

“The Future is Already Here, it's Just Not Very Evenly Distributed.”

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Abstract

This essay considers how contemporary inequalities will play a significant role in determining how the future will emerge. The building blocks of the future already exist today, within niches or lived minorities, and in the coming years they will spread to make the ‘normal’ of the future. However, the ability to control which elements spread, to ‘write’ the future, is unequally spread, and without great care, inequalities of today will lead to similar inequalities tomorrow.

The future....is not evenly distributed.

This title quote from the American speculative fiction author William Gibson alludes primarily to the fact that the things that will constitute the ‘normal’ or ‘everyday’ within the lives of those living in the future, already exist for some today. Most of what will constitute change, at least in the short- to mid-term, is simply the spread of these niche, or minority, ‘things’ to become more pervasive. Qualities may change to a minor extent, but not so much as for things to become unrecognisable. Instead it is scale, quantity and patterns of distribution that will be the primary trajectories of change. The future may, or may not, only be limited by our imaginations, however, an imagined future can only be imagined in terms of the already conceivable, and cannot exist outside extensions of elements that are already in existence (even if they may exist only as concepts).

Gibson’s quote can also be interpreted by considering that ‘the future’ itself will be characterised by inequalities, both locally and globally in a way that is similar to the present. The unequal distributions of power, freedoms and resources in the future are likely to be determined in a large part by the way those inequalities manifest today (and have done in the past). In order that these inequalities are not reproduced, or that their reproduction is minimised, it is necessary to ensure that those processes in the present which ‘write’ the future are not irredeemably tainted by these same inequalities.

This essay will briefly describe some of the ways in which we may be able to see the future as being unequally distributed in the present, over three key domains of the social, the spatial and the temporal. It will then consider what impact these distributional inequalities play with regard to those who may play a significant role in attempting to write the future.

It is hard to clearly identify what elements of the present will become more widespread in the future. Over the 20th Century, social transitions in the West have often involved the trappings of wealth becoming more accessible to wider sections of society, such as automobility, better quality housing, high quality healthcare and consumer technology. Whilst many contemporary future scenarios present the future to be a utopia of wealth and health furnished by a panoply of high-tech gadgets and permitted by continued economic growth, it is also possible that the future for some, or all, will involve either a gradual or rapid reduction in standards of living. Thus the future might consist of the expansion of the current lifestyles of either the rich and powerful, or the poor and oppressed. The carbon reduction approach of “Contraction and Convergence” (Meyer, 2007) explicitly proposes reducing global inequalities, in terms of both expectations of lifestyles and the environmental damage they cause.

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The future is always created on an uneven foundation. In order to understand how we can create futures that do not exclude, isolate or exploit we have to understand how the future is written in the present. So, whilst there is some interest in looking at how, in the language of socio-technical transitions, technological or social niches become part of the landscape, here we are more interested in how these minority elements are, in this moment, unequally distributed; how these inequalities are likely to be reproduced or altered in the future; and how these inequalities may actually determine what future or futures we arrive at. Through exploring how existing differences create unequal futures, we can begin to understand how to look forward in a way which is beneficial to those who are often excluded from official narratives of change.

Social Inequalities

Sometimes certain social groups (identifiable by gender, class, race physical ability etc.) are omitted from visions of the future, be that intentionally or not. Futurity is usually captured officially by politicians and 'experts' who wish to shape policy through 'horizon scanning'. The unofficial futures of everyday experience, hopes, dreams and imagined futures are often not considered. Social inequalities open up questions of power within socio-technical transitions and assessments of how to address these factors for a 'better' future is often lacking from projections of what is to come.

Efforts to incorporate everybody in views of the future often result in dystopian images, as attempting to dismantle social strata highlights current differences in exaggerated ways. J.G. Ballard's (1975) *High Rise*, presents us with a fictional interpretation of class and futures which is useful when assessing how social inequalities within the everyday are constructed and consumed. In the novel, class divide is physical (the higher the floor in Ballard's tower block, the higher the class of resident). Aldous Huxley's (1932) *Brave New World* also portrays fundamental inequalities at the heart of the imagined society, though here these are built into genetics and conditioning, not just architecture.

Understanding the everyday future in terms of the utopia/dystopia dichotomy is not necessarily beneficial. It is not only a frame which fails to assess the complete image of lived experience, but their exaggerated nature tends to render them unrepresentative of lives lived now. Even within utopia there will always be winners and losers, as differences result in socio-spatial boundaries creating differences between the insiders and outsiders.

In many ways, certain visions of utopia already exist, at least in fragments. In the UK, the vast majority of people can access clean drinking water in such sufficiency that we flush our toilets with it, calorific food in such quantity that we can become obese, and free health care to treat the consequences. It might be churlish to expect utopia to only exist as a singularity, and we should recognise and cherish these fragments as and when we find them, and it may be necessary to fight hard to keep them.

