



# Beyond Capitalist Realism – Why We Need Critical Future Studies

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## Abstract

This paper introduces the interdisciplinary field of Critical Future Studies (CFS). CFS investigates the scope and constraints within public culture for imagining and debating different potential futures. It interrogates imagined futures founded – often surreptitiously – upon values and assumptions from the past and present, as well as those representing a departure from current social trajectories. CFS draws on perspectives from various disciplines including sociology, political studies, intellectual history, cultural history, media and cultural studies, utopian studies, science and technology studies, and philosophy. CFS also engages with discourses and ideas from the natural sciences (including popular science), computing and economics. And, given our concern with public culture, CFS aims to contribute constructively to vigorous and imaginative public debate about the future – a futural public sphere – and to challenge a prevalent contemporary cynicism about our capacity to imagine alternative futures while trapped in a parlous present. To that extent, we propose CFS as a programme of engaged and open-ended social critique, not as a solely academic endeavour. Our paper begins by describing the relationship between CFS and mainstream Future Studies. Subsequently, we discuss the contemporary context for Critical Future Studies. Here we make the case that CFS is a timely and even urgent project at our current historical juncture, arguing also for the significance of both utopian and dystopian imaginings. We then go on to discuss methodologies within CFS scholarship. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on the values underpinning CFS. Overall, this paper not only describes CFS as a field of research but also serves as an invitation to cultural scholars to consider how their own work might intersect with and contribute to CFS.

**Keywords:** critical future studies, utopia, dystopia, realism

*This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.*  
—Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (1940)

*Post-apocalyptic fiction has been moved to our Current Affairs section.*  
—sign at a Massachusetts bookstore following Trump’s election victory

## Introduction

In this paper, we introduce the interdisciplinary field of Critical Future Studies (CFS). Stated briefly, CFS investigates the scope and constraints within public culture for imagining and debating different potential futures. It interrogates imagined futures founded – often surreptitiously – upon values and assumptions from the past and present, as well as those representing a departure from current social trajectories. CFS draws on perspectives from various disciplines including sociology, political studies, intellectual history, cultural history, media and cultural studies, utopian studies, science and technology studies, and philosophy. CFS also engages with discourses and ideas from the natural sciences (including popular science), computing and economics. And, given our concern with public culture, CFS aims to contribute constructively to vigorous and imaginative public debate about the future – a futural public sphere – and to challenge a prevalent contemporary cynicism about our capacity to imagine alternative futures while trapped in a parlous present. To that extent, we propose CFS as a programme of engaged and open-ended social critique, not as a solely academic endeavour. This paper describes CFS in greater detail and sets out some of the major reasons why it can be seen as a timely and, indeed, urgent project. The paper also serves as an invitation to cultural scholars (understood in the broadest terms) to consider how their own work might intersect with and contribute to CFS.

Our paper begins by clarifying the relationship between our vision for CFS and the already long-established academic field of Future Studies. In fact, the term “critical future studies” is not new, so our chosen label requires some discussion. In particular, it raises questions of epistemology, “macrohistory” and human agency. In short, our version of CFS stands with one foot inside and one foot outside mainstream Future Studies, and we describe this relationship in more detail.

Subsequently, we discuss the contemporary context for (re)inventing Critical

Future Studies. We live in interesting, if not perilous times. On one hand, our capacity to imagine alternative futures has seemingly atrophied over more than two decades of neoliberal hegemony: “capitalist realism” (Fisher 2009) has meant persuading citizens that there is no alternative to the onward march of globalized markets, finance capitalism, deregulation and environmental degradation. Yet the recent resurgence of Right-wing populist nationalism, frightening as it is, raises the possibility that neoliberalism is no longer the only game in town. Whether this is true of capitalism *per se* is, of course, debatable. Nonetheless, the future may be more open – perhaps more precarious – than it has appeared for some decades. Here we argue that, not only do we need an expanded repertoire of possible futures available for public consideration, but that both utopian and dystopian modes of imagination are vital for reinvigorating a futural public sphere. Modes of thinking about the future that claim to be realist are often, themselves, covert modes of utopianism. Moreover, there is something profoundly unrealistic in hoping we can maintain our current trajectories and institutional structures into the future while simply mitigating the side effects in piecemeal fashion – ecological damage is the most obvious marker of our unsustainable social order. There is a case to be made that imaginative ambition is now a prerequisite for averting catastrophe. Yet utopianism is still (with good reason) eyed with suspicion in many quarters, so we reflect on its role within Critical Future Studies.

We then turn to questions of methodology. CFS interrogates visions of the future (or “futurescapes”) from potentially any domain of culture, from popular science to science fiction to Future Studies itself. And it’s critically concerned with the “Future Industries”, that is, institutions that enjoy the greatest powers of agenda-setting, horizon-setting and problem-defining in terms of the way society thinks and talks about the future. While CFS is an open field of study, amenable to various methods of research and analysis, it is useful to sketch some of the key critical questions that CFS scholars can and should ask about both futurescapes and the institutions that produce them.

Finally, we conclude with a brief statement of the key values underpinning CFS: we see CFS as both rigorous and inclusive, but there is no sense in which it can claim to be value-neutral and it is important to acknowledge these values in our invitation for interested scholars to join this critical dialogue about possible futures and the ways in which we imagine and discuss them. Before proceeding, however, it is important that we acknowledge up front the limitations of our own perspectives as two male, European scholars: if our sketch of CFS seems unduly culture- and gender-blind, we hope that interested readers will view this not as closure but as an invitation to consider ways in which, for example, indigenous, Southern and feminist perspectives would form vital aspects of CFS going forward. We intend this paper to signify, first and foremost, the impetus for a much larger conversation.

