of history of some collectivity or other - Oxford dons, Shanghai workers, New Yorkers, Russians, Roman Catholics, or the world as a whole. As against the implicit assumption of most social scientists, that social change takes place according to smooth, gradual, predictable, and linear processes, historians assume that historical temporality is lumpy, uneven, unpredictable, and discontinuous.

Thinking about historical events makes clear another fundamental assumption about temporality that is probably less obvious (although no less true) at the level of personal experience: that social temporality is extremely complex. One significant characteristic of historical events is that they always combine social processes with very different temporalities - relatively gradual or long-run social trends, more volatile swings of public opinion, punctual accidental happenings, medium-run political strategies, sudden individual decisions, oscillating economic or climatic rhythms - which are brought together in specific ways, at specific places and times, in a particular sequence. That there are a diversity of temporalities operating in any present raises difficult analytical challenges. How do we handle the problem of sequence when we are dealing not with a chain of discrete and precisely timeable decisions, but the intertwining of long-term with punctual processes? Which social processes, with which temporalities,

will emerge as dominant in an event that mixes them together? How, and when, do short-term processes override, deflect, or transform long-term processes? How do long-term trends reassert themselves in situations where they seem to have been eclipsed by more pressing political processes? Writing convincing historical narratives often hinges on the ability to resolve such complex temporal conundrums.

The historians' "eventful" conception of temporality certainly posits that different historical times have, effectively, different rates of change - that history may be "accelerated" by events. But it also posits that events transform or reconfigure social relations. The consequence is that they see distinct historical eras as having varying forms of life and different social dynamics. Historians, to put it differently, assume that time is heterogeneous. We assume that what entities exist in the social world, how they operate, and what they mean change fundamentally over time. This is not to say that the world is in constant flux and chaos; the social temporality posited by historians is always a mix of continuity and change. But our working assumption is that every important form of social relations is potentially subject to change: not only ideas, institutions, and identities, but tools, forms of shelter, sex, gods, climate, diseases, cultivated plants, and languages. Another way of putting this is to say that historians implicitly assume that social life is fundamentally constituted by culture, but by culture in the widest possible sense - that is, by humanly constructed practices, conventions, and beliefs that shape all aspects of social life, from agriculture and procreation to poetry and religion. We assume that because these practices are humanly constructed, humans are also capable of destroying, altering, neglecting, forgetting, or radically reconstructing them, either purposely or unintentionally.

Temporal heterogeneity implies causal heterogeneity. It implies that the consequences of a given act are not intrinsic in the act but rather will depend on the nature of the social world within which it takes place. This assumption is quite contrary to the practices of mainstream social scientists, whose entire mode of operation is to discover and apply general causal laws, laws implicitly or explicitly assumed to be independent of time and place. The model

case would be economists, who assume that all social actors everywhere are utility maximizers and that the laws of supply and demand are universal. Historians of course admit the existence of causal regularities of considerable duration. But rather than assuming that the world of the past must have been governed by the same logics as the world of the present, historians assume that the social logics governing past social worlds varied fundamentally, and therefore that their logics must be discovered and puzzled out by the researcher.

Temporal heterogeneity also implies that understanding or explaining social practices requires historical contextualization. We cannot know what an act or an utterance means and what its consequences might be without knowing the semantics, the technologies, the conventions - in brief, the logics - that characterize the world in which the action takes place. Historians tend to explain things not by subsuming them under a general or "covering" law, but by relating them to their context.

Finally, if the world in which actions take place is temporally heterogeneous, it makes sense for historians to insist on the importance of chronology. Indeed, chronology - the precise placement of a happening or a fact in time - is important for two reasons. First, as I have already pointed out, historians insist that we cannot know why something happens or what its significance might be without knowing where it fits in a sequence of happenings. Meticulous attention to chronology is the only way to be sure that we have the sequence straight. But chronology is also important because the meaning of an action or an event depends on the temporal con text in which it occurs. In order to understand the relation of one social fact to another, one needs to know whether the temporal boundaries of the social facts placed them within the same "historical era" - that is to say, within a period during which some particular historical logic obtained. Chronology is crucial because it tells us within what historical context we must place the actions, texts, or material artifacts we are attempting to interpret or explain.

