

MIDLANDS CONFERENCE IN CRITICAL THOUGHT 2024

Centre for Policy, Citizenship and Society + Department of Social and Political Sciences, Nottingham Trent University
April 5th to April 6th, 2024

Call for Papers – deadline December 6th 2023

The Call for Papers Proposals is now open for the 1st annual *Midlands Conference in Critical Thought* (MCCT), which will be hosted and supported by the Centre for Policy, Citizenship and Society at Nottingham Trent University on April 5th and April 6th 2024.

This is the inaugural MCCT which is an offshoot of the London Conference in Critical Thought (LCCT). As with the LCCT, the MCCT is an annual interdisciplinary conference that provides a forum for emergent critical scholarship, broadly construed. The conference is free for all to attend and follows a non-hierarchical model that seeks to foster opportunities for intellectual critical exchanges where all are treated equally regardless of affiliation or seniority. There are no plenaries, and the conference is envisaged as a space for those who share intellectual approaches and interests but who may find themselves at the margins of their academic department or discipline.

There is no pre-determined theme for the MCCT. The intellectual content and thematic foci of the conference has been determined by the streams outlined in this document. Please look through the streams to see where your paper submission will best fit, we welcome paper proposals via a 500 word abstract – **PLEASE SUBMIT VIA A WORD DOCUMENT to midlandscritical@gmail.com**. Past programmes of the LCCT and examples of stream outlines can be found on the website: <http://londoncritical.org>.

The accepted papers will configure the panels that constitute the streams outlined in this document. For more information about the ethos and structure of the conference please visit <http://londoncritical.org>, and if you have any questions please email us at midlandscritical@gmail.com.

The deadline for Paper submissions is **Wednesday December 6th 2023**. Abstracts to be submitted via word and should not exceed **500 words** and should be sent to: midlandscritical@gmail.com.

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Neoliberalism and Digital Societies: Rethinking the Relation between the Real and the Virtual

Antonio Cerella, Nottingham Trent University

Luca Mavelli, University of Kent

Critical scholarship largely agrees that neoliberalism has a negative – if not altogether hostile – view of society (Chomsky, 1998; Harvey, 2005; Klein 2007; Brown, 2015, 2019). This idea is probably most famously evoked by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's (in)famous remark that 'there's no such thing as society' during a 1987 interview. In fact, the neoliberal rejection of 'social justice' – regarded as a dangerous abstraction that curtails individual freedom (Hayek, 1998) – has been indicted by critics as responsible for the 'crisis', 'disintegration', and 'destruction' of society (Munck, 2003; Laurell, 2015; Hartwich & Becker, 2019; Brown, 2015, 2019; Fuchs, 2021; Jessop, 2023).

While we largely agree with these views, we also believe that this literature has mostly overlooked the creative potential of neoliberalism. More specifically, we believe that the advent and diffusion of digital technologies are bringing about a new social semiotics, which, in turn, is generating novel forms of neoliberal socialisation and subjectivity. These new societies produced by digital platforms, however, should not be conceived as the virtual translation of the 'real' world that can shape existent societal relationships, but as actual spaces of interpenetration and continuity between the 'digital' and 'physical' worlds. For, as Lawrence Lessig (1999) and Shoshana Zuboff (2019) have clearly shown, the relationship between the digital and the real is not dialectical but hegemonic. In fact, within the new digito-physical apparatus, the codes written by software engineers and implemented by large tech companies provide the rules of behaviour and embody value judgments that set norms for how individuals interact both in the virtual and the real worlds.

This stream is thus interested in soliciting theoretical, empirical, and performative proposals exploring varied perspectives from academics, activists, artists, and practitioners to examine the interrelationship between neoliberalism and digital societies. The stream members will reflect, in an interdisciplinary environment, on some essential issues such as: To what extent are digital platforms neoliberal tools of communication and signification? What are the similarities and differences between Adorno's and Horkheimer's account of the 'cultural industry' and the contemporary forms of surveillance capitalism? How is it possible to resist social datafication and algorithmic enslavement? What is the nature and power of the subjectivity produced by digital societies?

Co-production in Research – The Emperor’s New Clothes?

Christopher R Matthews, Nottingham Trent University

Marit Hiemstra, Nottingham Trent University

Dee Yeagers, Nottingham Trent University

The language associated with ‘co-production’ – that is, research which is produced, or claimed to have been produced, in various ways with communities and participants – has become popular within the funding, design and delivery of contemporary social research. This has led to a multitude of papers claiming to employ such methods (Monforte et al., 2022; Palmer et al., 2019; Smith and Wrightman, 2021) and various articles questioning and challenging what such work means and might entail (Bell and Pahl, 2018; Masterson et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2023). While there are key elements in this turn towards co-production which are valuable political and academic projects, it is important for scholars, and the communities they work with, to critically reflect on such ideas in order to see how this process is playing out.

Is it the case, for example, that the language of co-production is creeping into areas of academia that are not epistemologically and axiologically set up to faithfully use it?

Is there evidence of such terms being used in a symbolically compliant and emotionally disengaged ways, that are the antithesis of what some would consider to be the political and scientific justification for such community engaging methodologies?

And, although the apparent aim of co-production is to ensure ‘science’ benefits various communities, is it still the case that it is largely the careers of scientists and the academy more broadly that benefits most clearly from co-produced research?

This stream sets out to consider these questions, and ones like them, by asking if co-production is at risk of becoming a ‘new’ way of describing what many researchers have been doing for decades – that is, engaging communities of practice, working with public and patient involvement, and being embedded in research settings in a way that prioritises the ways of working, and questions that needs addressing, as set by local communities.

In short, is co-production in research the emperor’s new clothes?

Papers considering any of the above, including those which defend co-production against the charge that it may be disingenuously used in some areas of contemporary academia, are welcome. Within this stream we will come together to discuss these issues in a productive manner, the aim will be to highlight actual and potential problems, consider solutions and future paths, and, above all, work to understand how co-production can be of genuine benefit for communities and the development of knowledge.