## **CFS and Mainstream Future Studies**

Future Studies is a long-standing, multidisciplinary field<sup>1</sup> which CFS both intersects with and diverges from. In providing only a brief description of how, we risk presenting a caricature of what can, with all due caution, be termed mainstream Future Studies. Our aim is not to misrepresent or annoy mainstream Future Studies scholars but simply to highlight some distinguishing characteristics of CFS. These differences are better understood as tendencies or matters of emphasis rather than clean breaks. The meanings, vocabularies and values of mainstream Future Studies are themselves matters of periodic contestation rather than neat consensus (Sardar 2010) – for example, questions arise as to whether Future Studies is primarily interpretive or empirical; whether it should focus on forecasting, “backcasting” (how actions in the present might bring about specific futures), or “foresight” (envisioning alternative future scenarios); or how closely Future Studies should align with institutional strategic planning interests.

Heonju Son (2015) provides a useful thumbnail sketch of Future Studies as passing through three periods: a mid-20th century phase focused on scientific and technological progress, concerned especially with forecasting and “rationalizing” visions of the future; a second phase beginning in the 1970s, increasingly concerned with global visions of the future and increasingly entwined with global business interests; and a third phase beginning in the 90s, characterized by a fragmentation of views of the future and by the prevalence of neoliberal institutions and worldviews. Son’s (necessarily simplified) schema, points to an “identity crisis” within Future Studies during this third phase. This resonates with our own efforts to reinvigorate the study of the future. However, we have no ambition either to reinvent or challenge the entire field of Future Studies. Nor do we intend to contribute to the cycle of “fruitless reinvention” that Ziauddin Sardar (2010: 177) identifies as a problematic tendency within Future Studies. Our more modest aim is to foster a field of study (CFS) that sits both within and alongside the broader field of Future Studies.

Briefly, we envisage several tendencies within CFS that give it a distinctive flavor. Firstly, CFS is heavily invested in cultural analysis. This does not mean treating matters of economy, politics or technoscience as somehow of secondary importance in shaping the future. But in terms of shaping society’s capacity to imagine and deliberate on potential futures (and therefore to steer towards or away from specific scenarios), we are always and unavoidably dealing with matters of culture. In part this means taking seriously popular culture (from science fiction films to populist news outlets) as a rich repository of imaginative futurescapes more so than mainstream Future Studies – which gives greater priority to expert knowledge – has tended to do. It also means acknowledging that our societal capacity to imagine, desire or fear particular futures is as much an affective as it

is a cognitive process. CFS is heavily concerned with the ways in which certain futurescapes carry affective weight, and also with the ways in which they compete for legitimacy. To that extent, the future is a matter of public culture. Herein lies a further distinguishing feature of CFS: it openly declares its commitment to the democratization of the future and its antipathy towards a technocratic ethos that claims the future is best left to the experts (though it must also be critical of the current populist vogue for delegitimizing expert knowledge on, for example, climate science). What this means in practice could (and should) be debated and contested at length, but for now it suffices to note the “critical” in CFS signifies a project that, while not narrowly aligned with any single future-oriented political platform, makes no pretence towards disinterested science. We will have more to say about the values and impulses underpinning CFS in the conclusion.

The term “critical future studies” is not a wholly new coinage. It is sometimes used to identify a particular (and usually rather marginal or secondary) branch of Future Studies. For example, Sohail Inayatullah identifies it as one of four dimensions of the wider field, the other three being predictive, interpretative and anticipatory action-learning Future Studies. He characterizes critical future studies as that which seeks to “*undefine the future*” and which is not concerned merely with predictions or comparisons:

Critical future studies asserts that the present is fragile, merely the victory of one particular discourse, or way of knowing, over others. The goal of critical research is to disturb present power relations through making problematic our categories and evoking other places, scenarios of the future. Through this distance, the present becomes less rigid, indeed, it can become remarkable. The spaces of reality widen and the grip of neorealism, of the bottom line, of the predictive approach loosens; the new is possible. (2007:10)

By Inayatullah’s depiction, CFS posits that the discourses we use to imagine the future are never neutral and shape the kinds of futures that can actually come to pass. This is true at the level of substantive future scenarios: for example, a future in which every citizen is guaranteed economic security only becomes a possibility as the Universal Basic Income (once “unthinkable”) enters the agenda of public debate. But this constructivist point is also valid down to the level of language: for example, whether we talk of “populations” or “communities” can shape the kind of assumptions we are liable to make about the scale, organization and social relations of possible future societies. The point of Critical Future Studies, in this view, is to defamiliarize unquestioned, sedimented or “common sense” discourses of the future, to shake them up in order to broaden the field of possibility. This, in

contrast to other domains of Future Studies, becomes the central focus rather than prediction or forecasting.