Spatial

The rural-urban divide is one spatial axis that highlights differences that are apparent across potential elements of the future. Access to new transport modes such as car clubs or Uber are increasingly available in cities but have little reach into rural areas. It is questionable how far these sorts of systems will be able to practically reach these areas, highlighting how different futures may emerge resulting from location. Moving from physical mobility to virtual mobility, access to high speed internet is another example of how something that is 'the present' in urban areas and may soon constitute a (relatively near) future for rural areas.

In terms of global distributions of lifestyles and wealth, the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century have seen an increasing dispersion of modern, westernised, 'middle class' lifestyles from Europe, North America and Australasia, to parts of Asia, South America and Africa. In the latter we can see a rapid transition towards futures that are very different to their recent pasts. In parallel, the last decade has also seen what might be considered by some as less "progressive" futures developing, such as the descent into

civil war and collapse of infrastructure in parts of the Middle East (e.g. Syria and Iraq) as well as uneven distributions of the consequences of the global financial crash hitting Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain particularly harshly.

Sometimes though, space causes less of a divide. Mobile phones provide a fascinating case study of how fast new technology can establish itself globally, rapidly levelling access to the services that a technology can provide. Mobile phones highlight not only speed with which futures can arrive, but also a 'virtual' shift in the everyday, from one which is only experienced through direct contact to one where connections are not just physical. Here the future may also hark further back to the past. There is a body of work that sees computing and the virtual realm as an extension of the oracles and shamans of the past (Davis, 2015). We haven't moved far from the past, and the past will always remain with us.

Temporal

Short-term events and disruptions such as blackouts and supply chain disruptions represent snippets of insight into more precarious unstable futures, as increasing energy consumption and retired generation mean that energy supply systems become progressively overloaded. These short-term events demonstrate how unstable futures are already embedded in current systems. Whilst disruptions to systems may appear sudden, they occur within the context of long build ups of dependencies and allow not just for a greater understanding of the nature of innovation in the moment, but also reveal much about the undisrupted, everyday 'normal'. But what is it we are seeking from the future? Are we just trying to maintain the current system to stop an unstable future? Or are we trying to actively improve it? If the former, for whom is the current system actually stable? The UK and northern EU are relatively rare in being parts of the world where black/brownouts are not considered normal, and for some with prepay meters, even here stability of supply is not guaranteed.

Temporal inequalities can also manifest across generations: the aging population may be a picture of the future for today's young. Although attempting to avoid the consequences of aging has been a long-time concern of much of the human race, this has, in the modern west, led to a failure to adequately consider the well-being of the old. Rather than adopting an attitude of denial, younger sections of society should help design the future by improving life for those who are old now and, consequently, for themselves when that time comes.

At the other end of the age spectrum, the comfort with technology shown by Generation Z/ 'Digital Natives' provides an insight for older sections of society as to how digital technology can rapidly become a given within everyday life, but also shows how we may not just take this technology for granted as a benefit, but also become dependent on its pervasiveness for the maintenance of everyday life.

Structural Inequalities

The three domains above - social, spatial and temporal - are just three ways of identifying differences. What matters most is not whether differences exist, but the extent to which the differences that arise over these domains result from the structuring of society (as opposed to say 'choice'). When they arise from structuring, and particularly when leading to negative impacts, these become issues of inequality that are of concern. How these differences become structured inequalities is usually related to issues of power. Unequal power relationships determine who gets to write the future, at least at a macro level, for example, through decisions about long-term infrastructure provision and the built environment, or through corporate strategies and government policies that will shape many people's everyday lives for years to come. These decisions are often made by a particular section of society –typified by being white, (upper) middle class and male. Although the demographics of decision-makers are now beginning to broaden, many of the organisational structures in which these decisions are made constrain the ability for ideas from outside these mind-sets to have much traction. Additionally, incomes associated with these types of positions mean that where people from other class backgrounds enter these roles, they often become separated from the day to day experiences of those from similar situations believing that if they have 'made good' then this is possible

for any and all. However, even when apparently benign, current differences in power have a strong impact on how the future is being written (for example, the power of people like Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg in deciding how a future free from global disease will be paid for and thus what it will look like).

Dealing with Inequality

How can we move forward to a more equitable future? Current discourse on labour seeks to understand the relationship between work and technology. From a Marxist perspective, many of the inequalities described above arise from discrepancies in access to and control of capital. Automation offers a mechanism through which to assess class and everyday futures, as well as incorporating a new economic model, that is being posited not as utopian socialism, but rather *Postcapitalism*.