Critical Political Epistemology

Critical Political Epistemology Network

Critical Political Epistemology (CPE) analyzes how questions around knowledge, power, governance, politics, oppression, and ignorance intersect. It is an interdisciplinary, critical, feminist approach to socially pressing issues arising from the intersections of current political and epistemic structures, systems, and institutions. Combining critical epistemology, philosophy of language, and political theory with for example perspectives from sociology, law, gender studies, disability studies, political science, comparative literature, and history, and also working together and consulting with artists, activists, and practitioners, CPE attempts to topically broaden, methodologically expand, historically and empirically contextualise, and critique political epistemology as it's currently emerging as a field in analytic philosophy.

Questions that arise include: How do forms of political resistance generate collective knowledge? Who is understood to be a political, epistemic agent? How do relations and structures of power impact which and whose political interests become knowable, and to whom? How do counterknowledges create resistance to oppression?

Potential topics of interest include but are not limited to:

- Social movements and activism
- The epistemic role, power, and authority of political parties
- Social categories and their impact on knowledge, ignorance, and power
- Marginalization and its effect on epistemic practices
- (Re-)Distribution of material and epistemic capital

We intend that throughout the stream, these topics will be analyzed from different disciplinary perspectives. As an inter- and transdisciplinary research field, CPE expands and links questions, lines of inquiry, and methods in social and political epistemology. We aim to bring together people from different epistemic communities and focus on critical, non-ideal theorizing that is situated in material and praxis-oriented analysis of prevailing epistemic and political structures.

We encourage applications from relevant subfields in philosophy that include but are not limited to epistemology, political theory and philosophy, critical theory, philosophy of language, phenomenology, queer philosophy, and feminist philosophy. We also welcome applications from the

humanities and social sciences, e.g., sociology and social theory, science and technology studies, critical race studies, gender studies, discourse studies, history, decolonial and postcolonial studies, genocide studies, legal studies, political economy, social psychology, media and communication science, political science and art history. We also strongly encourage activists, science communicators, policy analysts, artists, educators, and others who are interested in CPE to come join this stream.

War, State Harm and Resistance

Hannah Wilkinson, University of Nottingham

War and atrocities have been permanent features of the 21st century. Yet there remains a need for critical thought to re-frame 21st century conflicts within a wider continuum of colonial violence, state-corporate capitalism, and mass organised harm (Whyte, 2007; Jamieson, 1998) – as well as developing transformative, bottom-up forms of resistance (Weis, 2023).

The 'war on terror', led by the US and UK, cemented a violent neo-liberal capitalism through aggressive occupation and war, in breach of international law (Kramer and Michalowski, 2005). In addition to mass death and lasting ripples of harm, the 'war on terror' framed peoples of the Global South, specifically Muslim communities, as 'illegal lives' – and thus unworthy of grief in death (Butler, 2009). As Gandesha (2020: 7) argues, the current socioeconomic crisis of capitalism cannot be divorced from 'spectres of fascism' - grounded in class-struggle, colonial extraction of resources, and ultra-nationalism framed as 'a crisis of the health of the race or nation'. Combined with far-right authoritarian figures including Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and politicians such as Suella Braverman emerging through Boris Johnson's government, there is an urgency to consider whether we may be moving into dangerously familiar times.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been global shifts to enshrine 'states of emergency' (qua Agamben, 2005) into law. The rights of marginalised groups are being stripped, such as LGBTQI+ communities, and peoples moving across human-made borders to flee areas of conflict are increasingly criminalised. Further, growing international resistance movements, such as Black Lives Matter and climate activist group, Extinction Rebellion, have been responded to through culture wars and attacks to human rights. Indeed, concerning pieces of legislation such as the UK Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2020 have fundamentally dismantled our right to protest and resist. Considering the globe is amid an increasingly destructive climate emergency, with the Global South suffering disproportionate harm (Loach, 2023), it has never been more important to critically untangle connections between war, state harm and resistance. This stream invites inter-disciplinary proposals to explore war – broadly defined – and global state(-corporate) harms, along with sites and tools of resistance. We will seek to theorise, articulate, and respond to mass violence of the 21st century, with the collective aim of moving towards action and developing space for creative activism and transformative, grass-roots resistance. Activists working to address sites and experiences of state harm are particularly welcome.

While not wanting to limit proposal areas, topics may include:

- Colonial histories of war and current states of violent occupation
- Traces of war and experiences of state harm – for all those touched by conflict
- Cultural and environmental harms of war
- State-corporate harm and violent capitalism
- Shifting claims of 'nation state' and security
- Violent politics and state racism
- Erosion of human rights and democracy
- Border violence and mass detention of asylum and migrant communities
- Global rise of the far-right and weakening of left political alternatives
- Intersectional work around war, age, class, gender, sexuality, and geographies
- Resistance to atrocities and state violence

Identity in Utopia

Jen Neller & Kay Lalor, Manchester Law School

Over-determined identities lead to stereotypes, disciplining regimes of inclusion and myriad forms of exclusion. Yet building collective identities can lead to productive forms of recognition, supportive communities and greater self-esteem.

How can identities be celebrated for their distinctness without being essentialised and over-determined? How can identities be fashioned in ways that promote connection and belonging for all and avoid segregating and marginalising?

This stream invites delegates to respond to these questions by imagining, exploring and critiquing ideals. What would identity look like, what roles would it play and how would it be understood in a utopian society? How could we do difference differently?

The turn to utopian imagining draws from abolitionist perspectives and pre-figurative politics. It is premised on the notion that in order to effect change, we must not only diagnose the problem but also imagine the solution. Such solutions may not be instantly or even distantly achievable, but they orientate our actions and activism beyond the reproduction of the current system, presenting possibilities for rupture and radically different ways of being and becoming.