What we mean by Critical Future Studies intersects with Inayatullah's description. In particular, he usefully highlights how Future Studies itself can be rendered more reflexive in terms of the values and assumptions it operates with. But there are some important qualifications that must also be raised. Firstly, while sympathetic to the claim that discourses and "ways of knowing" shape the past, present and future, we do not begin from the strong constructivist assumption that the present (or, by extension, the future) represents the fragile victory of just one dominant discourse. Both present and future are better understood as shaped by contested and competing discourses, even if one predominates. In fact, a hegemonic worldview, such as the one commonly labeled "neoliberal", is itself never fully singular and encompasses multiple definitions and variants – this multiplicity may actually add flexibility and resilience to neoliberalism rather than fragility. Furthermore, it is important to note that discourses and ways of knowing are inextricably entwined with material forces (economics, institutions, violence, the biosphere and so forth). Again, the upshot is that both present and future may not be as easily "loosened" as we might wish! Strong constructivism risks becoming a form of cultural determinism. In our conception of CFS, we think it's important to entertain the possibility that the future is "overdetermined", that is, that the intricate interplay of factors shaping the future (including material, biological and cultural factors) can be characterized by radical complexity. For us, CFS must welcome epistemological pluralism: a rich futural public sphere implies the inclusion of diverse intellectual as well as political perspectives, including those that prioritize forces of contingency, emergence and complexity as well as variants of soft determinism (political, economic, technological, biological and cultural, for example).<sup>2</sup>

This leads to the question of agency. Inayatullah's characterization risks implying that critical future studies rests on the assumption that the hegemonic power relations of the present are "fragile" and rather easily challenged through a deconstructive move, and therefore that the future may be rather easily prized open. This would be idealistic in both the everyday and philosophical senses of the term: naïvely optimistic and prioritizing the power of ideas above material forces. We argue that CFS can and should remain agnostic in terms of "macrohistory", that is, models deployed to understand the movement of history. Macrohistory is already a significant field of inquiry within Future Studies (e.g. Galtung and Inayatullah 1997). For our purposes, while individual CFS scholars may advocate for (or assume) specific models of historical change, CFS does not necessitate grand theoretical claims about the scope of human agency. This would, in fact, constrain, rather than open up, dialogue about potential futures. Must we assume that human beings have the capacity to steer history to their own ends if we believe that

studying the future is an important part of our democratic life? Our perhaps counterintuitive response would be no, it isn't necessary. So long as we rise above pure fatalism to some degree and entertain the possibility that human agency can make a difference (large, small, predictable, unpredictable), and so long as we hold that leading a rich life in the present means at least engaging with questions of the future, then we need not start from the assumption that we can "steer" our own future or, more radically, our own species evolution as, for example, the transhumanist movement would claim (e.g. Young 2005). Indeed, and without reprising tired debates about the postmodern condition, the progressive waning of such Enlightenment hubris – at least outside hi-tech corporate elites – may be a defining tendency of contemporary Western culture. As such, a more inclusive project of reopening the future is one that reveals glimpses of various kinds of meaningful human agency, however partial, and not grandiose scenarios based on humanity "mastering" its own destiny – a discourse with questionable Western, masculinist and rationalist underpinnings.

This raises another constraint in Inayatullah's description of critical future studies. The deconstructive project of disrupting and dethroning powerful common-sense assumptions baked into dominant discourses of the future is necessary but not sufficient work. In our conception of CFS, it must be complemented by a reconstructive turn, seeking out visions of the future that may otherwise remain on the margins of public culture. As discussed in the later section on methodologies, CFS interrogates discourses of the future not solely to knock them off their perches but also to contribute productively to expanding the repertoire of ideas about the future available for public deliberation.

### **Utopia/Dystopia – Why We Need Critical Future Studies Today**

Critical reflection on our capacity to imagine potential futures is surely valuable at any point in history. Indeed, framing the future as a human project has been a recurrent theme throughout modernity. We should also be wary of assuming that our own times and current predicaments are somehow of special importance: writing about the hyperbolic contemporary fascination with the internet and comparing it with late 19<sup>th</sup> century claims about the telegraph, Tom Standage (1998) identifies the 'chronocentrism' to which we are always prone. Caveats aside, we do, however, want to suggest that the project of critical future studies is especially urgent at our current historical juncture. Narrating this briefly requires broad brushstrokes and simplifications but it's important nonetheless to reflect on this context.

A number of recent global events have cast the future in a new (and radically uncertain) light. A spate of protest movements from the Arab Spring to Occupy to Black Lives Matter (Mason 2013), coupled with the rise of new forms of political

populism (dominated but by no means monopolized by the variants of right wing neo-nationalism), all signal profound dissatisfaction with the institutional status quo in many parts of the world. Global capitalism and liberal democracy (as it has been traditionally practiced) still govern much of our world but their legitimacy is subject to unprecedented questioning. Meanwhile, reports of the irreversible consequences of climate change are piling up. Calls to rethink the future have reached a crescendo in recent years. Meanwhile, images of potential (most often dystopian or apocalyptic) futures proliferate in popular culture.

However, this renewed questioning of the future follows on from – and reacts against – a prolonged period in which the neoliberal mantra “there is no alternative” (infamously sloganized by Margaret Thatcher) enjoyed exceptional dominance. Alternative futures were kept largely off the agenda following the collapse of world’s second superpower and Francis Fukuyama’s declaration of the “end of history”. This despite the irony that the origins of neoliberalism itself can be seen as the planned application of a utopian blueprint for an alternative society, crafted in Mont Pèlerin and Chicago, and pitted against the consensus politics of welfare capitalism prevailing in Western democracies. Politicians of Left and Right in Western (and increasingly in non-Western) societies came to accept the new neoliberal consensus, and despite the visible negative consequences (cyclical economic crises, rising inequality and environmental degradation, for example), questioning the fundamental principles was easily marginalized and debating alternatives stigmatized as naïve or dangerous utopianism: realism was the prevailing wisdom. But while overt political utopianism was successfully suppressed for the best part of two decades, a technological utopianism flourished. Where the space race faded in significance, the internet stepped in.

