

Future tense: Scandalous thinking during the conjunctural crisis

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Abstract

This brief essay considers the impact of the current conjunctural crisis on ideas about, and access to the ‘future’. It explores ways in which cultural critics and scholars might learn to think ‘scandalously’ in order to imagine and build a more equitable and humane world.

Keywords

cultural studies, scholarship, the future, crisis, branding

Access to the ‘future’ is a privilege – one that is differentially meted out to classes, races and genders of people around the globe. Those of us who see ourselves as scholars and cultural critics, even those of us who recognize the constructedness of the ‘future’ and admire how thinkers and creators have theorized and played with the notion, now have no choice other than to confront, in the most immediate and material of ways, our own imbrication in the radical uncertainties and deep inequities that surround us. Whatever personal narratives or stories we may have told ourselves about our ‘own’ futures – where we might be, or what we might accomplish, in a week, or a month, or 2 years from now – are fraying and coming apart in the current conjunctural crisis.

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There is no ‘back to normal’ and there is no knowing or predicting a way ‘forward’ either; external events move at breakneck speed, and yet also, in the different lived realities of lockdown, unbearably slowly. Any sense of temporality as knowable or governable has been destabilized. Academic institutions perform an idea of the future that looks just like the past, each statement or action barely papering over the real questions looming behind it. Our universities and journals continue to ‘plan’ even while they (and we) know they can predict and guarantee nothing. Will we ever teach students face to face again? Not surprisingly, these future ‘plans’ are caught up in the frenzy of rebranding. In 2014, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* featured a ‘poem’ of affirmational university slogans and college-owned trademarks to recognize ‘a genre of marketing rhetoric that is lofty, predictable, and numbing at a certain dosage’ (Kolowich, 2014). Five years later, in the midst of a pandemic, this poem has changed from vacuous sentiments like ‘Inspire Your Mind’ and ‘Innovation is Our Tradition’ to equally vacuous sentiments meant to mollify and reassure, slogans that are supposed to somehow make a return to campus less of a traumatic health risk, like ‘Return to Learn’ or ‘Operation Restart’ or ‘Rally Together. Return to Campus’.

Our governments enact the same strategies and embody the same contradictions; they tout their pandemic management ‘successes’, national rankings (De Kloet et al., 2020) and generous emergency provisions for individual citizens, promising to ‘build, build, build’ (Morales and Ross, 2020), while simultaneously setting up ‘snitch lines’ for welfare ‘fraud’ (Golombek, 2020), allowing hedge funds to profit betting on the crisis (Wood and Skeggs, 2020) and, in the United States and Canada, handing out massive bailouts to financial institutions and corporations (Judge, 2020). Will ‘liberal democracy’ survive?

Corporations ramp up their social responsibility marketing, promising to ‘be there for us’ in the crisis and ‘welcoming us back’ to normal life even as they restructure and lay off thousands (Zadikian, 2020) and the virus continues to spread (Karimi et al., 2020). How many, and what kinds of jobs will survive? Finance markets, driven for years by arcane practices of ‘futuristic accumulation’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2015: 182), careen between gleeful speculation and abject doom, each convulsion asking: should we stay in the capitalist gamble, or should we exit? Everywhere across the neoliberal West, the ‘future’ has been exposed as a highly unstable promotional chimera and/or an elaborate game for finance and Big Tech capitalists.

In the midst of this deep conjunctural uncertainty, one fact remains clear: the weak, incremental reformist mantra of the centrist neoliberals is just so much bullshit meant to quell unrest: defer, delay and pacify. We see this in the way that corporate culture has appropriated both the pandemic and Black Lives Matter in order to rebrand themselves as corporations who care (Sobande, 2020). Those same corporations with long histories of discriminatory policies around hiring, promoting and merely acknowledging Black workers have put forth, one after another, statements about how ‘Black lives matter’. Banks, gyms and hardware stores – all of them worried about the ruptures in what had previously seemed to be an inevitable ‘future’ of boundless profits and growth. With people in the streets, and political statements against private property and what it means to ‘loot’ circulating widely, it appears at the moment as though these corporations might have something to worry about. The heightened visibility of radical new futures poses an existential threat to contemporary capitalism; perhaps this is why, after the first week of Black Lives

Matter protests in the United States, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* tried to contain the perceived threat by chiding readers with the audacious headline: ‘Buildings Matter Too’ (Setty and Silverman, 2020). We must resist neoliberal capitalist culture’s attempt to recuperate and restore the same old ‘future’ hastily papered over with a branded veneer of racial justice and a shiny, empty commitment to ‘community’ values.

For too long, so many around the world have lived with the threats of imminent disease, economic deprivation, political and social instability, racist violence and climate volatility; for them, neoliberal/neocolonial capitalism’s ‘future’ has always been an empty promise with destructive consequences. Alienation, deprivation, exploitation, appropriation and precarity in all of their variegated forms and guises comprise capitalism’s modus operandi; the propagation of the view that ‘there is no alternative’, no other possible future, is also crucial to maintaining its power. Contemporary discourses about capitalism’s inevitability legitimates the interconnected regimes of perpetual austerity in the West and the ‘structural adjustment’ programs of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the Global South, tilling the soil for the highly inequitable impacts of COVID-19 we are seeing now.