Among other things, papers in this stream may:

- Focus on any particular identity characteristic(s), identity in general and/or processes of identification
- Apply theories of difference and differentiation, such as feminist, queer, disability, postcolonial and critical race theories
- Critique and reimagine how identities are currently constructed and regulated in legal, political, media, literary or other contexts, and in Western or non-Western contexts
- Analyse the rhetorical and mobilising power of utopias in producing identification with imagined past and future communities
- Analyse how utopias of belonging and togetherness resist or reproduce biases, essentialisms and limitations of identity
- Examine relationships between place, emotion, identity and the future
- Analyse relationships between 'micro' and 'macro' utopias
- Analyse 'utopias of immanence' and uses of utopian or dystopian identities to resist or transform present conditions
- Explore influences of religious or spiritual beliefs on utopian understandings of identity and relationality
- Examine connections between identity and capitalism to inform the imagination of post-capitalist identities

Harm, postcolonialism and decolonisation

Edward Wright, University of Nottingham UK

The study of social harm – zemiology – provides an alternative to orthodox criminology, untethering analysis from state-defined categories, and facilitating interrogations of a wider range of scenarios than the lens of crime allows for. Within the field, harms are understood as commonplace within social order, and are to be understood in terms of social structure and power relations. In various ways related to the above – and also because of the uses of criminology for the establishment of colonial order (see, for instance, Agozino, 2004) – zemiology should be highly receptive to post-/decolonial theory. After all, this body of theory effectively seeks to explain and provide routes to repair the harms of empire and its aftermath. Such connections, however, are not often made. This is locatable within a broader trend within western social theory, in which colonialism is elided (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021). As Wright (2023: 139) notes, though: 'Recognising that the foundations of the present are colonial ... and that colonial relations are variously renewed in the twenty-first century provides a greater understanding of harm, currently unaccounted for in this area of study'.

This stream encourages dialogue between the study of harm and post-/decolonial thought. Scholars operating outside of zemiology are encouraged to contribute, as much as scholars already engaged with zemiology. As suggestions, questions addressed might include:

- What circumstances, scenarios, empirical cases and so on might it be particularly important for a zemiology attentive to the colonial to engage with?
- How can harms, which are routinely rehearsed as being caused by capitalism, be rearticulated so that colonialism is brought into the frame as an explanatory structure? And what are the benefits of doing so?
- Are there opportunities for injecting particular post-/de-/counter-colonial thinkers into zemiology, thereby working to undo the effacement of the colonial within the discipline?
- How might zemiological orthodoxy be challenged by conceptualisations of harm emanating from indigenous communities and/or the global south? How might the zemiological canon be reconfigured in relation to understandings of harm operating outside of western frames?

All scholarship broadly concerned with interrogating such connections and developing such analyses is welcome.

Apocalypse, crisis, and constructing our endings.

Dr Romain Chenet – Critical Development Studies

Dr Bryan Brazeau – Liberal Arts

(Based in School for Cross-Faculty Studies, University of Warwick, UK)

This stream invites a diversity of scholarly efforts concerning contemporary crises (political, social, environmental, and/or economic), empirical or rigorously polemical proposals of civilisational decay or human downfall, and cultural responses thereto. Notably, we are open to critical contributions discussing material realities which imply crisis-esque or 'apocalyptic' conditions (be they related to climate, inequalities, and expansively so on) in addition to provocations assessing the discursive and material constructs that may generate crises, and artistic or cultural pieces relating to such themes.

Overall, we are keen to explore current tendencies openly and critically on apocalyptic scene-making as a theme in academic and/or cultural enquiries, inviting study-based observations and discussions of human-prompted crises and catastrophes from a diversity of potential entry points. Without being theoretically or disciplinarily tied, we invite contributions from across the social sciences, culture, and arts, with scope for empirical, philosophical, artistic, and/or politicised considerations. If mindful of concerns about over-codification, we thus also invite a diversity of grounded interventions seeking to pursue ideological shifts in human consciousness or radically accelerationist provocations.

As existing scholarship related to this stream, we note work by scholars such as Han, Žižek, Agamben, and legacies of continental theorists such as Weber and Foucault. Recent efforts debating a proposed 'Anthropocene' also bear mention, as do explorations of neoliberal(ised) societies, and we assert the importance of contemporary cultural artefacts and analysis thereof (including books, movies/TV, art installations, etc.), opening scope for media- and arts-centred contributions. However, for purposes of expediency, we ask all proposals to maintain a contemporary positioning responding in some way to the overarching theme of 'crisis' or 'apocalypse' in themes/data worked from or in analyses made

Critical, Anti-Racist and Decolonial Pedagogies

Teodora Todorova, University of Warwick

As formal education institutions become increasingly marketized and driven by the logics of profit accumulation, and teaching, scholarship and research are divorced from the notion of education as a public good (Giroux 2006, 2010, 2023), this stream invites proposals to consider alternative critical, anti-racist, and decolonial pedagogies. The stream invites scholars to consider alternative practices and theories in the spirit of Paulo Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (1970) and 'pedagogy of hope' (1994), bell hooks' invitation to 'teach to transgress' (1994), Kishimoto's (2016) call for anti-racist pedagogies, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) call for decolonizing methodologies of teaching and learning in and beyond the academe. This stream is particularly interested in scholarly contributions and reflections from teaching practitioners who are committed to a praxis of decolonial, liberatory, and gender/ race/ class conscious teaching methodologies. Reflections on critical, anti-racist and decolonial pedagogic praxis need not be limited to institutional classroom settings. The stream welcomes contributions from scholars involved in training in the arts and public arts education, private tutoring, and civil society educational campaigns as well as primary, secondary, tertiary and higher education from a transnational perspective.

Who speaks for Women? Who speaks for Nature? Ecofeminist life writing in the Anthropocene

Julia Libor, M.A., Independent Scholar, Wilhelmshaven/Germany

The literary landscape offers a wide range of ways on how we can narrate and thus perceive our environments. While the first-person narrative is arguably an unreliable account of such observations, it certainly does not fail to transport first-hand impressions of surroundings to an audience. It is within this framework this stream suggests to have a closer look at how life writing narrates perceived environments and gender alike, leading to the central questions: Who speaks for women? Who speaks for nature?