There is no question that utopian ideas since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century “have become closely intertwined with a belief in the blessings of science and technology”, often expressing a “sense of the sublime”, as philosopher Rein de Wilde (2000: 1-7) points out (see also Nye 1994). New technological achievements have provoked admiration and astonishment, and continue to do so. The blessings of science and technology have promised us golden futures of prosperity and sustainability, without war and poverty. Communications revolutions from the telegraph and the train to the Internet have promised us the end of geography, a future without limits or borders.

Utopian energy has, in recent decades, been most readily found among what de Wilde calls the futures industry, i.e. “various (postmodern) technocrats” who gained significant ground in the 1990s, “such as cyber gurus, digerati (prophets of digital life), management consultants, and transhumanists – who specialize in selling bright futures” (2000: 4). The information society, for example, appeared as the symbol par excellence for modernity and progress in the Western World towards

the close of the 20th and through the dot.com bubble (cf. Johansson 2006). This was the era of the “digital sublime” (Mosco 2004). Dominant discourses on communications revolutions were implicitly and sometimes explicitly founded upon technological determinism – even technological fate or destiny. The view prevailed that information technologies were the *sine qua non* of economic, social and cultural progress.

Because the futures industry valorized technology above human agency as the object of its utopian gaze, this enabled it to enjoy a virtual monopoly on the utopian imagination during an era in which political utopias were discredited and even taboo. In fact, in the late 20th century, the apparent demise of any viable alternatives to market capitalism allowed the technocrats to smuggle in a utopia comprised of both technological salvation and unfettered markets, while disguising it as realism. As political scientist Wendy Brown argues:

This loss of conviction about the human capacity to craft and steer its existence or even to secure its future is the most profound and devastating sense in which modernity is “over”. Neoliberalism’s perverse theology of markets rests on this land of scorched belief in the modern. (cited in Vint 2016: 11)

This kind of future thinking, at once realist *and* utopian, has generally retained a belief in progress and a sense of the sublime but, as historian Carroll Pursell claims, “science and technology, once agents of progress, became its measure instead... Technology, after all, is not something that merely happens to us; it is something we have created for certain purposes, not always acknowledged” (2007: x; cf. Marx 1994). The future is and should be open – or at least negotiable – but the utopian belief in progress found in the futures industry make us “imagine the future only as an intensification of the present” (Vint 2016: 7).

Drawing on sociologists Barbara Adam and Chris Groves, utopian theorist Ruth Levitas extrapolates their distinction between *present future* and *future present* to utopian theory: “Present futures are imagined, planned and projected in and for the present: the future appears from the standpoint of the present. Future presents are both imagined and produced by actions in the present” (Levitas 2013: 129–130). Present futures, based on free market utopias and the technological sublime, appear in large part “inevitable” (e.g. Kelly 2016) and therein lies their realist disguise and their ideological potency.

The dominance of the present future today has, according to science fiction scholar Sherryl Vint, turned the future into “a site of crisis”, where hegemonic global liberal capitalism is narrowing our imagination:

the future is only more of the present, more of the same capitalist values and sites of invisibility – as the present in which some of us already live – while the actual present pales in comparison to the techno-product-saturated future to which we aspire. (2016: 12)

Various authors on the post-Marxist Left have produced perceptive diagnoses of our entrapment in this present future. Mark Fisher, for example, narrates the “slow cancellation of the future” (2014: 2-29), and the autonomist activist/theorist Franco Berardi (2011) has argued elegantly that the Left must now learn to live “after the future”. However, such works not only diagnose but risk reproducing a pervasive sense of pessimism or “Left melancholy” (Brown 1999). If our present course (economic, environmental, geopolitical) is indeed unsustainable, then there is no sense in which we can avoid a radically different future, be that a desirable or repugnant one. As such, “develop[ing] a positive version of the future” based on “socio-cultural ethics, wisdom, imagination and responsibility” (Levitas 2013: 130), becomes necessary in avoiding the twin pitfalls of abdicating to technocratic prescriptions or falling into political despair.

Recent years have indeed seen growing attempts to reclaim the utopian imagination from the futures industry and to challenge technocratic visions of progress which abandon political agency in the name of realism. This can be witnessed in diverse forms of activism. For example, regardless of their merits and efficacy, movements such as Occupy and Black Lives Matter have articulated an audacity (and “realist” critics would claim naivety) of ambition in calling for the end of “1% capitalism” and structural racism respectively. Of course, both movements (one now dissipated) have been characterized by tensions between those who hold to the radical goals of institutional reinvention and those who believe piecemeal reform is their best hope. We have also witnessed a resurgence of interest in utopian thinking at the interface between academia and politics. Levitas’ project to rethink sociology in terms of “utopia as method” is a notable example, as are growing interventions by progressive economists who seek to put once unthinkable issues on the agenda such as the universal basic income, radical reduction of the working week through automation, and a post-capitalist commons economy (e.g. Srnicek and Williams 2015; Bregman 2016; Frase 2016).

