

Social Futures

Monika Büscher, Centre for Mobilities Research, Lancaster University

When social scientists are calling for 'affirmative critique', one might think that humanity's canaries have stopped singing. Environmental sociology, practice theory, the 'new catastrophism', and other future oriented social science approaches have only begun to influence global policy with their diagnoses of humanity's failure to address the threat of a collapse of civilization around climate change, environmental degradation, anti-microbial resistance, violence and conflict. Yet, as political mechanisms like the Paris Climate Accord are choked by populism, some social scientists are promoting critique that 'affirms' survival.

Affirmative critique makes radical demands, including calls for post-human disloyalty to our own species (Braidotti 2016), drastic forms of population control (Haraway 2016), and life in the ruins of capitalism and modernity (Tsing 2015). It might sound like swan song, but these forms of enquiry are creating unique momentum and hope for a revolution in 'worlding'. In his last book, John Urry put forward a powerfully simple call to action, observing that 'the future is now' (2016:7).



Figure 1 A copy of a 1968 Paris graffiti in Seattle.
Image Source: [OvO](#) Reproduced under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

He proposes 'social futures' thinking as a response to the world-shaping, future-forming nature of social life in the present, highlighting the inherent 'systemness' of the everyday. This recognises that futures are social, firstly, because futures imagined and unfolding define people's lives here and now as well as intergenerational relations. Secondly, it starts from the understanding that futures

in the Anthropocene are social because they are shaped by the accretions, excretions and exhalations of the social. It appreciates that everyday social and material practices of mobility, energy use, consumption, and communication have complex multi-scalar systemic 'worlding' effects with resonances to Immanuel Wallerstein's world system theory and critiques of global capitalism. Social futures are local, but also global, planetary, perhaps even interplanetary; they entangle inequalities, multiple pasts, presents and futures, the material and the technological, the human and the non-human.

Most people 'are unaware of the systemness of their daily practices' (Urry 2016:73). But 'the science is in', showing that what the 7.5 billion people on the planet do every day, especially those in the global North, aggregates to reduce the earth's capacity to support human flourishing (Urry 2016:38). Changing this systemic dynamic requires transdisciplinary science, but it is not a matter for science alone. John Urry's *What is the Future?* sets out to 'mainstream the future', to engage diverse interests, knowledges, forms of expertise, creativity, and practice to envisage and contest what 'good' or 'better' futures might be, and to put into them now the things that might make them happen.

It is not surprising that John Urry was at the vanguard of this newly emerging 'social futures paradigm'. Like the 'new mobilities paradigm', 'social futures' thinking does not entail a complete departure from known theories and methods. Instead, it suggests a transformative shift in analytical imagination, perspective, values, practices, and politics. As Wells argued in 1906: 'the creation of Utopias – and their exhaustive criticism – is the proper and distinctive method of sociology' (cited in Levitas 2013: xi). Using utopia not as a blueprint of a perfect future (perfect for whom?), but as a method means that - like 'mobilities' – 'futures' constitute a diverse set of contested empirical phenomena and topics as well as a transdisciplinary analytical orientation and methodology, and contested ethical and political commitments. This convergence of the empirical, analytical, creative, ethical, and political resonate deeply with other – posthuman, feminist, cosmopolitan, participatory, designerly, artistic, phronetic, utopian, and affirmative – approaches, creating much synergy, but also some confusion. Some might say, with Peter Adey, that if futures are everything, they are nothing. But in a complex world proliferating intractable challenges, the very 'indiscipline' of mobilising utopia for social futures research could be empirically, theoretically, methodologically, ethically, and politically transformative of science and what it means for life on the planet.

Dark matter, hidden wealth, and social energy

If with the new mobilities paradigm, Urry and Sheller captured Bergson's fact that 'reality is movement', *What is the future?* captures the ontological futurity of the social and the sociality of futures, with resonances to Heidegger, Adams, Prigogine and many others. Complexity is a conceptual engine for this future-forming, 'affirmative' critique.