Automation is often viewed as the reason for workers losing jobs, zero-hour contracts and a lower standard of living. However, recent work (Mason, 2015; Srnicek and Williams, 2015), highlights how the increase of technology that eliminates aspects of labour may see the future change in a way that is beneficial to those who have till now depended on state welfare and been excluded. Through becoming part of a narrative that views leisure and reduced work as integral to the everyday, the un/underemployed will be able to 'demand the future' and become stronger participants in their own futures, rather than having their lives dictated by the structures of labour that are currently in place. The extreme view is that increased technologies in the workplace will allow for everyone to work less, resulting in what Srnicek and Williams call 'fully automated luxury communism'. Other views of the future have been put forward that, rather than automating all work, propose a refocussing on work that is less efficient whilst being more fulfilling. For example, Jackson (2011) in *Prosperity Without Growth*, potentially reflecting William Morris' (1885) *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*, suggests a vision of the future where worth and meaning might be seen as something to be obtained through work, rather than as something to be purchased from proceeds of work. This may, however, need to be partly obtained through automation of drudgery.

Full automation and Post-capitalism recognise the shift to a service-based economy that has occurred in the last 30 years, and the increase in what David Graeber calls 'bullshit jobs' (Graeber, 2013). It is not a vision, but rather a manifesto on how to transition to a better everyday for all, and this future may not be that different from the present, yet it provides a way for inequalities within wage income and work processes to be considered. Alongside full automation, is the idea of a universal basic income, a concept already being suggested as part of an everyday future in several countries, such as a recent experiment in Utrecht, Holland and a referendum in Switzerlandⁱ. Basic income is a guaranteed unconditional amount of money, regardless of employment or social position. Changing economic and social infrastructure in such a way means state welfare becomes something beneficial to all. However, the idea that a person should be entitled to payment for being a citizen of a certain state is controversial, perhaps because those who are already financially stable view a livelihood as something which people have to earn and are not necessarily entitled to.

Futures narratives require an understanding of how inequalities could be changed, culturally, economically and politically. Significant change in the current systems may be more likely to occur (at a large level) from the bottom up via revolution than from the top down – indeed Morris clearly saw that the wealthy would not relinquish their power without a struggle. In recent years the number of social protests and networks dedicated to changing social standings has increased significantly. For example, the #BlackLivesMatter network highlights the ways in which black people are deprived of certain rights by the state and 'intentionally left powerless'ⁱⁱ. Creating a movement that is both digital (the use of the hashtag in the network's name is demonstrative of its dependence on digital technologies and social media) and physical (through protests), shows how those who have an unequal footing in certain structures are changing their position and getting others to change as well.

Contemporary Efforts to Address Inequalities in the Writing of the Future

The narrative explored throughout this piece has suggested that the future tends to be written by the incumbent establishment, and this highlights how we appear to be living in interesting times. Whilst it might

be naïve to suggest that in a democratic society the ballot box is the pen with which the future of a country is written, we are currently seeing the electorate and elections as a prominent fighting ground. The voices of some who have perceived their influence as being diminished over the last few decades, are now being heard to call an end to the future being “more of the same”. These struggles can be seen to be not about what the future will actually be like, but simply about the ability to have a stake in its writing.

The 2016 UK referendum to leave the European Union can be seen as an effort by many people whose voice has been excluded from politics to cast a vote that counted, as opposed to many worthless votes in general elections under the UK’s first past the post system. A vote to leave could be seen as a vote that signalled desire for change from the established trajectory of the UK. It is hard to say what a vote for leaving represented in actuality, but what is clear is that the leave vote is culturally associated with many characteristics of those who have reason to feel excluded from the “classless society”, not only in terms of lower income, lower social grade and lower levels of education, but also by age, as younger people overwhelming voted to remain, seeing their future in a different way to those who will not live to be a part of it.

The referendum cut across already weakened party lines but within the traditional UK political system we are witnessing another attempt to derail the future from being an extension of business-as-usual written by the incumbent establishment. Jeremy Corbyn’s rise to power as leader of the Labour Party can be seen as an attempt by both young and left-wing people to wrest control back of a political system that has become associated with an elite, Westminster-centred political class. Whilst Corbyn may not usually be anyone’s first choice of leader (including his own), a chain of events has resulted in him being the figurehead for a significant number of people. These people have felt increasingly excluded from the Labour Party (and consequently from electoral politics) for over a decade for a variety of reasons. Given that his supporters appear to be more working class than his opposition, this could be seen to be reflective of the Brexit vote in some ways. However, the strength of the youth call for change through support for Corbyn is at odds with the tendency for young people to have voted Remainⁱⁱⁱ. In this case, they are cast as a generation who has been forgotten, or even singled out for particularly harsh treatment, by the current political class.

So, which bits of the present will the future be composed of and how will it be distributed? Our exploration of some of the social, spatial and temporal inequalities that highlight unequal distribution of an ‘everyday future’ in the present has raised many questions. Will we continue on current trajectories of growing inequality, or will current radical niches (social, technological or economic) spread and dominate? What will determine the path(s) we take? One thing is for certain, particularly in the context of climate change, business-as-usual is not an option.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/02/state-handouts-for-all-europe-set-to-pilot-universal-basic-incomes>

ⁱⁱ <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jeremy-corbyns-supporters-are-more-working-class-than-other-candidates-research-finds-10476433.html>

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www.ClairCity.eu

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