Levitas states that the “repression of active engagement with alternative possible futures has given way in recent decades to wider consideration of utopia in sociology and social and political theory” (2013: 127). She concedes that much of this has been ambiguous, avoiding direct use of the much-maligned concept of utopia. But, steadily, the concept of utopia is enjoying a resurgence. Vint, for example, argues for the “urgent need for genuinely open and new futures, the need to reclaim the power to imagine the future outside of industry-produced

advertising images” (2016: 8). As a science fiction scholar, it’s unsurprising that Vint emphasizes the role of speculative fiction in imagining alternative futures. We would also point to the urgency of a “speculative sociology” and, more broadly, speculative and utopian cultural analysis. Glimpses of alternative (and better) futures can be found in every conceivable corner of public culture, from popular science to political activism, and these all merit our (critical) attention. Utopian thinking can – and we would argue *should* – be deployed in the service of opening up the field of imagined futures. Utopias, “far from providing us with blueprints of the future” (Vint 2016: 8; see also Jameson 1982), are vital insofar as they expand rather than shrink our horizons.

In fact, we suggest that both utopian *and* dystopian modes of imagination are important nutrients for a revitalized futural public sphere. This requires some explanation. The first point to make is that utopian thinking does not necessarily imply a singular, closed or finished model of an alternative society. Certainly, the history of utopian thought abounds with examples that aspired to be complete visions of the alternative society. This is true not only of communist and fascist political utopias but also progressive literary utopias of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward 2000—1887* (1888), William Morris’ *News from Nowhere* (1890) and H.G. Wells’ *A Modern Utopia* (1900). Unlike the aforementioned political utopias, however, these texts – which, written before the horrors of the 20th century, now seem politically naïve, at best – can be read merely as generative thought experiments that added to the available repertoire of images of the future available to the contemporary public sphere. Of course, they could also be read as standalone manifestos: for example, *Looking Backward* inspired the rise of Bellamy Clubs dedicated to implementing its utopian ideas. But the aggregate impact of these works was to broaden, rather than narrow the imaginative canvas. For example, Bellamy’s utopia speculated on the then radical policy of industrial nationalization, something which would become a political norm some half-century later (not exclusively thanks to *Looking Backward*, of course).

In any case, literary utopias since the 1960s shifted away from holistically imagining full-fledged utopian societies towards describing the utopian impulse in, for example, human interrelations, as have been emphasized in feminist utopian studies (Godhe 2010). In one of the most famous feminist science fiction novels of the 60s, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Ursula K. Le Guin imagines a planet inhabited by a species without gender. The utopian energy is not found in societal perfection but in the thought experiment of a world in which interpersonal relations are not structured by prejudices of gender. Utopian thinking, in short, can disrupt common sense assumptions about what is “realistic” and challenge us to question whether and how we could rethink and reshape society. And if, as sugge-

sted earlier, garnering public engagement with the future is an affective as well as a cognitive problem (for example, fatalism is an issue of sentiment, albeit intimately connected to the availability of plausible proposals for change) then we need to consider seriously the role utopian thinking can play in countering hopelessness (cf. Bacciolini & Moylan 2003).

Within popular culture today, we are more likely to encounter dystopian than utopian thinking. But it would be a mistake to assume that images of dystopia are inherently corrosive for a futural public sphere. The appeal of recent cultural texts such as *The Hunger Games* novels (2008-2010) and films (2012-2015), *Snowpiercer* (2013) or *Children of Men* (2006), lies not least in the way they use futurescapes to hyperbolize our current societal trajectories and sharpen our focus on a catastrophic 'future-to-be-averted'. This could be said also of the most famous 20th century literary dystopias: Zamyatin's *We* (1921), Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell's *1984* (1949). But more so than their 20<sup>th</sup> century counterparts, recent fictional dystopias such as those mentioned above also run against the grain of hopelessness, featuring narratives of resistance and overcoming, offering beacons of hope against intensely bleak backdrops.

In sum, then, we suggest that dismissing utopian or dystopian thinking as exaggerated, naïve, unrealistic and therefore unhelpful in debating alternative futures misses the point. Firstly, the futural public sphere contains an important affective dimension in which hope (not to be confused with optimism – we will return to this in our conclusion) or excitement or a sense of drama about the future invites participation and public engagement, while sober realism and forbidding expert discourse, and certainly cynicism or fatalism, work in the opposite direction. Even on a cognitive level it is far from clear what it means to 'exaggerate' given the precarious state of today's economics, geopolitics and ecology: the spectre of collapse and catastrophe makes radical thought experiments all the more necessary (Cf. Bradley and Hedrén 2014). As "raw ingredients" (rather than final statements), utopian and dystopian futurescapes –whether as fictions or literal scenarios – have an important role to play in a revitalized futural public sphere. Not least, they can provoke us to think in different temporalities (centuries, rather than electoral cycles, for example); they can flex our imaginative muscles; and, significantly, they can move us. To clarify, this is an argument for including and taking seriously utopian and dystopian imagination as part of the futural public sphere: it is not an argument against the 'realistic' or the ameliorative and it is certainly not an argument against the vital role of expert knowledge.

## Critical Future Studies and Methodology

It should be clear by now, given our stated aims and interests, that CFS invites methodological pluralism and multidisciplinary contributions. So our aim in discussing methodology is not to be prescriptive but to offer an indication of some key ways in which we CFS scholarship can focus its energies in terms of its objects of study and its approaches to data. This will inevitably reflect our own disciplinary backgrounds and biases. For example, we do not discuss quantitative methods but this in no sense implies that statistics (e.g. surveys about perceptions of the future), data analytics (e.g. patterns of online discourse about future-related topics) and other quantitative approaches cannot make important and rich contributions to critical studies of the future. As an emerging field of study, we anticipate that methodological approaches will develop in ways we cannot yet envisage. With that in mind, what follows is just one way of narrating CFS methodologies.

