Speculating

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For many social scientists, speculating encapsulates the very antithesis of sober empirical research. Where matters of urgent care and concern arise, such as climate change, speculation would appear the least appropriate mode of response-ability. Rather, and so the story goes, practices of speculation have gained notoriety in the contemporary imagination and the predominance of such practices present a major challenge for those interested in the take-up of speculative thought as part of empirical research. On the one hand, the term connotes risky, irresponsible and opportunistic ventures often in relation to the mercantile, such as the trading of financial derivatives, resource prospecting in the extractive industries or techniques employed in branding, product and service development to devise new attractions for and forms of consumption. On the other hand, speculation is ascribed to an outmoded branch of philosophy committed to a belief in, and the exercise of, pure imagination. In both cases, speculation relates to the absence, or dilution, of the empirical and thus connotes partiality, incompleteness and a high degree of uncertainty or unreliability. In the terms outlined above, speculation operates in two distinct ways, and often in combination, namely as a cognitive capacity or as an economic activity (Uncertain Commons 2013).

Common to such approaches to the speculative is also a preoccupation with temporality and futures. Social analysis has a long and rich tradition in examining the discursive practices and rationalities by which societal futures, often marked by developments in science and technology, are brought about and managed, perhaps most notably through the identification and management of risk in so-called 'reflexive modernity' (Beck 1992) as well as the construction of hopes and expectations associated with new scientific and technological developments (Brown et al. 2000). Speculation, however, requires a shift in approach from analysing how probabilistic futures are manifested, managed and contested in the present – how actors imagine, model, predict, coordinate and in turn configure the future to the present – to the construction of adequate concepts and devices for exploring possible latent futures that matter. A word of caution is in order here, however: speculation is both prospective and retrospective. It applies as much to the politics of explaining past events (what might have been) as it does to the capturing of future possibilities (what might be).

The notion of speculation has recently been reinvigorated by scholars interested in understanding, explaining and theorizing process, change, novelty, becoming and individuation as inherent features of existence and sociality. Arguably, two distinct realist approaches have emerged on this score. In brief, the first is a philosophical preoccupation with realism and ontology independent of thought and language that has been labelled 'Speculative Realism' (see Bryant et al. 2011: for an introduction) and variously motivated by Quentin Meillassoux's (2008) 'correlationist' argument where thinking and being are viewed as inseparable and thus render knowledge of an independent (ontological) reality beyond thought and language a matter of speculation. The second – one which holds more promise for scholars in the social sciences – draws on the work of A.N. Whitehead, Gilles Deleuze and Isabelle Stengers, in what can be understood as the *constructivist* approach. In this mode, speculative thought becomes a practice of designing and constructing adequate concepts and 'devices' that actively "relate knowledge production to the question it tries to answer" (Stengers 2008: 92) and in so doing, the researcher, researched, research device and question become-with one another. As Bruno Latour (2003) points out, however, constructivism must not be confused with – or rather, must be rescued from – social construction and, for that matter, not mistaken for deconstructionism. That is to say, what counts as 'real' is a question of the strength and durability of human and non-humans distributions (constructions), and not simply the 'meanings' ascribed by persons. Thus, to relate knowledge production to the question it tries to answer, and to Whitehead's ontological principle that states "there is nothing which floats into the world from nowhere" (1978 [1929]: 244) including the researcher, the research question and the instruments of research.

What, then, is a constructivist approach to method? One way to answer this lies in the contrast between constructivist and 'critical' approaches. For Latour (2004), constructivism aims to produce more adequate explanations rather than debunk. Here, debunking can be viewed as allied to the impetus to provide access to concrete truth hidden by explanation or abstraction. Constructivism, by contrast, does not aim to debunk, demystify or deflate but rather to strengthen the production of knowledge claims by actively acknowledging the practices and techniques by which knowledge comes into being. In this approach constructivism concerns the fabrication of concepts and explanations as well as the devices, techniques, practices that partake in the milieu of the research event. For scholars interested in inventive methods (e.g. Lury and Wakeford 2012), it is precisely the question of devising adequate devices and instruments for research that matters. This involves a move from device-centered analysis (Marres 2012: 81) to device-centered method. If, as Stengers argues, the speculative tools for philosophy are adequate concepts that act as 'lures' for thought,

then for social researchers, arguably, research instruments are the tools for producing conceptions of the world that matter. In accounts of Whitehead's speculative philosophy as well as work that draws inspiration from Whitehead, it is precisely the practico-theoretical preoccupation with the experimental craft and care of the devices (conceptual, linguistic, material, machinic) that are made that comes to the fore.

In this constructivist light, speculative method can therefore be understood as a matter of situated becoming-with the researched. One way to think through this, or to approach the becoming-with nature of empirical research has been variously developed by Mike Michael. For example, Michael (2012: 535–536) draws on Mariam Motamedi Fraser's (2010) discussion of the notion of *event* in the work of Whitehead, Stengers and Deleuze. Briefly put, Fraser identifies two ways of understanding the event-as-process. On the one hand, the event denotes a process whereby elements combine and be together, retaining their individual properties. On the other hand, and in the Deleuzian sense, the event is the becoming-together of all the entities and phenomena involved in the process. As such, the event denotes a "becoming together" of an event's components rather than a "being together". The implications of this for anti-reductionist research is threefold: first, to take seriously the historicity and specificity of phenomena under study; second, to include the becoming of the practices, concepts and technologies which give rise to that which participates in the research event, and; third, the upshot of the research event is a matter of practical investigation rather than the preserve of philosophical thought. On this last score, the act of speculating, understood as the engagement with the unfolding nature of 'social' or 'cultural' phenomena (which are necessarily heterogeneous), is also a practical matter of investigation. Crucially, this 'practical matter of investigation' can entail an interdisciplinary array of techniques designed to address process of becoming.