The historian's implicit theorization of social temporality - as fateful,

contingent, complex, eventful, and heterogeneous - is, I hope to have indicated, reasonably coherent. And its methodological corollaries - a concern with chronology, sequence, and contextualization - seem to me logically consistent with the theory. I think that the vast majority of working historians would concur with at least the general outlines of what I have claimed on their behalf, although I am sure many would contest one or more of my specific formulations. This theorization is intentionally very abstract, and even historians who accept my abstract outline might disagree violently over how its various points might be specified: What counts as an adequate contextualization? What social causalities vary from one period to another? What is it about events that enables them to "change the course of history"? What is contingent and what is necessary in a given course of change?

Historians, at least implicitly, conceptualize social temporality with considerable care and finesse. But with rare exceptions, they do so only implicitly. They don't regard their understanding of the temporality of social life as being a matter of theory at all, but simply as how the world works, as the mere factuality of things. They learn their conception of temporality by a kind of scholarly osmosis, by reading other historians and internalizing the ways they narrate accounts of historical change and continuity. They know a lot about social temporality, but they know it as a kind of professional common sense, all the more so because it is roughly consistent, as I have tried to indicate above, with a more everyday common sense about the temporality of our personal experience. Moreover, historians, in my experience, suffer from a kind of narrative overconfidence. When they reach tight spots in their arguments, they tend to try to narrate their way out of trouble, going back to the sources for yet more detail, laying on more and more examples, instances, and anecdotes. This often means that important conceptual questions - about temporal dynamics, about causation, about the nature of the relations between events or entities - get lost in a welter of narrative detail, rather than being addressed at the appropriate conceptual level. Historians may be virtuosos of social temporality, but their theoretical consciousness is often so underdeveloped that they are not conceptually aware of what they know.

It also must be said that there are plenty of sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, or geographers whose working assumptions about temporality more closely resemble the historians' model I have sketched above than the assumptions of mainstream social science. Indeed, most of the examples of adequately historical conceptualizations of temporality that I discuss in *Logics of History* were assembled by sociologists or anthropologists, not historians. I have chosen these examples in part because it is important to show that sophistication about temporality is not fated to be a unique possession of professional historians and in part because sociologists and anthropologists tend to be more self-consciously aware than historians of the theoretical problems posed by their historical arguments. Yet it is symptomatic of the primitive state of theoretical dialogue between history and the social sciences that even these social scientists, whose general theoretical and methodological instincts are finely honed, are often insufficiently explicit themselves about their temporal assumptions. This is another reason to believe that a more robust theoretical dialogue between social scientists and historians would be beneficial to both.

THE VALUE OF IMAGINATION IN JOURNALISM

Josephine Lethbridge
Interdisciplinary Editor at The Conversation

Of what value is fantasy – or the imagination – when it comes to the future? This is a question we returned to in Amsterdam last summer, over and over; and it is a question, in various forms, that dominates the curated conversation in this issue of the *ISRF Bulletin*. What role does fantasy play in academic research? To what ends should such fantastic imagination be directed – are some to be avoided? Need fantasy always be balanced by forecasting? And what should we be critically aware of when we employ the fantastical imagination?

Individual feelings or answers about to these questions varied enormously, and were to some extent determined by discipline. Ian Loader, for example, stressed that those in the field of criminology have particular reason to mistrust 'future talk'. It was also noted that futuristic fantasies have a tendency to be politicised and commercialised, and should therefore be taken with a pinch of salt. Others noted the growing interest within some disciplines in more straightforwardly fictional forms of fantasy – the value of speculative fiction, for example – querying whether such approaches could inform the academic imagination.

Naturally, the academic frame of the workshop directed and inflected these questions. So what do I, a journalist who commissions and edits content by academics for a public audience, think about all this – what is the value of futuristic fantasies, journalistically?

The first thing to stress is that, of course, fantasy in journalism

attracts many of the same questions as those detailed above, albeit perhaps with a slightly different spin. Is the imagination something of journalistic interest? Certainly. But obviously a journalistic imagination of the future (or futures) can also work in both positive and negative fashion. Many of the dangers attendant on journalistic fantasy are the same as those discussed academically. This is particularly the case of fantasies framed as, or mistaken for, predictions. The hazard in the case of journalistic writing is that predictions – or fantasies dressed up as predictions – are likely to generate interest, to 'sell', or to operate as clickbait. Everyone desires simple answers to scary or complex questions, which makes commissioning fantastic predictions such as these an attractive prospect for an editor.