In short, CFS treats texts, discourses, images and ideas of the future as its primary data. These futurescapes may be found in almost any conceivable domain of culture (both expert and lay), but certain domains are of particular significance. Some of these are academic and intellectual. Future studies is one domain that seeks to cultivate and claim expertise in articulating futures, both in terms of substantive scenarios *and* in terms of process (what and whom are the primary agents of change, for example). Another is the field of utopian studies which explores literary and other forms of utopia. (CFS, while drawing on utopian studies, is restricted neither to literary nor utopian futurescapes.) The natural sciences (often refracted through the filter of popular science) also produce futural claims that have a special (though increasingly controversial) legitimacy within public discourse. Aside from substantive predictions or forecasts, they also raise (implicitly or directly) important issues surrounding scientific doubt and uncertainty about the future: an issue frequently exploited by political and media agencies as in the field of climate science, for example. Social and human sciences (for example, when economists study the future implications of automation) are also significant producers of futural knowledge claims. Other sources of expertise beyond the academy are also salient: policy analysts, urban planners and smart city experts, technology gurus, think-tanks and so forth.

But, more so than mainstream Future Studies, CFS looks beyond expert knowledge-production for insights into the potentials and shortcomings of the futural public sphere. As already indicated, popular culture is taken seriously for its reach, its imaginative ambition and its affective power: science fiction, technology journalism, advertising, music videos – all can be rich repositories of futural imagination. We should also point out that some domains of culture speak about the future indirectly or allusively rather than directly, but these should be taken seriously, too: consider, for example, the ways in which the “futuristic” is encoded

into technology design or architecture.

But how do CFS scholars interrogate their data? There are too many possibilities to do justice to here. One possible starting point, though, is to reference the rich vein of methodological traditions already at our disposal, for example: hermeneutics and literary methods, critical discourse analysis, visual semiotics. But a more open-ended and inviting (if admittedly simplistic) way to begin might be to consider certain key questions that CFS scholars can ask of their data. To offer just a sample:

*How is the future invoked?* Is it based on prediction, foresight, extrapolation from the present, speculation or fiction? Is the future directly described or just alluded to; is it presented visually; is it merely a backdrop for a narrative; is it fictionalized? And this, of course, raises interesting questions about how we extract meaningful claims about the future from fictional, non-verbal or allusive texts.

*What kind of future is evoked?* Is technology presented as the path to a brighter future (and if so, how)? Are we encouraged to retreat from the path of relentless technological upgrading through, for example, dystopian imagery of digital- / bio- / nano-technology run amok? Or through utopias premised on a retreat from technology and a return to nature, community, the slow and the small-scale?

*Who would want to live in such a future (and who would not)?* In reality it is often possible to discern both utopian and dystopian imagery within a single text. Partly this is a matter of subjective disposition and taste for different futures. But it is often bound up with structural inequalities of class, gender, race, culture and geography. Who stands to gain and who stands to lose are always critical and unavoidable questions.

*What sort of people live in such a future?* Visions of the future often contain anthropological values and assumptions that demand to be unpacked. Utopian futures may be problematically premised on a supposed universal appetite for order, productivity or harmonious close-knit communities, for example. Or dystopian futures may contain questionable assumptions about the inevitable return to a state of nature in the face of infrastructural collapse.

*How are we expected to arrive at this future?* Is this future presented as our inevitable fate or destiny? Or does it depend on particular agents of change? What or who are these agents? Are they institutions, visionary innovators or collective movements for change? Or are there non-human agents in the driving seat as the prophets of the “singularity” (Kurzweil 2006) – who postulate that intelligent tech-

nology will take control its own evolution – would have us believe? Various other post-humanist and anti-humanist perspectives on the future would also challenge as a fantasy the notion that humans are in the driving seat.<sup>3</sup> Whether through explicit or implicit reference, or through silence on the topic, visions of the future are always premised on assumptions about agency and the politics of change, and these too demand to be unpacked.

*What is the persuasive power of such a vision? What are the rhetorical or aesthetic devices shaping the appeal or potency of this vision? For example, dystopian futurescapes can clearly be both repellent and seductive: why?*

*What's the history behind this vision of the future? Is it a new vision? How is it shaped (consciously or otherwise) by other texts or by the history of ideas? What lessons from history can be brought to bear on our assessment of this futurescape?*

The questions listed so far may erroneously suggest that CFS is only interested in decoding futural texts. But this is not the case. It is also vitally important to pose questions about the conditions under which these texts are produced – for the sake of simplicity, we call this the political economy of the future. Salient questions here would include:

*Who are the actors (institutions, individuals etc.) producing and propagating images of the future? What are their interests? What resources and power do they bring to bear? How do different actors interact? An actor-network perspective, for example, might broaden the range of actors to include non-human actors, from media platforms to library classification systems.*

*What are the institutional arrangements (from scientific institutes to popular and online media) shaping the circulation and discussion of images of the future? What are the economic, political and technological imperatives shaping these arrangements? What alternative institutional arrangements can we imagine that might diversify or democratize public consideration of the future? What are the media systems shaping our futural public sphere?*

*How are ideas of the future discussed and contested in public life? What are the protocols shaping the contestation of ideas? Do futural public spheres (whether on Twitter or in the university seminar) privilege certain cultural norms of participation? Are they best understood as a deliberative or conflictual spaces? Who do these protocols favour, and why? What alternative protocols would give otherwise excluded or marginal interests a greater voice in debates over the future?*