Alongside an interdisciplinary team of designers and social scientists, I have taken up the challenge of speculating as an experimental approach to method in the context of energy-demand reduction and Twitter (Wilkie et al. 2015).[1] This involved the design, deployment and analysis of automated software robots (bots) to explore the existing as well as virtual, or immanent, dynamics of Twitter, not least in how this mediated energy-demand reduction practices. Most existing social media studies are pre-occupied with numerical magnitude, value and force (e.g. frequency of tweets, quantity of followers, number of retweets) that appropriate measures of relevance and importance pre-built into the platform. By comparison, this project involved three different bots that were designed to intervene in Twitter exchanges (often nonsensically) in order to probe the proliferation and propagation of new political configurations, environmental concerns and practices (including Twitter practices). Here, what was provisionally disclosed by our experiment into social media and

environmental engagement was that energy-demand reduction communities are transient and are made and undone by indiscriminate accumulation (of followers, communications etc.) as much as by explicitly shared content. This gave rise to the very concrete possibility that almost any activity or event can be subsumed into energy-demand reduction, and that, relatedly, ambivalence and disinterestedness does not necessarily prohibit engagement. What the above involved was reciprocal capture (Stengers 2010: 90) whereby the bots operated to disclose their own agency and capacities, and through their interventions (and the responses they precipitated) disclosed the emergence of other energy-related (human/non-human) actors on Twitter.

Figure 1: The Energy Babble. Source © the author.

The bots, mentioned above, went on to resource the design and three-month deployment of twenty-one Energy Babbles (see Figure 1), automated talk-radio like research devices that were also informed by a plethora of other techniques, including workshops and ethnographic engagements. Developed by an interdisciplinary team of designers and social scientists, the Energy Babbles were distributed to members of seven local UK energy communities (in Cornwall, Devon, Kent, London, Norfolk and Nottingham). The babble device – using speech synthesis – drew on an aggregate of online environmental and energy-demand reduction content, such as Twitter feeds and scraped content, and live UK national grid updates to produce new, and often barely intelligible, spoken statements based on the corpus of content it collected.[2] Using the handset microphone, community members also had the ability to add to the cacophony of energy-related speech and were encouraged to share views, practices as well as

respond to the device's output. As such, and at base, the Babble sought to articulate (connect and express) the problem space of energy-demand reduction by scrambling, interjecting, provoking and inviting responses from both local community members and social media users. In effect, these articulations raised the possibility of a speculative engagement (for both researchers and community members) with energy-demand reduction and climate change. Consequently, during the three-month deployment of the devices to the energy communities, various unforeseen practices and sensibilities emerged with the Babble in its various eventuations across and within the communities. So, in some cases, the Babble was 'instrumentalised', used by community members in their efforts to create a formal alliance of local energy communities, or to promote community engagement and outreach events, or as part of experimental home set-ups. However, the Babble also opened up different modes by which communities enacted energy and energy demand reduction; this included, on the one hand, a proliferation of instrumentalities, and, on the other, a querying of the very idea of instrumentality (Wilkie and Michael 2018). Along the way, the communities themselves also emerged and underwent change in various ways.

To summarise thus far: drawing on social science and design techniques, Bots were developed to intervene and trace the unfolding of 'energy communities' on Twitter, which then informed the design and implementation of the Energy Babble which similarly intervened and traced the unfolding 'energy communities' in relation to seven local UK energy communities.

Now, given that these interdisciplinary speculative methods 'provoke' their objects of study one might query their value. Is not becoming (in this above case, of energy communities) simply the result of - the reaction to - a specific set of speculative interventions? In other words, can particular procedures be valued and formalized as a guide for the conduct of (speculative) research practices? There is no easy answer to this. But perhaps social and cultural researchers can draw on Martin Savransky (2016: 201–203) who favours a modest and practical approach to grounded speculative experimentation. This would seek to broaden the composition of empirically given situations through concepts and tools that are themselves actively involved in the very construction of possibilities that emerge from those situations. Put differently, but nevertheless in keeping with the ethos of constructivist speculation, speculating through interdisciplinary methods is a process that is itself not always transparent even to the practitioners involved (who are themselves becoming-together). Modesty would seem to be inescapable given that, in light of the preceding point, "we don't consider ourselves authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know' (Stengers 2005: 995).

Notes

[1] This research was conducted as part of the project 'Sustainability Invention and Energy-demand reduction: Co-Designing Communities and Practice (ECDC for short) and was one of seven projects funded under the Research Councils United Kingdom's (RCUK) Energy Programme (project code ES/1007318/1).

[2] See (Gaver et al. 2015) for a more in-depth description of the Energy Babble.

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