Consequently, an ecofeminist approach to nature and gender in general reveals crucial interrelationships between oppressing mechanisms of the two within life writing in the Anthropocene. Women, among other oppressed groups, and nature alike have been suffering from similar oppressing mechanisms rooted in colonialism, sexism and political agendas.

In this context, this stream invites discussing the challenges of an ecofeminist approach to narrate life writing, and encourages discussions on how an interrelationship between the first-person narrative and the environment is used to give the non-human a much needed voice. Works on poetry, music and photography functioning as accounts of autobiographical memories in regards to nature and gender are also highly encouraged to be submitted.

Submissions to the stream could focus on, but are not limited to:

- Queer representations in the Anthropocene
- Questions of (literary) agency in nature life writing
- Travel writing, environments and gender
- Transculturality in nature life writing
- Dystopian ecologies and gender in autobiographical writings
- Gender and natural disasters in autobiographical writings
- Autobiographical graphic novels, photography, eco-poetry and nature
- Environmental movements and gender questions - then and now
- Politics, gender and nature Literary criticism, unreliable narrators and nature
- (Post)colonial life writing and gender
- Animals in life writing Spatial discourse, nature and gender

Mental Health Commons: Fantasy, Utopia and Infrastructure

Raluca Soreanu & the FREEPSY team freepsy.essex.ac.uk

What are 'mental health commons'? Are there forms of *commoning* that take shape in the field of mental health, which can reconfigure the way we think about fantasy, utopia and infrastructure?

This strand invites contributions ranging from history, to psychoanalysis, social and cultural theory, to ethnography and beyond, which aim to understand practices related to commons and undercommons (Harney & Moten 2013) in the field of mental health. We ask how the offer of care can be organised in a radical way, reconfiguring states of fantasy and crystallising utopias in the social field at large, and, by doing so, create new infrastructures, where resources can be arranged in alternative anti-capitalist, antiracist and antipatriarchal ways.

Mental health *commoning* is the work of actively weaving and sustaining communities of collaboration and action around the dimension of life that has to do with psychic suffering. *Commoners* of radical mental health initiatives manufacture and use resources and goods by collectively creating rules of production and use, improvising and revisiting these rules on an ongoing basis, in response to particular socio-ecological situations. Such initiatives, experiments and practices prefigure new modes of self-governance grounded in the common participation of all people, horizontality, anti-hierarchy, in pluralism and openness. This strand aims to further conceptualise 'mental health commons', as well as to document sites, cases, collectives and practices which can ground these conceptualisations.

This strand has a particular focus on 'infrastructures' for mental health commons. As the ecological crisis is deepening and taking ever more forms, various thinkers turn to some idea of 'infrastructure' to capture and reimagine how life (including movements of resistance) changes *from within itself*, from *within the scene of experience*. Marxists, feminists, anarchists, cultural theorists (such as Lauren Berlant 2022) are turning away from 'structure', to the everydayness of the generation of forms of life in various fields of practice. This articulation of 'mental health commons' and 'infrastructures' stems from the work of a research collective interested in psychoanalytic free clinics, their legacies and practices (FREEPSY: freepsy.essex.ac.uk). Whilst psychoanalytic clinics are at the centre of our interest, the call is open to other kinds of mental health initiatives, such as therapeutic communities, lesser-known anti-psychiatry sites and practices, initiatives of radical care for the treatment of psychosis, etc. Contributions can reference initiatives from any part of the world, historical or contemporary.

Invited topics include but are not limited to:

- Mental health commons: theory and cases
- Infrastructural thinking and infrastructural practice in mental health
- Radical care for psychosis: theory and sites
- Anti-psychiatry initiatives: theory and experiments
- Therapeutic communities: models of care and radical practice
- Psychoanalytic free clinics and changes of psychoanalytic *dispositif*
- Race, class and marginality in mental health *commoning*
- Utopias of mental health
- Ethnographies in the radical mental health care field, especially psychosocial ethnographies

Post-human social inquiry: ontology to method and back again

Dr Victoria Cluley, University of Nottingham

Professor Nick Fox, University of Huddersfield

Background

Post-human theories are increasingly applied in social science disciplines, to think through and make sense of a plethora of phenomena. However, the translation of the post-human ontology into methodology raises many questions and challenges. This is in part due to the differing agendas and ontologies developed by key post-human thinkers, including Barad, Bennett, Braidotti, DeLanda, Deleuze and Guattari, Latour and St Pierre. DeLanda, for example, suggests a realist application of posthumanism while Barad promotes a highly-relativised 'diffractive' approach based to research methodology, and Fox and Alldred develop a methodology grounded in DeleuzoGuattarian 'ethology' based on a Spinozo-Deleuzian ontology.

While 'post-humanism' is frequently flagged as an ontological perspective in social science, arts and humanities research, it is all too often critiqued for being both everything and nothing. To respond to this, it is important to consider, what does that mean for would-be researchers wanting to apply post-humanism, when it comes to issues such as the development of research questions, the choice of research methods, the practical conduct of data collection and analysis of findings, and the ethics and politics of social inquiry?

Aim/ purpose

In this stream we will explore the theoretical and practical opportunities and challenges concerning post-human research practice. The stream invites papers that discuss posthuman ontologies from the point-of-view of social inquiry, explore and showcase practical examples of how post-human ontologies may be translated into research practice, and discuss specific methods and research techniques that articulate with posthuman ontologies, epistemologies and ethics.