*Who are the agenda-setting and gatekeeping powers in the futural public sphere? Who has the problem-stating prerogative and why? Where we speak of news values that determine what can be legitimately considered news (“dog bites man” vs “man bites dog”), can we also speak of future values (e.g. an animal species extinction event vs the threat of human extinction)?*

*What potential impact could this vision of the future have? Is popular reach (e.g. the box office success of the *Hunger Games* films) the most salient factor, or is it the way themes and ideas provoke discussion, influence thinking or inspire action?*

These are relatively simple starting questions, though the answers themselves will rarely be straightforward. And there is another, more complex, question that we will highlight here, which can be formulated as follows: what is the relationship between *future imagination* and *future imaginaries*? In our conception of CFS, it's important to interrogate “future imaginaries”, that is, ideas about the future which, at least in some – usually powerful – quarters, become taken-for-granted or congealed discourses. This includes utopian ideals such as the technological or digital sublime as well as realist or post-utopian discourses of, for example, sustainable development or climate change mitigation – both of the latter have become congealed as obvious and unproblematic while questions over whether they are even coherent or viable as concepts get pushed to the margins. On the other hand, progress, as a key imaginary of Western modernity, has become less obvious or unproblematic in recent decades. Faith in progress had, of course, taken a battering in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was discursively rebuilt in the post-war period. In other words, the victories of social imaginaries are always provisional (if not always “fragile”) ones.

The concept of the imaginary is derived from philosophers Cornelius Castoriadis (1998) and Charles Taylor (2002). Today it is used in different contexts and with variations such as the social imaginary, the cultural imaginary, and the global imaginary. While it is not always easy to separate the term from that of the imagination, we believe the distinction is important for CFS. When imagination congeals into something taken-for-granted it becomes a social or cultural imaginary. These shared understandings, by receding into the background, guide us in our common practices. As Taylor (2002: 106) states, “it incorporates a sense of normal expectation that we have of one another, the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life”. And as historian Samuel Moyn (2014: 120) has emphasized, the concept of the social imaginary is intimately connected with the social order. According to Manfred B. Steger (2008), the social order of globalization has been characterized by the rise of “a new global imaginary”, destabilizing notions of nationhood

and borders. The changing ideational landscape is closely related to “the forces of ‘globalization,’ defined here as the expansion and intensification of social relations across world-time and world-space” (xiii-iv). The global imaginary is premised on “increased interconnectedness and increased awareness of it”, as anthropologist Thomas Hylland Erikson (2007: 4) puts it. This awareness of a global condition (which once required the act of conscious imagination) came to be increasingly taken-for-granted. For our purposes, it is sufficient to acknowledge that this global imaginary also became a future imaginary, in the sense that it would require a conscious act of imagination to conceive the future as any other than an intensification of globalizing dynamics. It is possible to argue, of course, that recent and ironically global phenomena, such as the rise of the nationalist Far Right and resurgent interest in economic protectionism, cast the enduring hold of the global imaginary in some doubt.

Apart from globalization, it is possible to briefly identify a number of future imaginaries. One obvious example is digitization: it is increasingly difficult to conceive of anything other than an intensification of digital ubiquity as developments like wearable computing, smart cities and the “Internet of Things” continue apace. Whether these developments are conceived in terms of the digital sublime or a digital dystopia (the latter rendered eerily in the near futurescapes of British TV show *Black Mirror*, for example) does not alter the pervasive sense of inevitability. It is hard to imagine a future that is less, rather than more, pervasively digitized than the present. While there is no space here to discuss them in detail, automation, innovation and smart technologies are arguably other prominent examples of prevalent future imaginaries: it takes considerable imaginative effort, to envisage future without progressive automation, spectacular innovation or increasingly “intelligent” machines.

But the point of drawing our critical attention to future imaginaries is not merely to dethrone, defamiliarize or loosen them. We see such deconstructive work as essential to CFS but also suggest that imaginaries can work not only to constrain future thinking but also positively as the semantic ground for expansive and potentially radical thinking. Like utopias, they can expand as well as shrink our horizons. An example would be the idea of human rights. This is already embedded in the social imaginary but embodies an implicit indeterminacy. The idea of universal human rights may be dismissed as an exhausted or, worse still, oppressive ideological project (e.g. it can never live up to its promise, it excludes certain groups, it’s an alibi for cultural imperialism or military invasion). But it can alternatively be viewed as a perpetually unfinished project that demands radical rethinking of social structures: will internet access or basic incomes become staple human rights in the future, for example, or will the rights of humans be extended toward non-human entities? Progress, another of modernity’s key imaginaries,

can also function to narrow our imagination (when it is unquestioned) or as the ground for expansive thinking as, for example, when it gives rise to discussion over the relative values of economic versus ethical progress. Understood this way, future imaginations and future imaginaries are dialectically entwined: we can use imaginaries as the basis for stretching our imagination from what Arjun Appadurai (2013), in his “anthropology of the future,” calls the politics of the probable towards the politics of the possible.