In my interpretation, complexity is key, because by acknowledging the multi-causal, non-linear dynamics of social change, a social futures approach turns the apparent oxymoron of affirmative critique into a catalyst for actionable research. Affirmative critique is not about agreeing with that which is being critiqued, but about acting on it with insight and – in Bruno Latour's words - radically careful and carefully radical creativity, coupled with a commitment to 'world' or co-create alternatives by 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway 2016). Critique becomes affirmative when the

public role of social research to be responsible here and now is understood to go beyond policy recommendations. It requires social research to become response-able, to transpose or 'mobilise' conventional social research methods of listening and observing, alongside analysis of troubles, as well as an articulation of *responses to troubles* and public experiment with such responses.

These methodologies are not unique to the new social futures paradigm, but derive new energy from John Urry's observation of the 'dark matter, hidden wealth, and social energy' of lived social change, everyday creativity and social innovation. In *What is the Future?*, he argues that capitalism, progress, and technology may 'bend humans to their character', but that social 'structures of feeling' are a powerful source of resistance (Urry 2016:12). They are 'dark matter' that can effect tectonic shifts in complex socio-economic orders (Urry 2016: 35). Wealth hidden away from the collective good through offshoring may have unhinged democracy and truth, but at the same time, people live de-growth alternatives in the cracks, leveraging a 'hidden wealth' of good social interactions, wellbeing and low-carbon lives (Urry 2016:179). And the way in which high mobility sociability burns energy is counteracted by a 'social energy' that delivers communities from the fast lanes of high carbon into slow living, from land-use into land stewardship and car free city movements (Urry 2016:181). Social futures thinking and co-creating of research around such alternatives amplifies the dark energy of the social stored in these hopeful prefigurative phenomena, and could tip humanity from hurtling towards collapse into a good life in the ruins of capitalism, modernity, and risk.

What could such futures look like? I will briefly sketch some contours taking shape in disaster risk management, where a hidden wealth of social interactions, and collective social energy give lived detail to these desire-lines of hope.

Beyond Control

People are unaware of the systemness of their daily practices, even if it has disastrous consequences. For example, '[n]o wars or terrorist attacks currently cause anything like' the 'toll of death, pain and injury' of road traffic with its 1.25 million deaths a year worldwide (Urry 2016:131). Yet, locked in to automobility systems, most people do not reflect upon, let alone act, to change their role in the production of such systemic disasters. Since Immanuel Wallerstein's *World System Theory*, Charles Perrow's *Normal Accidents*, Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society*, and Sheila Jasanoff's *Learning from Disaster*, we know that geo-political and socio-technical systems are risky beyond human control, for some more so than others. John Urry's work on complexity and mobilities has been pivotal to show how multiple forms of mobility and mobility systems are interconnected in this unequally risky runaway world. Many proliferate dangerous im|material im|mobiles such as air or water-borne micro-particles and plastics, climate altering greenhouse gases, nuclear radiation, and anti-microbial resistant bacteria. And there are digital and cultural im|material im|mobiles that cause trouble, too. Data has become Kafka-esquely noxious, erratically splintering freedom, tolerance, equality, social solidarities and values in surveillant assemblages, while cultural memes circulate, infiltrate and shape cultural politics of (un)truth and emotion that inhibit understanding of systemness and risks.

However, people are unaware of the disastrous systemness of their everyday practices not just due to its im|material im|mobile complexities, or their ignorance, apathy, or susceptibility to manipulation. Unawareness of systemness is also actively produced by modern discourses of disaster risk 'management' and 'security'. They

are couched in metaphors of command and control. The modern myth of human mastery over nature is durable. Even though unknowability and uncertainty are widely recognised as intrinsic to risk, difficulties in preventing or responding to disasters are regularly traced back to a 'data gap'. Post-disaster reports routinely blame a lack of information, inadequate organisational, legal, and technological interoperability, and social, cultural, or political reluctance to share information for failures. A clamour for more and more free-flowing data, better networks, visualization and communication technologies drowns quieter calls to work with more humility and respect for the incalculability of risk.

For example, Rana Novack, founder of the Refugee Admissions Network Alliance reacted angrily to the 2015 refugee crisis, writing in *Wired* magazine in 2015: 'We should have seen this refugee crisis coming ... we have the technology—right here, right now—to create a new, agile, insightful model that will predict mass migrations'. This is one of myriad calls for more data and data sharing that sound hollow in view of the fact that, very often, 'we' already know.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and other agencies routinely monitor the movement of people. UNHCR figures readily available in 2015 showed that the number of people displaced by conflict and persecution had increased dramatically by 8.3 million in 2014, to a total of 59.5 million in 2015 (65.6 at the time of writing). And this is just a small section of the total number of people on the move across borders worldwide at 244 million.

