Imagining unhealthy climates

Perceiving climates as healthy or unhealthy is not new to present day climate change debates. There are plenty of historical accounts of the unhealthy tropics or the modification of forest cover to improve the climate. These were in frequently much more regional ways attempts to govern future climate and to bring that ideal future home, sometimes with a nostalgia for the past, as imagination to mobilize citizens, governments and scientists to resolve the question: what to do with the climate. Today, many climate change accounts paint fearful pictures of future climates and their deleterious consequences for infectious diseases, livelihoods, heat waves and even depression and obesity. Indeed climate change becomes an idea imbued with the possibility of acting against all kinds of other issues that are made to connect to it. Action on climate change is thus held to have the ability to solve (at least some) health issues too, whilst both are frequently labelled ‘security’ issues.

In this think piece I would like to outline the scientific and theatrical presentations of imagining future climates as unhealthy by focusing in particular on contemporary climate and health research. This imagination of the future, however, also promotes action in the present and climate, health, terrorism share many similar discourses in this respect (as ‘security issues’). What does it mean however to imagine climates as healthy or unhealthy? For whom are they unhealthy? And what kinds of action do these imaginations promote in the present? To what extent is the future governed through the present or the present through the future? Therefore I perceive that this work would best fit the ‘Imagining the future’ theme or the ‘Anticipating the future: security and technologies of governance’ theme.

Imagining the future or, better yet, futures: the epistemological challenge

What is the future? The future is, by its nature, unknown and unpredictable. Governing through the future (or, as futurists would term it, multiple futures) is not only about dealing with perceived uncertainties, risks, and/or opportunity spaces. It is also includes imagining several futures – the possible, the probable, and the desirable (Toffler, 1978). Yet, as noted
by Wendell Bell in 2007, there remains an epistemological challenge when working with the future: As the future is by its nature unknowable, how do you differentiate between two assessments of the probable future among other challenges?

Sources:


Rens van Munster, Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen

Fantasies of Security: Imagining Catastrophic Futures in the Cold War and the War on Terror

For security professionals, the imagination of the future has become one of the main stakes in the management of catastrophic risks: how to manage a threat that has not yet happened, we don’t know and cannot predict? This presentation examines the different ways in which security experts have mobilized and linked imagination to strategies of risk management during (i) the Cold War period and (ii) the post-9/11 War on Terror. While the genealogy of post-9/11 security practices can be traced to risk technologies deployed during the Cold War, there seems to be a significant difference in the way in which imagination is integrated in governmental practices during these two periods. More specifically, ‘thinking the unthinkable’ of nuclear catastrophe during the Cold War has relied on rational, cognitive forms of risk assessment and responsibility. Imagination was mainly deployed by the anti-nuclear movement in an attempt to make people aware of the catastrophic consequences of nuclear war. In the post 9/11 context, by contrast, imagination no longer serves this critical role, as it has been integrated in processes of governing in the war on terror. Through imagination, subjects are summoned to ‘expect the unexpected’ and develop a precautionary attitude of response-ability in their daily lives.

Andrew Hill, CRESC, The Open University

Imagining future conflicts

The form future conflicts (from terrorist campaigns to inter-state wars) will take has been the subject of fresh consideration in recent years - motivated not least by the new type of conflict ‘the War on Terror’ seems to present. This paper will consider the terms in which near future conflicts have been discussed, analysed and imagined, and the ways in which these processes intersect with questions of governance.

At one level the paper will examine how the imagining of future conflicts is prey to the mechanisms of phantasy. At the same time it will analyse visuality as central to processes of imagining. In so doing the type of knowledge or understanding of the future this imagining gives rise to will be interrogated, whilst noting the difficulties long associated with adequately depicting war and conflict.
The paper will move on to examine the way in which new technologies have provided a focus for the imagining of future conflicts, including the phantasies of clean, precision strikes and use of humanless technology, that together seem to hold the promise of a warfare in which no non-combatants or Western military personnel are harmed. The United States’ use of drones to carry out strikes in Pakistan will be discussed as an already existing exemplar of the use of this technology.