As CFS scholars, then, we are interested in both negative (critical) and positive (reconstructive) modes. We are influenced here by Levitas (herself influenced by Ernst Bloch) who argues that utopia, understood as a method rather than a goal, is vital to what she calls “the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society”:

It provides a critical tool for exposing the limitations of current policy discourses about economic growth and ecological sustainability. It facilitates genuinely holistic thinking about possible futures, combined with reflexivity, provisionality and democratic engagement with the principles and practices of those futures. And it requires us to think about our conceptions of human needs and human flourishing in those possible futures. (2013: xi)

For Levitas, the utopian method has three aspects. An archaeological mode entails the kinds of critical examination of texts, discourses and practices to which we have already alluded. Embedded within those texts are both surface-level claims about the future, but also deeper-lying values, assumptions and impulses (whether utopian, realist or dystopian) that need to be interrogated. An ontological mode asks, at its simplest, “who do we want to be?” and speculates on the kinds of human agent that will populate our various imagined futures. In this mode, which we have also alluded to above, we engage with the future of human values, ethics and dispositions – in short, future subjectivities. An architectural mode is reconstructive and entails speculating on the kinds of policies, social infrastructure and institutions that would need to be built to support various imagined futures geared towards human flourishing (2013: 153-220). It means switching between a default “hermeneutics of suspicion” and a “hermeneutics of faith” (Ricoeur cited in Josselson 2004) in which we aim to shed light on and give voice to potentially productive ways of thinking about the future that are frequently relegated to the margins of public culture. We suggest that this mode can include speculation on new technological innovations that might enrich society in the future. But it is important to note the stark contrast between Levitas’ holistic, threefold approach and the narrow technological determinism that characterizes the utopian imaginings of the Silicon Valley elite. The impor-

tant point to is to avoid narrowing the imaginative field: we should be cautious about neo-Luddite reactions against technology that risk constraining progressive thinking about the future, but equally we should resist the seductions of simplistic technical fixes to social problems – what Evgeny Morozov (2014) terms ‘solutionism’ – proffered by the digital technocrats.

### **Conclusion: On the Ethics of Critical Future Studies**

We have presented CFS as a field of study open to diverse disciplinary, methodological, philosophical and political perspectives. But we do not see CFS as value-neutral. While committed to rigorous scholarship, CFS entertains a broad ethico-political commitment. In the interests of reflexivity and in the hope of encouraging scholars to contribute and collaborate, we close with a brief statement of values motivating us in this project.

As we finish writing this paper, Donald Trump presidency is only days old and the horrifying executive orders are piling up. It can seem like we are witnessing a rapid, rather than slow, cancellation of the future. Orwell’s *1984* is a bestseller once again, with popular media discussing its insights into the current new reality of “alternative facts” rather than a future we risk sliding towards. It would be easy to claim we cannot afford the luxury of speculating on positive futures when all our critical energies are required for fighting battles in the present. Of course, fighting battles in the present depends on some conception of a desired and/or feared future. Longer-term, utopian thinking about the future, though, may seem out of place today when mere survival (of democratic institutions, human rights, refugees, or the human race as a whole) presents itself as a desirable future needing to be fought for. But this may be a false dilemma: not only can the rearguard fight for survival co-exist with contemplation of better possible futures, it can surely be energized and enriched by it.

We can challenge not only the deep pessimism of those who believe the future is now an inevitable catastrophe but also the horizon of low expectations at stake when we imagine it is unrealistic to hope for anything more than the fragile continuation of civilization and the mitigation of the worst consequences of our current trajectories. CFS aims to be a modest but significant part of that challenge.

Fortunately, many around the world are battling to “uncancel” the future. As we write, for example, huge protests are swelling across the US against the threat of neo-fascism. It is an exciting as well as daunting time to be studying the future. CFS is committed to the values of an open, democratized and vigorous futural public sphere, in which diverse ideas about the future are given voice and critically examined. CFS starts from the position that the future is “open” – although we can never predict or create the future with certainty, as citizens we can intervene and

work against powerful interests narrowing and monopolizing our futural imagination.

CFS is motivated by a utopian impulse. This does not mean faith in specific or closed utopias. It means instead that, in addition to sharp critical faculties, a vigorous futural public sphere depends on positive, hopeful and ambitious imagination. CFS could be understood as motivated by an “emancipatory interest” in the sense commonly associated with critical theory. We make that connection cautiously, however, as we envisage CFS as inclusive, not necessarily tied to post-capitalist futures which the association with critical theory might imply: our interest lies in expanding the repertoire of potential futures available for public reflection. Visions both of reforming and surpassing capitalism have their place in that.

CFS, in short, is a project founded on hope. Hope is not optimism (cf. Eagleton 2015). Not only does optimism seem ill-advised in our current predicament, it can also function as an alibi for passivity as faith in the future absolves us of responsibility. Hope too can engender passivity (keeping one’s fingers crossed, for example). But hope – especially fragile hope, which may well be the most apt sort today – can also engender a sense of urgency and excitement. CFS declares itself to be motivated not merely by curiosity about the future, but also by a sense of urgency, fragility, excitement and hope.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Scholarly journals in Future Studies include: *Futures* (1968-); *Journal of Future Studies* (1996-); *Foresight* (1999-); *European Journal of Futures Research* (2013-).

<sup>2</sup>The qualifier “soft” is necessary here insofar as “hard” forms of (for example technological or economic) determinism are, by definition, inhospitable to alternative perspectives.

<sup>3</sup>Examples would include radical ecological perspectives premised broadly on the ‘Gaia Hypothesis’ (Lovelock, 2000); the recently ascendent philosophical school of ‘New Materialism’ or ‘Object-Oriented Ontology’ (e.g. Coole and Frost 2010); the anti-humanism of philosopher John Gray (e.g. 2002); or the ‘big history’ approaches popularized by, for example, Yuval Harari (e.g. 2011).

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