We welcome papers from all research disciplines and from authors at all career stages, focusing on issues and questions such as:

- What can posthuman research do?
- The empirical application of post-human theory
- Post-human research methods in the arts, humanities or social sciences
- The politics of posthuman social inquiry
- The ethics of posthuman social inquiry
- Post-human reviews
- Post-humanism and traditional research methods

Rethinking work and career; continued resistance to the neoliberal order

Ricky Gee, Nottingham Trent University;

Ranier Abengana, University of the Philippines Baguio and University College Dublin;

Anastasia Fjodorova, University of Stirling;

Louise Oldridge, Nottingham Trent University;

Neo-liberal society perpetuates a work obsessed culture; one where paid work becomes an important facet of a person's identity – pushing leisure and unpaid work to the fringes of importance. It is via working life that one comes to be read as 'worthy' and compensated for their time whilst value is simultaneously extracted by the capitalist class (O'Connor, 2018). The collective desire to succeed at work creates an "achievement society" where people become projects, tirelessly working on themselves toward 'voluntary self-exploitation' (Han, 2015, 2017). The combination of work experience is coerced to accumulate responsibility, status, and rewards (Hall and Mirvis, 1995; Gee, 2022) to construct a narrative of linear progress – a career. Progress becomes individuated in turn consolidating the colonial/capitalist project, that privileges patriarchy and whiteness playing its part in structuring a labour market that exponentially exploits migrant, women and racialised workers (Andrews, 2021).

The 21st century labour market has seen an increase in digital platform technologies and rise of AI exacerbating precarity and many forms of employee burn out. The centrality and inescapability of work in society, the phenomenon of idolising 'workaholics,' and the role of passion as a chief motivator, must be considered as the material bases that sustain unjust working conditions (Chung, 2021; Kim, et al., 2020; O'Connor, 2018). The (re-)emergence of work-related protests and resignations invites us to continue to rethink the very paradigm of work and career. The abundance of strikes across many sectors and new forms of unionisation / solidarity are indicative of reactions to unjust working conditions which have been amplified since the pandemic. The growth of these movements merits a closer examination of the very working conditions from which they emerged.

This stream is a sequel to the 'Rethinking work and career; resisting the neoliberal order' stream from the London Conference in Critical Thought, to invite new contributions to continue the conversation and dialogue generated from the initial stream. It is interested in soliciting theoretical, empirical and performative proposals exploring varied perspectives from academics, activists, artists and practitioners to rethink work and career in the neoliberal order, considering opportunities and actions to build solidarity to resist and subvert such an order.

- How do we conceptualise 'work' and 'career' within and beyond the neoliberal society?
- How can we address the structural injustices allowing for uncompensated work (e.g., reproductive labour)?
- What are the different intersectional (race, class, gender, disability, etc.,) issues that affect working conditions and create just or unjust working environments?
- What are the arguments for and against the refusal and resistance of work and working practices?
- Reorganisation or abolition of work and traditional notions of career?
- How can various forms of resignations and work-related protests and resistance be operative within working environments?
- How might AI impact upon conceptions, experiences and enactment of work and career?

Critical spatial action for the place in crisis: experiences of rebellious citizenship

Dr Jenni Cauvain (Nottingham Trent University)

Dr Michele Grigolo (Nottingham Trent University)

Dr Yahya Lavaf-Pour (University of the West of England)

Dr Fidel Meraz (University of the West of England)

In urban and community studies, space is a multifaceted arena where the urban fabric intertwines with social dynamics, reflecting contestation and innovation. It influences people's lives through its use, planning, and construction, not only as a canvas for urban life but also as a critical site of resistance and experimentation, challenging distant and detached spatial organisation. Consequently, questions about space's purpose and governance become inherently political, fuelling movements like the "right to the city," which aims to construct a critical urban agenda spanning diverse social domains. Concepts like urban commons and Do-It-Yourself urbanism have emerged, adding complexity to dialogues on urban justice and intersecting issues like gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability. Simultaneously, the concept of crisis undergoes intricate theoretical exploration across various contexts, from philosophical underpinnings to critical theory. However, examining crisis states through the lens of public spaces and urban contexts reveals nuanced approaches that may decontextualise spatial narratives or uncritically accept the prevailing status quo. This misalignment between narrative and lived experience highlights missed opportunities to frame them as effective responses to crises. The question arises: Can the theoretical understandings of oppressed individuals effectively conceptualise and explicate crises through their lived experiences and acts of rebellion? In this quest, the synthesis of theoretical insights and experiential realities emerges as a pivotal avenue for advancing our comprehension of crises and their resolution, steering society toward more significant equity and justice.

Following up from the strand suggested at the last LCCT, this strand invites a more focused analysis and interpretation of individual and collective experiences of spatial action, production and contestation when crises emerge. The aim is to uncover what is behind the perception of spatial injustice (narratives) and materialisations (practices) and highlight their evolving core issues. The strand would aim to gather the crisis experience and support an emancipatory theorisation of spatial conditions, disentangling the emergence of crises within architectural places. Instead of being framed by a particular discipline, we are eager to hear about innovative methods to study place, its built and digital infrastructure, and people's experiences. The strand invites a plurality of approaches to collect spatial stories and urban and architectural manifestations that reveal circumstances of oppression. Contributions to this strand could approach, among other possible, the following issues:

- Citizens as performers of activism for sustainability, environmental defence and human rights.
- Contested historical perception of conflict in times of culture wars.
- Critical practices in contentious spaces in the right to the city.
- Critical sustainability in architecture.
- Housing and the right to a home.
- Negative urban form as a social space.
- Post-colonial re-colonisation experiences.
- Socio-spatial manifestations of the energy crisis

Media epistemologies: The formal, material, technical, infrastructural, and communicational conditions of knowledge

Thomas Sutherland (University of Lincoln)

Scott Wark (University of Kent)