Ben O’Loughlin, Royal Holloway and Andrew Hoskins, Warwick University

The End of the Future: 9/11 and the Extended Present

The way we think about the future defines the post-9/11 era. We have entered the era of the extended present (Nowotny, 1994), in which past and future are interwoven into a single narrative of now. Broadcast and online media connect any breaking event with past precedents, drawing on new digital archives to impose ‘media templates’ on interpretations of the unfolding mediated present. Simultaneously, the scale of media, with an endless Internet and 24 hour news channels, provides us with continual speculation about future possibilities that would extend and stem from today’s breaking news events. But the significance of such possibilities is that we should be worried – and act – today, as guided by the mediated lessons of the past to prevent similar future legacies. As Grusin (2004 and forthcoming) argues, our society is engaged in perpetual ‘premediation’: we are preoccupied with future threats that are an outgrowth of present conditions and past lessons to the extent that media and political discourses anticipate all possible outcomes before they have the opportunity to disrupt future times. Consequently, while terrible things will happen, nothing will happen that surprises us. As in the movie Minority Report, futurologists and horizon scanners endlessly foresee potential scenarios, probabilities and necessary preventative actions.

Thinkers across the fields of philosophy, law, sociology, journalism, media, communication and cultural studies, science and the arts have sought to capture the ways in which certain tempos or conceptions of time structure how we live now. For instance, many argued that 9/11 and the launch of the ‘war on terror’ implied we lived in a moment defined by an exception: that circumstances demand that norms and laws be set aside. Others argue we live in a time constituted by events, particular media events (Gitlin, 1980, 2001), and that such events can have transformative consequences. Is it the case that in fact we inhabit and manage these temporalities simultaneously? What happens if our expectations are based on one temporality only for another (a sudden event, the realisation of a permanent state) to become significant? How do we modulate our movement between these multiple temporalities and mediations?

This paper identifies the principal mechanisms that mediate our continuous and extended present.

Steve Hinchliffe, The Open University

Swine, swimming and birdsong – the threat of life and the questionable ontology of emergence

As current reportage over the viral threat to life turns from wild enemies to the domestic arrangement of farming, matching, perhaps an inevitable shift from a friend enemy
distinction to circulation, this short paper starts to ask a series of questions regarding the ways in which bio-securities and in particular potential virulent pandemics are being anticipated and pre-empted. Thinking about preliminary fieldwork from an ESRC funded project on biosecurity practices and reflecting on the pervasive ontologisation of emergence and of governance, I will seek to develop some ideas for an approach to current bio-life issues which remain suspicious of a-political ontologies of the real (emergence) and which seek to open up possible interventions in an onto-politics of living things…

Claudia Aradau, The Open University

Catastrophe and the Politics of Events

Catastrophe has recently re-emerged as a concern for governance. While disasters, emergencies, and crises have continually problematised how to govern, more recently the ‘biopolitics of catastrophe’ (Neyrat 2008) has become a dominant mode of governmentality. ‘Expecting the unexpected’ (National Counter Terrorism Security Office 2003) is the new motto of counter-terrorist measures of preparedness, and could also be taken to be the motto of a governmental change in relation to the future.

The ‘biopolitics of catastrophe’ appears to interrupt the temporality of progress and repetition, of crisis and system, by introducing the unexpected event in the realm of governmentality.

In this paper, the unexpected event is unpacked through a reading of Alain Badiou. I engage in this reading of the biopolitics of catastrophe and of the politics of events together with a twofold purpose. First, the conceptual work done around events and a radical politics of interruption can shed light on some of the transformations underway. Second, the formal similarities that underpin the politics of events and the biopolitics of catastrophe raise more disturbing questions about the language of radical politics.

Friday, 26 June 2009

Bruce Braun, University of Minnesota

Between the dreams of the presumptuous and the terrors of the timorous: technics and the time of government.

What is the relation between government and the future? On the one hand we might say that we govern in the name of the future; to govern is to propose actions that will bring about a desired future state. Or, we might say that today, after 9/11 and the ‘war on terror’, we increasingly govern social and biological life through the future; by imagining future events that may or may not occur, we bring their consequences into the present. Both rely on particular understandings of time, the former a reversible time of linear causality, the latter an accumulating time of immanent causality. In this thought piece I explore a different understanding of the relation between government and time, one that imagines that the practice of government, far from bringing about a future that can be foreseen or, alternately, bringing the future into the present, instead throws us forward into our past; in our advance, in our effort to anticipate and govern the future, our past runs ahead of us.
How can this be? How can one be thrown forward into the past? And how might ‘governing’ be part of this temporal dynamic? Our guides for this exploration will be the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler and the American literary theorist David Wills. Although ‘government’ is the concern of neither, both propose an understanding of the relation between techne and time that may lead us to conceive the time of government differently, where government comes to be understood as a form of thought/action that worries over the future yet nevertheless comes to mind after the event.

