

Suspended between Armageddon and Immortality? A Sociology for the 21st Century

 Source: Jason Yan

The 'Digital' Panel (Photo: Jason Yan)

by Elena Denaro, PhD Student

The first evening of Cumberland Lodge kicked off to a roaring start: an inspirational opening presentation by Craig Calhoun (Director of the LSE) followed by our first panel session on 'Digital Futures' with a trio of professors: **Lord Anthony Giddens** (Former Director of the LSE), and the department's own **Judy Wajcman** and **Nigel Dodd**. Despite the late hour, the room was buzzing with thought-provoking ideas; about the future of the world, the impact of technology, how social theory can help us address the problems of the present and future, and how sociology as a discipline could position itself in the future.

The tech triad driving the future of the 21st century

Anthony Giddens took us on a whirlwind tour of 'digitalisation': a phase he characterised as the most extensive period of technological advancement and change in human history. The impacts of the digital, primarily through the medium of the internet now best embodied by the smartphone, have already been pervasive and significant; for migration and communications (Giddens), but also for labour (Wajcman) and money (Dodd).

Giddens then proposed a triad of catalytic forces propelling us into a new world: the **Internet**, **supercomputers** and **robotics**. Much of our lives now depend upon Internet-connected supercomputers – our entire financial and monetary system, for example – and these supercomputers are already able to overtake us mere humans in many ways, from chess to musical composition. The potential consequences of continued advancements in these fields are substantial. Giddens reported a study suggesting that developments in supercomputers and robotics could lead to the loss of nearly 50% of the labour force – and given the creative capacity of supercomputers, it will not only be manual jobs that disappear.

However, the prospects are not all doom and gloom. Despite radical changes to our economic system stemming from increasing automation, humans are incredibly resilient and adaptable; in fact we rarely notice the extent to which automation has already changed our lives (Oyster cards ring any bells?). So we find ourselves in unprecedented times, in a '*high risk, high opportunity society*', chiming with Beck's work, which was lauded throughout the retreat.

Back to the future

All three talks referenced reactionary movements seeking to resist the digitalisation: from a revival of analogue as a protection mechanism (Giddens); to the growing rise of mindfulness, a desire for simpler times and a return to nature (Wajcman); to the metallistic view of money embedded in Bitcoin as a means of creating scarcity in digital abundance (Dodd). However, these 'back to the future' themes within the presentations rang deeper. Some of these digital shifts may actually reflect a modern take on older practices. The thinning of the lines between work-life and personal-life, between production and consumption (Wajcman) and indeed between the *social* and *economic*, is reminiscent of the pre-industrial age. Similarly, the move away from a monetary

monoculture (a very recent and short-lived phenomena) to a pluralistic monetary system, is a return to a mode of multiplex money that extends beyond its historical plurality, entering the digital sphere as well (Dodd). Yet even within digital attempts to re-envisage our financial system, such as Bitcoin, the same inequalities play out, in fact to heightened degree. With Bitcoin we are talking not of the 99% but of the 99.9% (Dodd).

The paradox inherent within the phrase 'back to the future' is one social scientists should not shy away from. By acknowledging the problems with both extreme epochal thinking (as discussed in reference to patterns of social and economic inequality by Mike Savage later in the weekend), and with notions that nothing has really changed, we may unpick more nuanced understandings of the complex relationships between past, present and future. This will be crucial for critical, public sociology in the future, if it hopes to help address these problems, as well as understanding them.

Personal lives: digital worker or digital player?

Giddens argued that digitalisation is driving a revolutionary transformation in *participation*, all of which is happening within a very short timeframe and in a truly global way, as highlighted by the penetration of smartphones across the African continent. Through our smartphones we are constantly connected. Soon they won't just be our calling and texting devices, our internet portals and social media access, but also our bank accounts and debit and credit cards (Dodd). They are progressively a larger and more crucial part of our identities (Giddens).

While many lament the increasing intrusion of work into our personal lives through our smartphones, Judy Wajcman aptly pointed out that the private-professional boundary is being loosened in *both* directions, allowing us to bring our homes to work, as much as we bring our work home. As the digital expands, it is not only the work-home boundaries that are being bent, broken and redefined: production and consumption too are blended into notions of 'prosumption'. 'Big data' raises not only issues of personal privacy and security (Giddens), but as value creation is more and more embedded in the digital (think Facebook, Google and the like), serious sociological questions emerge around what is and is not work, and what should and shouldn't be commodified (Wajcman). In the world of Bitcoin (Dodd), micropayments for micro-transactions of micro-value creation are a technical possibility, but are they a socially desirable one?

Reorganising society

With potentially drastic changes in the horizon, both social and economic, this opening panel at Cumberland lodge raised many important questions. As sociologists, we should cherish the opportunity to work on such rapidly changing worlds and harness the reflexive power of our discipline. Giddens concluded his presentation with my personal favourite, and definitely the most memorable statement of the weekend: the 21st century is "*suspended between Armageddon and immortality*." On the brink of such a brave new world, we sociologists must hope to be there to document and analyse it, and maybe – dare we say – even to steer it.

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