In 'Forgetting' (1981), an often overlooked early essay, Friedrich Kittler claims that theorists and philosophers tend to 'forget' the influence that media exert on the knowledge they produce. Though Kittler is specifically commenting on the relation between the apparatus of print-based research – libraries and their systems for sorting and classifying knowledge; the literal tools of scholarship, such as pens and paper, note cards and bookmarks, and, indeed, print publications themselves – this observation has only become more pertinent in our digital age. Today, increasingly complex and increasingly automated media technologies, devices, and platforms are deeply implicated in our epistemologies. They are not passive carriers of information; they play a crucial role in both shaping the formal parameters via which we produce, encounter, and circulate knowledge and also in shaping the critical instruments and methods via which we reflect upon this knowledge. In short, media might not wholly determine how we think, but they inevitably inform how we think with them and about them. In this stream, we wish to solicit varied responses to the question: How are media technologies implicated in knowledge production and circulation? Though we are particularly interested in theoretical and methodological perspectives that consider the possibility that media, by the very fact that they mediate, come already embedded with epistemologies, we are also interested in papers approaching this question from a multitude of different angles:

- To what extent is the constitution of knowledge, as well as its technical support now inextricable from digital media technologies, and how does this alter the very notion of 'critique'?
- How can we account for the recursive relationship between media theory and media themselves?
- Can we reflect upon the epistemological force of media and the formal or material conditions they impose without being accused of 'technological determinism'?
- What are the social, cultural, and political implications of our epistemologies being increasingly automated or subjected to techniques of algorithmic sorting, selection, and generation?
- What can we gain from theoretical currents such as media ecology and media archaeology, as well as the various 'turns' toward affect, infrastructure, computation, and speculative ontology in addressing these epistemological questions?
- And beyond media theory, what light might other traditions – such as: French epistemology (e.g. Poincaré, Bachelard, Canguilhem, etc.); deconstruction; Foucauldian discourse analysis (with its equation of knowledge and power); feminist social epistemology (emphasizing situated and communitarian knowledge); postcolonial critiques of epistemic violence; new materialism; and ecocriticism (plus the environmental humanities more broadly) – shed on this problem?

Addressing the Underbellies of Neoliberal Academia

Matko Krce-Ivančić (Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, Zagreb, Croatia)

In *Dawn & Decline*, Horkheimer (1978, 218) noted that, when it comes to universities, 'they admit no one that refuses to shut up and be quiet. There is such thing as a pre-established harmony between the fate of universities and the course of history.' Bearing this in mind, with the aim of arriving at a more precise understanding of what academia is today, the stream opens up a space for addressing the underbellies of neoliberal academia.

One of academia's underbellies is related to the ways in which academia exploits our hopes. Making herself ever more competitive, the neoliberal subject takes an active role and such a subject is, in Foucault's (2008, 226) words, 'an entrepreneur of himself'. It is in this context that we also witness the birth of the neoliberal scholar, anxiously engaged in a wide array of activities – networking workshops, publishing, conferences, consulting gigs, etc. – that promise at least a bit of progress in terms of her competitiveness. As she piously puts hope in reaching a decent life in the future while burning out at work, thereby fuelling the excessiveness of neoliberal academia, the neoliberal scholar is a hopeful subject. Addressing this underbelly of neoliberal academia enacts us to realise that, as Tokumitsu (2015, 59) underscores, 'hope labor isn't merely normalized, it's institutionalized' and that academia thrives on our – mostly unfulfilled – hopes of making it at some point in our academic future.

The fact that many academic positions have been rigged reflects yet another of academia's underbellies. If we fail to recognise that a good number of advertised academic positions are not genuinely open but have a predetermined outcome, we might mistakenly conclude that all of those who have eventually secured permanent academic positions are the most competitive and diligent scholars out there. However, when it is acknowledged that the rigging of academic positions is a *neoliberal* systematic reversal of *neoliberal* emphasis on building our self-entrepreneurial capacities through competition, it becomes more obvious that corruption is a part of – and not a deviation from – neoliberalism. Addressing this underbelly of neoliberal academia makes us question and understand what sort of knowledge gets excluded from academia by the practice of rigging academic positions. The aforementioned are just two of many academia's underbellies which, if addressed in a critical fashion, enable us to offer a window into the performativity of neoliberal academia. The stream welcomes proposals that engage with a critical analysis of contemporary academia and its underbellies. In view of a range of issues that invite a critical perspective on the underbellies of neoliberal academia, the following list of possible themes is by no means exclusive:

- Anxiety and depression in academia
- Function(s) of hope in academia
- Corruption in academia • Ideology of funding bodies
- Academic inbreeding • Academia and its constitutive outside(s)
- Dread and despair in academia
- Academia and the Enlightenment ideology
- Underbellies of critical theory
- Rigged academia

Transgressive Thought in the 21st century: Thinking the thought of the outside, the thought beyond the Law

I want, along with other GCAS researchers, to propose a stream on 'Transgressive Thought in the 21st century' for the Midlands Conference. Specifically, the stream would ask: what are the conditions of possibility for what we might call transgressive thought, and what is its function and its aim? That is, what must be transgressed, if indeed there is anything that must be transgressed or that can be, in the 21st century?

That there is today, at the precipice of contemporaneity, a renewed urgency for a thought, or constellation of thoughts, which can somehow think outside of the dominant, prescribed logic of the established hegemony, is in a sense undeniable. This is so because the disasters besetting the social order, in all of their complexity and interconnectedness, are currently unthinkable within the paradigms for thought that govern the status quo. Yet despite this urgency, such a demand raises challenging social, political, and epistemological problems, not the least of which would be, following Georges Bataille: do we not need the Law, the established injunction against thought, in order for transgression as such to take place at all? And if so, then what scope remains for those of us with dreams of an emancipatory political project, if the law transgressed is constitutive of the very act of transgression itself? In other words, what is thinkable and what are our aims? At the intersection therefore of much-needed debates in philosophy, social theory, and political theory (to name a few) lies precisely the radical questioning (which is not a negation thereof) of the conditions and nature of transgressive thought itself.