**John Clarke, The Open University, UK**

**Changing to stay the same? Global time, governmental time and crisis time.**

Governing has typically been done in the name of the future. What Li describes as the ‘will to improve’ shapes a characteristic narrative for governmental intervention that separates past, (flawed) present, and a better future. This appears to be almost a political necessity (it is difficult to imagine trying to enrol political subjects to the project of a worse future). But it is always potentially contradictory and contestable by other narratives and other imagined futures.

I am interested in the ways such contradictions and tensions are visible in the problems of trying to articulate national temporalities (and rhythms) with global temporalities (and rhythms). While this is most obvious in processes of speed-up or intensification, this is not really Harvey’s famous space-time compression. Rather, it might be a question of how heterogeneous temporalities are to be coordinated. The title refers to a particular example – how to ‘modernise’ nations by their insertiojn into a globalised world, while respecting ‘traditions’, ‘values’, ‘ways of life’ that modernisation-as-globalisation appears to threaten. In the words of a Danish Commission on globalisation ‘we must change in order to stay the same’. How are presents, pasts and futures to be re-knitted or re-aligned in such governmental projects?

The final part of the title points to the emergence of a new temporality - crisis time. I wish to explore what ‘crisis’ does to established arrangements of times, temporalities and rhythms. As an example, both the USA and the UK have revived – at different times and with different meanings – the ‘New Deal’. What does the return of a 1930s policy programme signify in the governance of crisis?

**Ben Anderson, Durham University**

**The Presence of the Future**

Common to different forms of anticipatory action (pre-emption, precaution, preparedness and so on) is a seemingly paradoxical process whereby a future becomes the cause for action in the present. In my comments, I will argue that to understand the strange temporalities of governance we should attend to; *styles*, consisting of statements that disclose and relate to the form of ‘the future’, *practices*, consisting of acts that make specific futures present, and *logics*, consisting of interventions in the present that aim to create desired futures. However, I will also argue that once action shifts to the future an analytics of how anticipatory action functions are not enough. We must also learn to reflect on the
relations to ‘the future’ that infuse our own sensibilities, concepts and methods. More specifically, to respond to the contemporary proliferation of forms of anticipatory action it is necessary to experiment with affirmative ways of relating to the future. What might such techniques do? First, work could anticipate other futures by imagining contestable visions of possible or not-yet futures. Second, work could welcome the unanticipated and thereafter care for the irruption of virtual or to come futures. I will probably illustrate these thoughts by reference to Swine Flu.

*Kirstie Ball, The Open University*

**Exposure: Exploring the Subject of Surveillance**

The aim of this paper is to identify a construct which may be used to frame the subjective experience of surveillance in contemporary society. The paper’s central question concerns whether there is a concept to describe the experience of surveillance which can then inform empirical studies. Surveillance practice has consequences for the individual, yet surveillance studies do not have a particular take on the subject. Building on some preliminary empirical observations from the workplace, the paper suggests that the notion of ‘exposure’ is a useful starting point. The paper explores the range of ways in which subjects can be exposed under surveillance, and theoretically locates the concept in relation to developments in organization theory, new media theory and surveillance theory. Two observations are made which support the centrality of the ‘exposure’ concept to studies of surveillance. The first argument is that the body interior of the surveilled subject is more open to division, classification and scrutiny, either because it is seen as a source of truth, the target of public revelation or fetish. There is now a political economy around the revelation of this interiority, which calls for a non reductive and multi-dimensional approach to the subjective experience of surveillance. The second argument is that the nature and character of exposure is a product of institutional configurations which have consequences at the level of the individual. A research agenda is developed which will frame future work exploring the experience of surveillance.

