

The presentation will discuss work in progress from a two-year research project (Sept 2018—Aug 2020): 'Imagined Futures of Consumption' (Funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council – project ES/R007942/1). Imagined futures of consumption here refers to both lay expectations and to models and visions of futures of consumption produced and circulated by corporations, think tanks, consultancies, political parties and public agencies, NGOs and social movements. Since the end of the Second World War, the imagined future of consumption played a critically important role in the wider social imaginary (underpinning common understandings of the economic and the political), in the form of the promise of 'prosperity for all' realised through mass consumption in the consumer society. The project explores the significance of "imagined futures of consumption" in the context of the contemporary crisis in political and economic imaginaries. The presentation will focus on the first of three core empirical components of the project which analyses lay expectations of the future of consumption through a Mass Observation Archive (MOA) 'Directive' (www.massobvs.org.uk). MOA 'Directives' consist of written questions and prompts concerning an area of research that elicit rich, unstructured free text responses from MOA's panel of volunteers. The panel is not demographically representative. A Directive on 'The Future of Consumption' was sent out in Dec 2018 which asked the panel to respond to questions and prompts concerning expectations of their own future consumption, and elicited speculation about change and continuity in different domains of consumption (e.g. travel, housing, food) for future generations, and in 50 and 100 years' time. 128 responses were received and analysed using Nvivo 12. Analysis was conducted by combining inductive coding with coding developed from Mische's (2009) concepts of "dimensions of projectivity", which specify cognitive dimensions of future projections, such as "Extension" (e.g., utopian movements' vision of long term transformation; or short term of business and electoral cycles), "Contingency" (i.e. degree to which projections are imagined as predetermined or uncertain), "Sociality" and "Volition" etcetera. The aim of analysis is to relate the "dimensions of projectivity" to imaginaries of future consumption, where imaginaries are understood as affectively-charged "representations of how things might or could or should be" which may be enacted within actual social practices as "materialisations of discourses" (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002: 195).

Visions of collective futures embody expectations of future states, pragmatic beliefs, and beliefs about the 'the common good'. They play a critical role in critique and processes of problem-solving and in processes of social and political mobilisation (Mische 2009). Faith in the providential future of consumer society as the "realm of freedom" beyond the sphere of production has been fundamentally challenged: firstly, through loss of faith in "mass utopia"— "that the industrial reshaping of the world is capable of bringing about the good society by providing material happiness for the masses" (Buck-Morss 2002:3); the profound challenge of the ecological crisis to the horizon of limitless economic growth on which the twentieth-century democratic imaginary was founded (Mitchell 2013); and critically in the wake of the global financial crisis, with the collapse in faith in expectations of continuously rising living standards in the USA and Western Europe (Ipsos Mori 2011, 2017; Pew Research Centre 2013); as well as with elite fears of secular stagnation (Gordon 2012) and profound geopolitical reconfiguration (Arrighi 2009). This collapse of a hegemonic imagined future of consumer society opens up cultural and social space for both competing capitalist imagined futures of consumption and alternative or anti-capitalist imaginaries. It is within this context that the wider project seeks to explore the role of imagined futures of consumption in processes of social and political contestation and legitimation, and how such futures shape, and are shaped by, social processes (Mische 2009). The presentation will contextualise the analysis of the MOA Directive data within this wider context.