Risks, such as conflict, drought, or famine undermine human security and underpin migration. Their systemness and connection between global everyday practices and these vast numbers of people on the move is extremely complex (see Figure 2). But it is not seen because there is no data or analysis. The International Organization for Migration, for example, has developed a contextual and strategic data collection capacity on the nexus of crisis and mobility, by continuously tracking the movement of people through its Displacement Tracking Matrix. However, discourses of security or command and control, and calls for 'Big' data veil a social and political unwillingness to acknowledge how the privileges of the few are on the same map as the suffering of the many.

A new Structure of Feeling

But a new structure of feeling is emerging around people's experience of the politics of command-and-control-based disaster risk management reasoning. The 'we' in Rana Novack's 'we have the technology' is no longer confined to formal disaster risk management agencies and expert analysts. People affected by risk have appropriated these technologies in quite different, less modern ways that open up new possibilities for new forms of systemness awareness.

Prompted by post-election violence in Kenya in 2007, the Kenyan Ory Okolloh set up the Ushahidi crowdsourcing platform, and designed it to allow Kenyans to report election violence and share information. In an environment where a government ban on live media reporting and self-censorship severely curtailed people's ability to know about the troubled election process, this was transformative beyond Kenya's borders. Ushahidi enabled people affected to report crises and needs with such ease that it prompted a group of people affected by the 2010 Haiti earthquake, in collaboration with 'digital humanitarians' gathering around Patrick Meier, a PhD student at Boston University, to set up the 'Ushahidi Haiti Project'. This allowed Haitians to submit situation reports and register their communities' needs in a way that was very direct and easy (provided one had access to a mobile phone), and it

involved recruitment of a global ‘task force’ of supporters to translate, geo-reference, and parse the messages for visualization on a map. This passionate first mobilisation of ‘digital humanitarians’ was by no means unambiguously positive, but it did provide information that was used by formal emergency response agencies to prioritize rescue missions. Since then, Ushahidi has reached over 25 million people in crisis in over 120,000 different deployments. Two of the most recent deployments brought it full circle, first (with some irony) to the 2016 American elections, and then back to Kenya in 2017, where over 1600 issues of election disturbances were reported. This latest deployment has also brought it into close contact with quite different, manipulative ‘psychographic’ uses of data by ‘election management agencies’ like Cambridge Analytica.

Similarly conflicting intersections of crowdsourced and surveillant ‘intelligence’ are emerging in relation to refugee journeys. Websites, such as www.appsforrefugees.com, index a boom in the ‘datafication’ of refugee mobilities. This is a highly contested field, with benefits for refugees who can access and share information more easily through these apps, but who also become more trackable and controllable through the way in which data is shared in surveillant assemblages of security and crisis response agencies. At the same time, crowdsourcing and data visualisation platforms like Max Galka’s ‘Metrocosm’ or ‘Our World in Data’, supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, are beginning to visualise the systemness of migration through comparing socioeconomic variables for 167 countries alongside analysis of country-to-country net migration (Figure 2) and by addressing the question ‘Does Development Reduce Migration?’ in the context of data about global inequality, extreme poverty, and environmental issues.

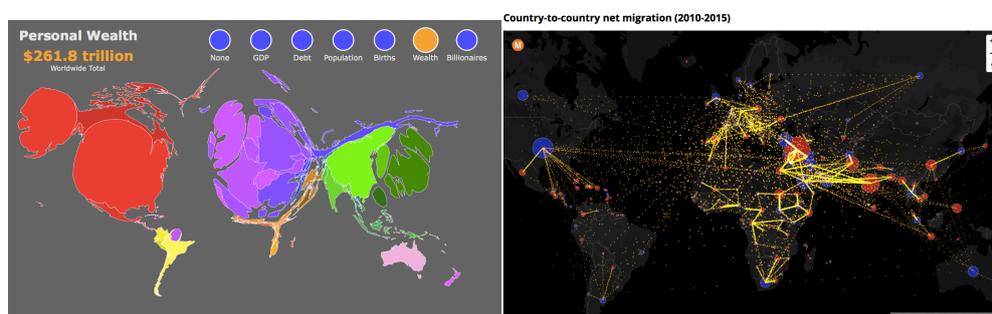


Figure 2: Visualisation of global distribution of personal wealth and country-to-country net migration – Max Galka, reproduced with permission <http://metrocosm.com/permissions/>.