*Evelyn S. Ruppert, CRESC, The Open University*

**Transactional Citizens?**

In the commercial and government sectors transactional databases compile massive quantities of digital information on individual conduct (purchases made, services used, finances transferred, benefits received, licenses acquired). Through practices such as profiling, data matching, data mining and predictive analytics these transactional databases can be used to identify populations on the basis of patterns of correlated conduct which in turn can be used to predict and potentially pre-empt future conduct whether it be illegal border crossings or benefits fraud. The significance of this shift to categories of conduct from the usual categories of sociological interest (social class, ethnicity, etc.) is that they are rapidly becoming the basis of prediction and policy. What people do in relation to government (transactions) is the object of analysis and intervention rather than what they say they do and who they say they are (subjective identifications). Government policies promoting the use of joined up transactional databases assume that these are objective measurements of subjects and provide a more comprehensive evidence base for policy-making because transactions are measurements of what people ‘actually’ do. If governing is shifting toward technologies that predict the future on the basis of correlations in past
conduct, what are the emerging political sites of contestation and intervention? I will explore a conception of the 'transactional citizen' to think about this question.

Victoria Basham, University of Bristol

Subjects of the Future: ‘Petty Sovereigns’, (Neo)-Liberalism and Counter-Terrorism

In March 2009, the British Government launched an updated version of its strategy for 'countering international terrorism'. The strategy is founded on four key 'work streams' - pursue, prevent, protect and prepare - which 'reflect the assumptions' that the government has made about 'the future threat' of international terrorism. Central to these assumptions is the question of how to govern in light of the risky, uncertain, and potentially catastrophic, future. The dominant discourse here is of inevitability, not caution; and insistence on 'when the worst happens' rather than 'what if'. This of course raises a number of important questions about how (in)security is interpreted and articulated and about the role, aims and targets of state and legal interventions. However, the strategy also raises important questions about the role that individuals are expected to play in countering international terrorism. Pursuing terrorists not only involves intelligence from the usual experts but from members of the public; preventing attack requires communities to tackle 'violent extremism' in their midst; and measures such as Project Argus reveal how protecting the UK means educating business managers and professionals on how to reduce the vulnerability of crowded places, transport, and national infrastructure and prepare them for their responsibilities in the event of attack. In this paper, I thus explore how particular forms of agency, subjectivity and citizenship are articulated in relation to the forms and tactics of governmentality at work in the British government’s counter-terrorism strategy. I examine how the pursue, prevent, protect and prepare paradigm shapes and is shaped by particular logics of national identity which require 'petty sovereigns' to affirm and reinforce the boundaries of national security policies and practices. I conclude that 'petty sovereigns', and the liberal forms of agency that characterise their subjecthood, are essential to maintaining and policing these boundaries.

Elspeth Van Veeren, Bristol University and Lucy Easthope, Lancaster University

Waking the Dead: Necropolitics, Biopolitics and Disaster Response post-7/7

In 2008, Jenny Edkins published an article in the Review of International Studies entitled ‘Biopolitics, communication and global governance’. Broadly speaking, the article called for a closer examination of the processes used by UK police forces to identify and investigate sudden death: the Disaster Victim Identification process or DVI. She argued that DVI is biopolitical in nature and reflects a way in which the state regulates and silences the political voices of its citizens rendering them equivalent to Agamben’s 'bare life'. Edkins therefore suggests that the distress that families felt following the 7 July 2005 bombings in London was unnecessary and symptomatic of the expansion of the ‘state of emergency' and the accompanying bureaucratisation of trauma. Building upon Edkin’s work, what this paper argues, however, is that to fully appreciate the extent of the biopolitics at work, an interdisciplinary methodology is essential. By extending research into the Disaster Victim Identification process beyond the elite rhetoric to exploring the discursive practices - and therefore requiring a greater understanding of DVI and disaster response that comes from engaging practitioners and an interdisciplinary approach - that constitute and shape the social itself, what this paper argues that DVI is a power-laden practice, but that this power is
produced biopolitically rather than through sovereign exceptionalism. In looking at the extensiveness of the practices associated with DVI rather than the rhetoric, what is explored is how those bereaved in the disaster were not only instantly, inevitably, and seriously disempowered by the trauma itself (Eyre, 2003) and by any intervention – the moment of exception - but that a study of 7/7 and DVI also reveals the fragmentation and dissipation of power, the plurality of choice, and the contingency of life itself (Dillon, 2007). The practices of the DVI police officers, the coroner, the pathologist, the journalists who seek access, and the agencies that claim authentic knowledge, compete with the realities produced by and for the families to produce alternative and competing subjectivities for themselves and for those who have lost their lives.