Specifically, the perimeters of thought that the stream could focus on destabilising are such topics as: the logics of exclusion/inclusion operating globally and locally (which Giorgio Agamben has so excellently deconstructed), the instrumentalisation of thought (and the university more broadly), and the reduction of all pursuits (be that artistic, intellectual, social or political) to the vacuity of the imperative for profit maximisation. In opening up debates such as the above across disciplines, these questions will aim to stimulate an engagement with the possibility for the critique of ossified structures (such as the failing democratic systems in the UK and the US) and reified forms (the primary and repeated invisibilisation of power's functioning through the network of financial capital), through a rigorous interrogation of thought and praxis' obligations and the instances of their accountability. The hope is that this might approach what Deleuze once called, in an apt characterisation of Foucault, the 'thought of the outside. Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- ❖ Problems of inclusion and exclusion in political theory;
- ❖ The nature of transgression, i.e. sexually, politically, performatively, and its own limits;
- ❖ The status and stability of hegemony and hegemonic structures;
- ❖ Modes of philosophising that produce new subjectivities and new ways of thinking identity outside of established, juridical paradigms;
- ❖ On the relationship between politics and philosophy today in the maintenance of the social order;
- ❖ Late-stage capitalism and the potential disintegration of classical modes of critique;
- ❖ Eco-theory and transgression;
- ❖ Transgression as a form of life;
- ❖ The nature of community and the state of the polis under a transgressive law;
- ❖ The relationship between the Law and transgression Bataille and beyond

Productivity or Process: What is the Value in Making?

Oliver Cloke (Questioner) and Patrick Loan (Instructor) VCAS - Vienna Contemporary Art Space

"The creative process is an end in itself; it is a performance, an improvisation, a journey into the unknown." - George Maciunas

Within the realm of contemporary art and intellectual discourse, the exploration of the creative process as an aim in and of itself has gained significant momentum in recent years. This interest reflects the broader societal tensions between economic productivity and output, and the fundamental meaning found within the endeavours themselves. Our central objective for this stream is to challenge the value of outcome over process, and explore the implications of elevating the act of creation itself above any tangible end result. How might this shift in perspective impact artistic practice, intellectual inquiry, and our broader cultural landscape? Through interdisciplinary dialogues, the presentation of diverse case studies and participatory actions, we aim to create a space to explore the potential transformative power of process-centred approaches. In consideration of hierarchical structures, capitalistic systems, emerging technologies, rapid development of AI and growing economic strain, the case could be made that the pressure to produce outcomes with economic value is intensifying. Drawing inspiration from the avantgarde movement Fluxus, known for its emphasis on intermedia, performance, and dematerialization of art, we would like to challenge traditional art and societal boundaries. Our aim is to unite diverse voices and prompt reflection on the enduring relevance of 'process' in contemporary artistic and intellectual discourse, challenging the prevailing emphasis on final outcomes. We invite submissions for presentations, demonstrations, performances or experimental workshops from across disciplines (creative practitioners, theorists, academics etc.) exploring topics including, but not limited to, the key questions below:

Process versus the end result in creative fields

- Is the creative process valued, or is the value only attributed to the finished object/ outcome? Can/ should this be challenged?
- Are the ideals and philosophies of movements like Fluxus still relevant today? Or is this an ideal that is outdated?
- In what ways have artists, filmmakers, writers and musicians used process and the 'non-result' as a way of pushing boundaries?
- Can process-centered thinking provide a challenge to established norms, disrupting hierarchical systems, and fostering inclusivity in creative fields? Productivity and value in society
- How much value do we, as a society, place on being productive/ efficient, and does this marginalise or impact certain groups?
- How might the shift of prioritising process over the end result impact artistic practice, intellectual inquiry, and the broader cultural landscape?
- How do Western capitalistic systems and growing economic strain intensify pressure on artists to produce outcomes with economic value, and how does this affect the creative process - is this a positive or negative trend? New technologies, AI and the creative process
- In what manner do emerging technologies act as disruptors, not only of general labour, but also of creative processes?

- With the development of AI and robotics, more and more roles within the labour market are expected to become automated. Will this positively or negatively shift the creative human process?

Do we care how we get the result (e.g. using AI to produce music), as long as the outcome is what we want? This stream, for us, represents a unique opportunity to invite participants to observe, reflect and reimagine the possibilities, good or bad, of pursuit without a goal. We aim to bring together a diverse community of artists, academics, theorists, and writers for transformative discussions and innovative thinking that can help precipitate developments across the realms of art, academia, and beyond.

Gentle Gestures - To feel, touch, activate, brush, signal, indicate, host, carry, trust, blush, disrupt.

Alice Bell - University of Lincoln, Mark Kasumovic - De Montfort University, Danica Maier – Nottingham Trent University

This expanded Midlands stream of *Gentle Gestures* seeks embodied, sensorial, and artful provocations that question, demonstrate, and activate spaces of alternative learning. It invites a range of affective and effective responses that generate hopeful and expectant dialogues. The stream invites proposals across the creative arts, pedagogical enquiries, participatory or community art/ivism, art/ecologies, art/ographies, practice-based research, and critical theory, that explore the ways knowledge production can be a living, pleasurable, multiple, empowered, navigated, generative and co-creative activity. Through a re-evaluation of the relationships between process, pedagogy, gesture, territory, desire, within accelerated developments of neoliberalism, what can be uncovered towards a deeper understanding of being-with and within creative practices and power.

The stream welcomes a range of submissions from traditional paper/panel presentations, video essays, round tables, assemblies, art experiences, workshops, performances, critical reflections through, text, live art, video, installation, sound, voice, networked technologies, or curatorial programming. Practice-based presentations should bear in mind that room allocations for the events may have limitations and we will utilise classrooms at the host institution, please take this into account during your application and any proposal that requires a specific space please state on application and we will discuss the possibility.

The stream will propose ways in which creative arts practices can explore positions of unfamiliarity, precariousness, and hopefulness towards our relationships with one another; the bravery and trust required; the dynamics of ownership; comfort in expressing bodily knowledge, interiority and touch - all forms of potential knowledge generation, transmutation, and transformation (hooks, Freire, Ettinger, Irigaray). It will also consider meta, networked, and transdisciplinary cognitions, ecologies, and relations, (Candy, Bateson, Butler-Kisber). As such, it will appeal to artists and researchers of education, pedagogy, and the arts with interests in psycho-social, phenomenological, and critical theory.