Fantasy in journalism is therefore a delicate path to tread. One doesn't want to be the sort of journalist who peddles narrow-sighted, politicised or commercialised fantasy futures, entrenching rather than opening them up. Journalistic writing, after all, should educate, enlighten, criticise, offer new perspectives. But fantasy can be of use here, too.

Firstly, criticising or highlighting the workings of certain hegemonic fantasies about the future – such as the commercial or political ones discussed – is of great journalistic value. But it's equally important to offer new ways of thinking.

Secondly, as was stressed by many in Amsterdam, recognising the multiplicity of available futures is key to valuable fantasising. The imagination should be used to open up the future rather than close it down, and one way of doing this is to recognise and give airtime to the imaginations of different worldviews, cultures and viewpoints. Journalistic writing seems an obvious and valuable way to do so.

Thirdly, individual fantasies about the future – the extrapolation of possible futures from investigations of the past and present – can also be of journalistic value. Such articles can provide alternatives to hegemonic views of the future, encourage questioning of our trajectories, or be used to enlighten readers about the present.

Key to getting this right, as discussed, is a critical awareness of the flimsy and contingent nature of such fantasies – awareness that they are not, per se, predictions.

Indeed, certain forms of fantastical imagination work in journalistic writing where they do not in academic writing. Patrick Overeem notes that imagining possible futures – both positive and negative ones – is crucial to academics, 'if only to stimulate processes of theorizing and hypothesizing'. Not something that necessarily gets *written*, then. But this fantastical stuff lends itself brilliantly to journalistic writing. A short piece of imagination about possible futures can – if it comes from a place of expertise related to the particular futures being discussed – be of huge interest. Scribbling down such thoughts can also operate as a testing ground of experiments or new ideas.

This is where The Conversation comes in. Our site, I think, is in a unique place to offer such articles. Individual fantasies about the future are – or should be – only valuable to a general reader if they come from a place of expertise: if they are steeped in and supported by years of research in the area they concern. People read *The Conversation* (where all articles are written by academics on their area of research) because they value news and views from a place of expertise. The fantasies of such people are therefore particularly interesting – they are informed fantasies, after all. Speculation that is driven and informed by rigorous research can offer the general reader something more, while being a little more grounded, perhaps, than pure fantasy.

I am often asked how I go about commissioning articles. This is a difficult question to answer, because at the end of the day, it simply comes down to the story. Is it good enough? Is it interesting enough? Is it attention-grabbing enough? I think the most relevant thing to stress here is that stories I commission come from all stages of research. A lot of them are written in response to news, employing relevant past research. Others are written to mark new publications. But others – and I often find these the most interesting, although they only work in very particular circumstances – are written right at the beginning of a research

trajectory – when ideas are being formed. I published one piece recently, for example, that came out of a workshop organised by a neuroscientist, a geographer, and an artist. They wanted to consider whether lessons pertaining to the social effects of geographical mapping might inform the way we go about mapping the brain in the future. This, in and of itself, is a fascinating question – and so made a great article.

This brings me on to say that perhaps, as we all found in Amsterdam, fantasy about the future is particularly (or perhaps even only?) valuable when it takes place across and between disciplines. When old lessons are applied to new fields. Such fantasising is naturally self-aware, critical, it probes all sorts of assumptions. As indicated by Bill Sewell in his essay on 'What Historians Know', only by combining the thought-processes of a historian and a social scientist can we appreciate the intricacies of temporality, while remaining conscious to the blinkers of theory.

Interdisciplinary imagination, I think, can encourage us to look around in a panoptic way (such as James Symonds has argued is happening in archaeology). And I have great hope that informed, interdisciplinary imagination in journalistic form will tend towards the opening-up of futures, rather than closing them down.

Since April 2017, Josephine Lethbridge has been The Conversation's Interdisciplinary Editor, funded by the ISRF. Josephine's role includes working with scholars at The Conversation's member universities, as well as past and present Fellows of the ISRF, to bring interdisciplinary social research to millions of readers worldwide.

Anyone wishing to pitch an idea for an article to Josephine, or simply interested in knowing more, should contact her directly at josephine.lethbridge@theconversation.com.

('TODAY'S FUTURE')

A Poem[1]

Erin Kavanagh
Independent Scholar

The events that impact our privilege
re-cast borders of enquiry.
The problem is not the apocalypse.
Today's future is the perception of trajectories where 'we' look
scary
And so we lower our gaze
To
a
sense
of
falling.
There may be nothing wrong – but we should see it
so,
unfathomable,
transforming
a threat we have co-created out of nothing,
lamenting our consciousness.
But
Futures have utility because reliable crystal balls find promise.
Those of us who study a contestation of narratives enact
intended outcomes
beyond reach,
More unsettling doubts become unable to hold together the
complex environment.
Suspicion does not mean abandoning hope.
We should not give up – in the here and now – suppressed
meanings give ideas democracy.
It was ever thus.

