Inventing the Social

Celebrating 10 years of the Centre for the Study of Invention and Social Process

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There has been talk of a 'return of the social' now that social media, social innovation and social design present and push themselves as objects, instruments and contexts of research and engagement. Social and cultural researchers might be tempted to recognize in the 'social' a 'ghost from the past,' as important and customary questions about the nature of collectivity and the relation between social stability and change – endurance and invention – are posed with renewed urgency. At the same time, to seek refuge in these questions would surely provide us with a false sense of security and result in missed opportunities.

Crucially, the return of the social should not be mistaken as a return to 'the human'. Practices of social innovation, design and media stand out precisely insofar as they attribute distinctive capacities for sociality to technology, settings and things. Empirically, this also seems to be significant, as 'bots' turn out to be the most active users on Twitter, and a plastic island in the Pacific 'brings us together' in ways that no politician seems capable of doing.

In this symposium, we celebrate the 10th anniversary of CSISP by exploring renewed efforts at the socialisation of technology, the environment and implicated entities, both as a phenomenon to be investigated and as a challenge to savour and respond to. We are especially interested in the question of whether and how the 'return of the social' involves a radicalization of the 'performativity' agenda in social and cultural research and theory. It has long been recognized that sociality is 'performed', 'accomplished' or 'enacted', but technological and environmental practices raise the further possibilities that sociality can also be activated, generated, created and produced. Here, we seem to be faced with a further de-naturalization of the social.

The issue of the 'social' also has major implications for the practice of sociological research itself, for example, how social research, broadly defined, might participate in the invention of the social. What if sociology adopted the agenda of the invention of the social? Is this possible? Indeed, can sociology ask more 'inventive' questions or explicitly engage in 'problem-making'? These are, of course, risky and tricky questions, which require a suitably experimental and ludic approach. In this symposium, we take up these questions in a symmetrical fashion, as 'problems' pertaining to the conceptual, methodological, empirical, bureaucratic, and stylistic devices that participate in the practice of social research.

Speakers

Lisa Blackman (Goldsmiths)
Nigel Clark (Lancaster University)
Will Davies (Warwick University)
Maarten Derksen (Universiteit Groningen)
Ignacio Farias (WZB, Berlin)
Carolin Gerlitz (University of Amsterdam)
Bernd Kraeftner/Judith Kroell (Vienna)
Fabian Muniesa (Mines Tech, Paris)
Evelyn Ruppert (Goldsmiths)

Respondents and chairs

Andrew Barry (UCL)
Rebecca Coleman (Goldsmiths)
Michael Halewood (Essex)
Daniel Lopez (Catalunya)
Anders Koed Madsen (Aalborg University Copenhagen)
Linsey McGoey (Essex)
Liz Moor (Goldsmiths)
Dan Neyland (Goldsmiths)
David Oswell (Goldsmiths)
Marsha Rosengarten (Goldsmiths)
Manuel Tironi (Catholic University of Chile)