So, while Western countries tend to figure populations of ‘developing’ nations as striving to emulate the ‘advances’ of ‘developed’ nations, recent events show us that, in actuality, it is ‘developing’ countries that comprise the avant-garde, existing as they do on the cutting edge of neocolonialist capitalism’s brutal practices of dispossession, extractionism, social stratification and violence. Many in the West may have imagined they were immune (‘the virus won’t come here’), or superior (‘our advanced scientific knowledge will save us’), but now it is blatantly obvious that these views are fuzzy illusions, ideological effects of power. Poverty, disease, neglect, and brutalization have always been among us, on our doorsteps in fact, as constitutive components of capitalism, rather than external threats. In this sense, as Silvia Federici reminds us, we cannot see this crisis as ‘special’ in any way (Federici, 2020).

Writing in early April, at the height of the first global wave of COVID-19, Arundhati Roy (2020) confirmed that this kind of devastation and instability is not new for those in the Global South, insisting that the longing to return to ‘normal’, to think of this as a temporary rupture, is a privilege none of us can afford. In her powerful words, this conjunctural moment is a ‘chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves’. The pandemic – and we would argue, the increasing visibility of racism and racial disparities in every aspect of life – is an opportunity to break with the past and confront the urgent need to create a different kind of future. As Roy argues:

It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

The speed of the response to COVID (the rapid shuttering of life as we know it) and the speed with which hitherto ‘unthinkable’ ideas have become thinkable – ‘defunding’ the police, abolishing the carceral state – have shown that change *can* happen fast. Another world, a more equitable, humane future is, and *always has been*, possible.

Surely, this more equitable future is explicit in the statement that Black Lives *Matter*. Therefore, while the current crisis is not ‘special’, it does provide us with an opportunity to relinquish our material, affective and intellectual investments in a racialized capitalist future.

Given all of this, then, what of the critical scholar now? How to write? How to think? How to contribute in this role? In his 1983 address to the *Australian Left Review’s* Marx Centenary Symposium, Stuart Hall famously spoke about ‘Marxism without guarantees’. Marx, Hall recounts, deserves to be celebrated not just for his epic contribution to our understanding of capitalism or socialism, but simply because ‘he insisted on thinking radical and subversive thoughts. He used to say he hoped his own thought would be scandalous – a scandal and an abomination above all to bourgeois professors’ (p. 38). Hall celebrates Marx’s commitment to struggle itself – to a state of thinking on ‘an open terrain’ (p. 43), where, inevitably, the ground will shift beneath our feet and the future can never be guaranteed.

While a refusal to return to a particular kind of future ‘normal’ may signal a type of failure to some, for us critical cultural scholars and activists, it must be seen as a productive failure, a failure that can generate a certain kind of public and popular awareness, an opening in the collective imagination, to envision a different world. As Jack Halberstam’s (2011) writing about the queer art of failure contends, we should ‘use the experience of failure to confront the gross inequalities of everyday life in the US’ (p. 4). Failure repudiates and refuses oppressive social relations and gives those who ‘fail’ relief from the relentless pressure to measure up to constraining and patriarchal norms of achievement, which are themselves a form of unfreedom. As Devon Powers (2020) argues, cultural studies has an obligation to wrest the future away from the ‘unfreedoms’ proffered by the techno-capitalist futurists, and render the future a ‘zone of democratic possibility . . . to be occupied, fought over, theorized, envisioned, and possibly emancipated’ (p. 456).

This kind of radical possibility also animates Afrofuturism, which, along with forms of Indigenous knowledge (see Williams, 2018), offers us a roadmap for how to refuse the dominant logics of racism, sexism and settler colonialism. These forms of thinking/knowing are ‘scandalous’ (especially to the bourgeois professors!) because they move beyond existing methodological, disciplinary and technological strictures and attempt to undo the inequities of contemporary learning environments. Most importantly, they highlight the centrality of the ‘chronopolitical’, revealing the cruelty inherent to Western forms of temporality and future-thinking (Eshun, 2003: 297), and the freedoms that can come from asserting and imagining different kinds of future entirely. Recovering, repairing, healing and creating with new sets of logics and cultural understandings can open minds and open worlds. Scholars such as Alondra Nelson (2002), Kara Keeling (2019) and Robin DG Kelley (2003) have eloquently pointed the way to different kinds of ‘freedom dreams’; a way of finding space

so that those of us living today who are forging logics and material relations and organizing things in support of that other world we believe is (im)possible can consider what in those freedom dreams might survive us and our limited perceptions, taking flight beyond what is presently imaginable. (Keeling, 2019: 31)

The concrete actions and gains of the Black Lives Matter movement have been made possible because of the movement's insistence on the 'freedom dreams' of Black liberation, abolitionism and reparations. The conjuncture of Black Lives Matter activism and the material inequities exposed by the global pandemic has provided exactly the kind of ontological shattering needed to create a 'portal', in Roy's words, to a 'future' free from the brutal practices of neoliberal, neocolonial, racialized capitalism.

As cultural studies scholars, it is our job to help design and build that portal. The conjunctural crisis has exposed the failures of social care, opportunity, voice and power that exist all around us. These failures, these freedom dreams, must be our opening; we must meet them with audacious, scandalous 'future' thinking, without guarantees.

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