These are examples of how ‘ordinary’ people are increasingly turning to social media platforms to document, debate, organise, and contest disaster risk management. A closer look at an example will allow us to trace some possibilities (and obstacles) for new forms of systemness awareness emerging from these bottom-up movements.

When, in the spring of 2011, the Japanese government failed to make measurements about radiation from the meltdown at the Fukushima Daichi nuclear power plant available, and even tried to raise the thresholds for harmful radiation, some people self-organised grass-roots radiation measuring communities such as *Safecast* (<https://blog.safecast.org>). They bought Geiger counters, and, when they could not obtain them, shared knowledge online to learn how to build them; they measured radiation in their local environments, and shared the data online, constructing maps of the effects of Fukushima’s meltdown (Figure 3).

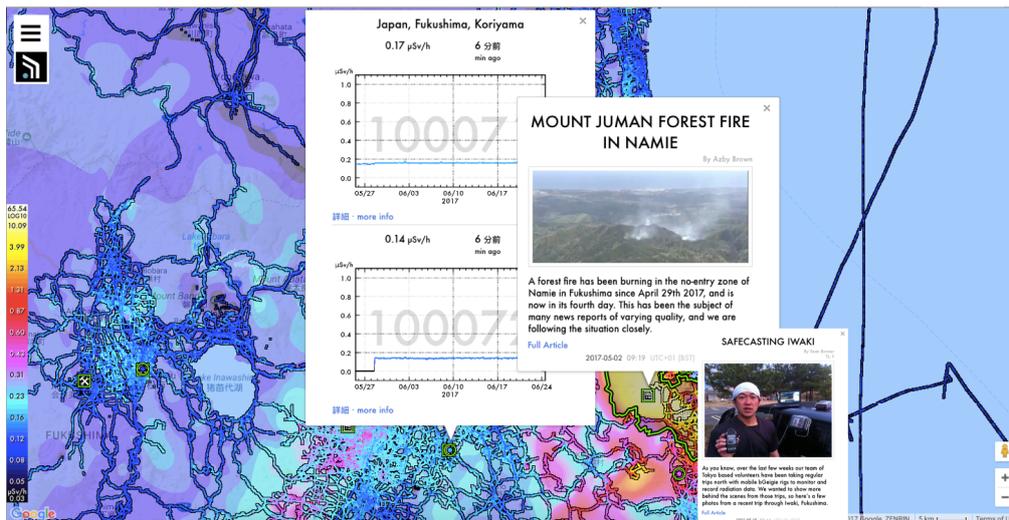


Figure 3 Safecast Map with entries of measurements and observations. Source: <http://safecast.org/tilemap/?v=37.92&x=140.38&z=7&l=0&m=0> [Screenshot taken 24 June 2017]. Reproduced under Creative Commons Attribution Share Alike License <https://blog.safecast.org/faq/licenses/>.

One day after Safecast published its maps, the Japanese government released its first maps, highlighting the political power of self-organised citizen sensing to force the hand of authorities. Moreover, the Safecast map differs starkly from these official maps, which showed areas of contamination risk as roughly concentric rings, where the risk diminished linearly the farther away from the nuclear plant one moved on the map. The crowdsourced Safecast map, in contrast, shows complex micro patterns of contamination along roads and shipping routes, in areas where people live and work, and children play, as well as areas of agricultural production. In a 2011 article entitled 'The Map is the Debate', Jean Christophe Plantin describes how the communication and collaboration involved in producing the Safecast map constituted a public experiment, and a new way of sensing systemness and precarity. It did so by engaging people in experimenting with new ways of making (sense of) disaster risk. Quoting Noortje Marres, Plantin argues that 'the introduction of new techno-scientific objects to society involves much more than the addition of new knowledge and things to social life. It requires the reconfiguration of the wider social-material relations among which the new object is to be accommodated' (Marres 2009, quoted in Plantin 2011: 12). One such reconfiguration is a decrease of trust in governmental data and a growth of citizen sensing projects not just in Japan. Over 1000 Safecast Geiger Counter kits have been bought in more than 90 countries and more than 65 million measurements have been submitted. Another reconfiguration is Germany's decision to decommission all its nuclear power stations after the Fukushima accident.