Proposals could be around:

- Art and responsibility
- Non-hierarchical approaches to knowledge development or exchange within or beyond artistic practice
- Ethical considerations in socially engaged practices and collaborative learning
- Situated practices, traditional and alternative sites for learning / institutional critique, diversities of practice and ways inequalities are reproduced
- Methodologies and strategies for radical artistic practice
- The relationship between pleasure, desire, and knowledge as a form of artistic love-as-encounter
- Feminine, queered, maternal methodologies that challenge neo-liberal knowledge structures

Some starting questions that may help form proposals:

- What kinds of spaces/places do these practices occupy?
- What kinds of interventions bring the feeling body back into the learning

space? What bodies, where, when, and how?

- How can or when does creative practice serve as a vehicle for the facilitation of learning?
- Which artistic activities can be practised in radical pedagogical encounters? Are they fast or slow? Kind or harsh? Inside/Outside/Beside, or in-between?
- How can, or do, radical pedagogies give way to systematically oppressed voices without falling back into dominant logics or reproducing narratives of oppression?

Cultural Resistance in a Time of Economic Stagnation

Dr Hui-Ying Kerr & Dr Naomi Braithwaite, Nottingham Trent University

Since the late twentieth century, subcultures have been identified as deviance from the mainstream, delinquency, subversion, strategic or symbolic forms of resistance, and forms of distinction in which the concept of a heterogenous monoculture is critiqued (Cohen, 1997; Hall and Jefferson, 2006; Hebdige, 1979; Thornton, 1995). However, how does this relate to the wider economic climate, specifically during times of economic deprivation and prolonged stagnation, when conditions for cultural facilitation and support are less than ideal? In Britain, culture has come under persistent governmental devaluing in the form of budget cuts to cultural bodies such as museums, theatres, outreach programs, university courses and most recently the withdrawal of funding for 'low value' arts and humanities courses in the ideological favouring of STEM subjects (Adams and Allegretti, 2023; Butterworth et al., 2022; Newman and Tourle, 2012). In these cases, capitalist terminology is used in the pursuit of ideological often conservative frameworks of commerce and instrumentalism rather than national good or holistic self-development.

Yet, from 1980s British punk to 1990s Japanese Lolita, subcultures have been observed to flourish in direct contrast to the realities of economic life, painting a different picture of social, cultural life that can be vibrant, defiant and imaginative (Crossley, 2015; Kang and Cassidy, 2015). With it being over 15 years since the global financial crash, three years since Brexit and an ongoing cost-of-living crisis, what can we learn from past and current forms of cultural resistance and their artefacts in response to a context of economic and political gloom?

Proposals may wish to consider (but are not restricted to) any of the following questions:

- How can we define the relationship between cultural resistance and economic conditions?
- How is cultural resistance manifested through artefacts or outputs and what are its impacts on wider culture? What are the material signs and implications of cultural resistance?
- How does the economic environment affect cultural output and what type of work is produced? Does cultural resistance have a subsequent impact on the economic environment?
- What is the relationship of cultural resistance to 'value' (societally, culturally, politically, economically, etc)?
- Do culture and economics exist as cause and effect, or are they mutually contested ground? Do they exist in a relationship of critique?
- Are expressions of cultural resistance gendered? Do conditions of class, social or cultural segmentation affect participation and to what effect?
- Does privilege matter?
- What of the participants in cultural resistance? What are the human stories, and do they matter?
- Are the intangible aspects in cultural resistance significant?
- What effects of the digital, the global and the transnational on resistance?
- Is cultural resistance futile or meaningful? Is it impotence or resilience?

Submissions welcome from a range of subject areas, including (but not restricted to):

History, art and design history, material culture, gender studies, climate studies, politics, economics, sociology, cultural studies, critical theory, transnational studies, art and design, area studies, other.

Defining the City in an Undefinable World

Dr Francesco Proto, Oxford Brookes University

In today's world, numerous definitions exist to describe urban landscapes. Some view the city as a bustling metropolis, teeming with skyscrapers and endless activity. Others see it as a cultural hub, where art and creativity flourish. There are those who perceive the city as a concrete jungle, filled with noise and pollution. Ultimately, the definitions available nowadays to describe the contemporary city are insufficient to reflect its multifaceted nature and the diverse perspectives of its inhabitants.

The concept of a contemporary city has in fact evolved over time, giving rise to various definitions. One-word descriptors such as 'smart', 'post-urban', 'edge', 'hyperreal', 'virtual', 'collage', 'hieroglyphic', etc. attempt to capture the essence of these urban spaces. However, the complexity of cities defies simple categorization. From bustling metropolises to sustainable eco-cities, each definition offers a unique perspective on the multifaceted nature of contemporary urban life. As cities continue to evolve, so too is our understanding of what it means to be a part of this ever-changing landscape.

An updated definition of the contemporary city is essential in today's rapidly changing urban landscape. With urbanization, globalization, and technological advancements thriving, cities have evolved into complex ecosystems. This panel will explore the multifaceted aspects of a contemporary city by redefining our understanding of cities to better address the challenges and opportunities they present in the 21st century.

On the other hand, with rapid urbanization and changing dynamics, traditional definitions no longer capture the essence of a city. Panellists are invited to redefine cities to reflect their fragmented nature, dispersed populations, and absence of a clear centre. This updated definition will enable policymakers, practitioners, and urban planners to address the challenges posed by these changes effectively. In this respect, the importance of theory in defining the contemporary city cannot be overstated.

We encourage papers interested in re-actualizing neglected past theories of the city or, commendably, newly radical, controversial, and comprehensive definitions of the city that might re-trigger a dormant but desperately needed debate on what architect and urbanist Rem Koolhaas has quite recently defined as the 'generic city.'