Full Report to the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia on 'The New Catastrophism and Social Futures' Workshop (25-27 March 2015).

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Workshop overview

From the 25th of March to the 27th of March 2015, the Hawke Research Institute at the University of South Australia (UniSA) hosted a Workshop titled, 'The New Catastrophism and Social Futures', which was organized by ASSA Fellows, Prof. Anthony Elliott (UniSA), Prof. Bryan Turner (CUNY) and Prof. Bob Holton (UniSA). The aim of the Workshop was to enhance research capabilities in Australia in the study of social futures, by bringing together researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds, career stages and geographical areas.

The three day Workshop commenced on Wednesday the 25th of March with a public in-conversation series event between Professor John Urry (Lancaster University, UK) and Professor Deborah Lupton (Canberra University), titled, 'Catastrophic Futures? 2050 and Beyond'. Following this public event that had over 350 attendee registrations, delegates were invited to the Kerry Packer Civic Gallery for a welcome reception. Day two and three were comprised of five Workshop sessions. As part of the ASSA workshop scheme, a dinner was held for the visiting delegates on the second night of the event.

Issues discussed and main conclusions

The three-day Workshop was organized around five sessions. In the first session, Professor Urry delivered the keynote address. Urry discussed the ways in which society should think about certain social futures, including those which have become increasingly seen as being catastrophic. His address was divided into 6 parts; Welcome to the Future, Wicked Problems, Collapse of Society, Cascades, Dystopias and Who Owns the Future? One of the main points that Urry put forth is that there are multiple causes, solutions and constraints of potentially catastrophic social, technological and environmental futures. In response to this claim, Urry discussed how government policies and certain futurologies should approach the future as a shared social issue, whereby as a collective society we determine what we want to address these impeding catastrophic futures.

The second session dealt with techno-futures and their associated everyday practices. Dr David Bissell (ANU) discussed how the development of robotic technologies are causing the acquisition and loss of many human skills. Bissell posited that to address these technological transformations individuals have to become more receptive to the physical and psychological changes that these technologies are having on our day-to-day lives. Professor Deborah Lupton presented on digital data practices in the age of lively data. Her presentation pointed out that personal data has situated humans within the 'Internet of Things', which includes smart phones, smart houses and smart cities. Lupton discussed how the continuous configuration and reconfiguration of personal data within this complex network can have direct ramifications on people's everyday beliefs and behaviours. Dr Thomas Birtchnell's (University of Wollongong) paper discussed research he had undertaken with others on the future of cities, which proposed four possible scenarios of what cities may look like in the coming decades. Birtchnell specifically focused on how different variations of 3D printing would fit within each futuristic model. For example, Birtchnell discussed how in a Hi-Tech

future with high growth and high mobility, 3D printing could be used for creating steel and aluminium parts for cars and aircraft. Birtchell also posited for how 3D printers could also become portable devices used to produce firearm parts in futuristic 'fortress' like cities, which are cities high in mobility but low in social growth.

The third session involved a roundtable discussion on IT and Digital Media Futures. As part of this roundtable, Dr Daniel Chaffee (UniSA) discussed the revolutionary impacts of contemporary technologies and the environmental changes brought about by the internet. Professor Anthony Elliott discussed the social intricacies of micro-mobilties and how we can deepen our understanding of the affective and emotional components of electrical devices that we use on a day-to-day basis. Professor Deborah Lupton spoke about the ways in which social scientists need to develop more technological based methodologies, such as using 'apps' on smart phones, to address impending social/technological issues. Professor John Urry discussed the ways in which digital methods may be used to interrogate the flows of money, especially taxation, to and through corporations and accounts that are deliberately created to minimize the payment of taxation. He also posited for the reversibility of digital eco-systems, in that there may be ways to challenge the inevitability of massive technology-based corporations. Urry also added to Birtchnell's discussion of 3D printing, by suggesting that 3D printing may also have the capacity to reorganise and re-localise manufacturing on a global scale.

Session four was a roundtable discussion on 'Building Sustainable Futures'. Associate Professor Chris Riedy (University of Technology Sydney) discussed how there is a need for specificity when defining a 'sustainable future', because the meaning of sustainability is so diffuse and not necessarily all that we should strive to realize. Professor John Barnett (University of Melbourne) took a geo-political stance against climate change and posited that for sustainable futures to be understood societies need to be reassured that there will a future, and not simply some catastrophic outcome. Barnett also highlighted the gap between rhetoric on climate change adaptation and the lived realities of those in the Pacific islands. Dr Kathryn Davidson (UniSA) concluded the discussion by highlighting the neo-liberal influence on ways of addressing ecological change. By focusing on the organization C40, Davidson illustrated how the social-ecology of cities around the world is now being framed in economic terms.

The fifth session of the Workshop was titled 'Perceiving Climate Change Futures'. Dr Constance Lever-Tracy (UniSA) began by talking about the relationship between climate change and natural disasters and how they are presented in the media. She continued her discussion by stressing the importance of both local experience and expert knowledge in addressing pre-emptive strategies towards natural disasters. Professor Joseph Reser's (Griffith University) presentation articulated the psychological dimensions of climate change. He discussed how climate change has psychological impacts often deemed as 'ambivalent environmental stressors'. Dr Aidan Davison (University of Tasmania) discussed the discourse around the Anthropocene and the complexities, which emerge from this line of thinking. Davison also highlighted the paradoxes of using anthropogenic language to understand changes in the social world.

In the sixth session of the Workshop which dealt with the personal ultimatum of being either optimistic or pessimistic about the future, ASSA Fellow, Professor Brendan Gleeson (University of Melbourne) started the session by discussing how we cannot think of impeding catastrophic futures as only negative things. Gleeson offered a radical rethinking of the creative potentials of catastrophes and on what grounds we can be optimistic of dire situations in many parts of the urban

world. Dr John Cash (University of Melbourne) furthered the discussion by addressing the psychological conditions of how one might be optimistic in troubled times. Cash developed his line of inquiry by discussing Ulrich Beck's notion of the 'art of doubt' and how ambivalent ways of thinking can create a more optimistic outlook when societies are faced with catastrophic futures. Finally, Dr Kristin Alford (University of Adelaide/ Bridge 8) revealed her insights as a private and industry future consultant. She laid out a number of useful models in which we can better understand the future. Professor John Urry and Professor Anthony Elliott provided the closing comments for the Workshop.

Policy implications and next steps

Several policy implications emerged from Workshop discussions.

1. The first is that government and public rhetoric around solutions to climate change often make mention of a low carbon economy, however there is a need to use the term low carbon *society*. This is because low carbon futures can only come about if there are broad societal transformations. Markets alone are unable to confront the dangers posed by climate change. States also need to play a strong role in the addressing climate change futures.

2. A second policy recommendation is that it is problematic to simply advocate for a sustainable future. This is because it is unclear what sustainability means. Sustainability can mean the reinforcement of social inequalities. Sustainability can also denote an undesirable way of living.

3. A third policy implication of the Workshop is that there is a need for further funded futures research in Australia. A focus on the short-term can obscure broader and more incremental social, technological and environmental changes that are nonetheless going to be extremely pertinent to the ways Australians live their lives.