Positioned at different points of privilege, the people affected by the Fukushima disaster in Japan, the German population, politicians, and anti-nuclear campaigners, refugees, analysts and visualisers of the systemness of forced displacement and migration seem to share a visceral awareness that 'precarity is the condition of our time', and they are asking 'What if the time is ripe for sensing precarity?' (Tsing 2015:20). But they are also asking if it is time to sense precarity themselves and in its systemness. These are no smooth utopia of grassroots infrastructuring for human security. However, they change how people inhabit risky worlds and understand systemness. It is beyond the scope of this short essay to specify the altered phenomenologies, ontologies, social practices, ethics, and politics this generates, but perhaps enough of the 'hidden wealth' of good socio-material interactions has

become visible to jog the sociological imagination for social futures research that intervenes with 'affirmative critique' in these dynamics.

To Conclude

To conclude briefly, I would like to share a personal memory. At one of the first meetings of the team that set up the Institute for Social Futures at Lancaster University, one by one we went around the room. Each of us stepped up to a whiteboard and drew (with more or less skill) a picture of their motivation for, and contribution to, the new social futures paradigm (Figure 4).

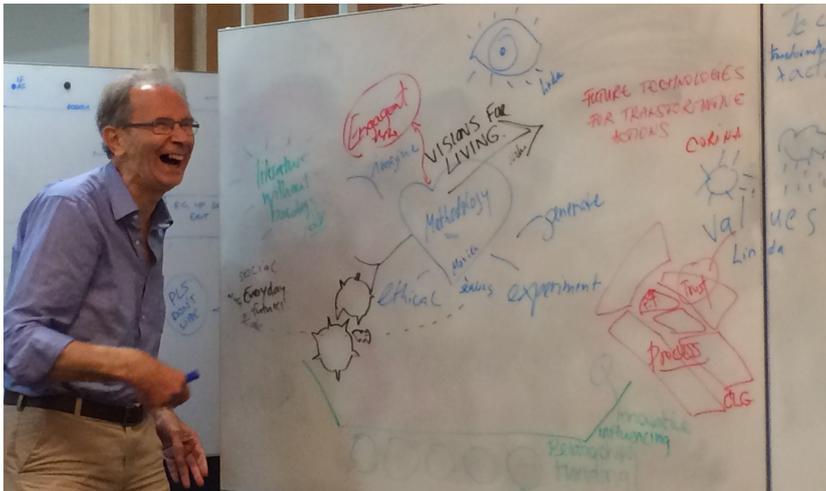


Figure 4 John Urry at the Institute for Social Futures, Lancaster University.

When it was his turn, John didn't know what to draw (he was not keen on creative methods). He laughed and, in the course of what I recall as a beautiful moment of intense intellectual sociability, he drew a frame around everything: a perfect capture of his most extraordinary skill as a map-maker, charting troubled socialities with such diagnostic vision and clarity, his great conceptual creativity, foresight, ethical and political commitment. His public sociology of complexity, mobilities and social futures is the best footing I know for affirmative critique, for putting the map to use to make a better futures, in interdisciplinary and collectively engaging, experimental ways.

References

- Braidotti, R. (2016). Posthuman Critical Theory. In D. Banerji and M. R. Paranjape (Eds.), *Critical posthumanism: planetary futures* (pp. 13–32). New Delhi: Springer India.
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Levitas, R. (2013). *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Plantin, J.-C. (2011). [“The Map is the Debate”: Radiation Webmapping and Public Involvement During the Fukushima Issue](#). In Proceedings of A Decade in Internet Time: OII Symposium on the Dynamics of the Internet and Society. 21 - 24 September 2011, University of Southampton.
- Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The mushroom at the end of the world: on the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Urry, J. (2016). *What is the future?* London: Routledge.