1. Cut out sequentially from the words and punctuation of *'So Far, So Good...?'* (pp. 8-32).

But in a ravaged land
the strain to return voices envisions life,
a wishful thinking may make no sense today
but become the future.
The landscape shaped by dream
repeats itself
because human nature remains more or less the same.
Political presentism, the perspective is
fragile.
Now, historians reflect and question everyday problems
manifest in nostalgia,
a turn towards resurgence:
Great, "great", 'great'
and troubling.
The haunting act of faith, a paradigm of reason.
We are a chain of
Archaeology
perceived in a panoptic way.
This serves to master a space between...
Here the unheimlich reveals invisible worlds
a deeply trodden path
fleeing the steady rise of water.
Rethinking moral duty:
teaching connections?
The price-tag on universities, forgotten
by all but those of us trying to practice dialogue
crashing into
crisp
white
assumptions
- jolted from
Pandora's box.
"So Far, So Good...?"

For info on Erin Kavanagh's ISRF-funded project, Layers in the Landscape, visit http://www.isrf.org/about/fellows-and-projects/fg2-7/, and http://www.geomythkavanagh.com/layers-in-the-landscape.

A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH

Past & Future Workshops

Dr. Louise Braddock

Social science's Janus-faced stance between the future and the past, an emergent theme from the 2017 ISRF Workshop, will be taken up again and taken further at next year's Workshop. It will bring together our own Fellows, past and present, with scholars from the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, and will be held on 26-28 September 2018 at the conference venue of the Max Planck Society there, the Harnack-Haus. The format will again be one in which participants are encouraged to have a voice and to engage in collective thinking and discovery. Our website will be carrying further information, and you can register there for email updates.

Keep up to date with the latest ISRF activities - including grant competitions, workshops, research outputs and more - by signing up to the ISRF Mailing List:

http://www.isrf.org/follow-us/

WHAT IS THE PLACE OF DIGITAL INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IN THE ECONOMY?

The Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF) and the Cambridge Journal of Economics (CJE) intend to award a prize of €7,000 for the best essay on the topic 'What is the place of Digital Information Technology in the Economy?'

The impact of digital information technologies throughout society, and in particular the economy, is one of the most critical issues of our time. They are rapidly transforming practices of capitalist production and provision of services everywhere. But the impact is uneven and uncertain. Jobs are being lost while profits for many are increasing. And while technology advances rapidly, with anticipated exponential changes in areas like artificial intelligence and robotics especially, existing organisations are often able to adjust only slowly, whilst the acquisition of relevant skills can take time. What are the dominant trends? What really is going on? Some say that ongoing developments herald a workless society. Others maintain that they undermine markets and herald the end of capitalism. Are these mere speculations? What can we discern from informed investigation and analysis? Essays are welcome that address these or a related theme.

For more information, visit:

http://www.isrf.org/2018EssayPrize

ISRF MID-CAREER FELLOWSHIP COMPETITION (MCF4)

The ISRF intends to launch its fourth Mid-Career Fellowship competition in January 2018.

Scholars from within Europe are eligible to apply. Applicants will normally hold a salaried position at an Institution of Higher Education and Research. Candidates should be 10 years or more from the year of their PhD award. The ISRF expects applications for grants up to a maximum of £60,000.

ISRF POLITICAL ECONOMY RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP COMPETITION (PERF2)

The ISRF intends to launch its second Political Economy Research Fellowship competition in January 2018.

Scholars from within Europe are eligible to apply. Applicants will normally hold a salaried position at an Institution of Higher Education and Research. The ISRF expects applications for grants up to a maximum of £60,000.

For more information, visit:

http://www.isrf.org/grant-competitions

This issue features:

Annelien de Dijn

Alessandra Gribaldo

Erin Kavanagh

Josephine Lethbridge

Ian Loader

Emanuele Lobina

Nina Moeller

Patrick Overeem

Murray Pratt

Jayne Raisborough

William H. Sewell Jr.

Charles Stewart

Sherrill Stroschein

James Symonds

Jay Wiggan

Hansjakob Ziemer