Speculative Research

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# Introduction

Speculative research is a mode of empirical engagement that places emphasis upon the not-yet, the potential, the emergent, the possible, the co-becoming. Needless to say, these terms do not always map happily onto one another. For example, some authors would argue that the ‘possible’ is emergent in the flow of a world of becoming, rather than provoked by methodological intervention; indeed, some would argue that it is not possible to operationalise the possible through a method; some authors would insist that at best it is only possible to become sensitive to a field of potentialities rather than specify particular possibilities. For present purposes, however, we conceive speculative research in terms of the notion of the ‘research event’ which is part of a world of becoming and thus might well emerge as something other than research. The obverse is that ostensibly non-research occasions may become ‘research’ in the process of their eventuation. The point is that to talk about speculative research, is not only to address the substantive issues inherent to research (e.g. energy demand reduction, science communication, biomedical innovation, etc.) but also to become open to different possibilities, the non-research and other-than-research possibilities immanent in a research event. The upshot of this formulation is that it is necessary to keep a fluid sensibility not only to the conduct of speculative research, but also to what speculative research might actually entail.

In what follows, there is an initial outline of various approaches to speculative research. This is followed by an extended consideration of a particular approach to the speculative, including an explication of the relevant philosophical and practical underpinnings not least those that relate to the concept of the event. Following this, examples are provided of a number of conceptual and empirical tools. Particular attention is paid to the role of the philosophical figure, the ‘idiot’ and how this manifests in a particular speculative tool the ‘cultural probe’ (or ‘probe’, for short). This focus serves not only as a means of setting out key parameters of operationalizing speculative research, but also a means to addressing and differentiating a variety of forms speculative research. Throughout, there is an insistence that there is nothing straightforward about these speculative ‘operationalizations’ of the possible; they can, through a range of processes, undermine the possible and reinforce the probable.

# Researching and Speculating

Recently, the notion of speculation has attracted renewed attention by social scientists and cultural theorists interested in understanding, explaining and theorizing process, novelty, becoming and individuation as immanent features of sociality. Although the term is typically associated with risk, irresponsibility or opportunistic endeavours (arguably, the precise opposite of sober empirical research) or an outmoded branch of philosophy interested in the exercise of pure imagination, speculation has gained renewed value as a way to critically explore possibilities and futures in contemporary societies marked by calculative logics and developments in science and technology. In so doing, and crucially, the version of speculation that we present here seeks to avoid the reduction of the speculative to a cognitive capacity or economic activity (Uncertain Commons 2013).

Clearly, then, the question of speculation raises issues related to sociotechnical futures and temporality which have been a longstanding preoccupation of social analysis. Social research, for instance, has a rich tradition in examining the discursive practices and rationalities by which societal futures are accomplished (or not) and managed, perhaps most recognisably through the identification and management of risk in ‘reflexive modernity’ (Beck 1992) as well as the construction of hopes and expectations associated with new technoscientific developments (e.g. Brown et al. 2000). The move to the speculative, however, and as scholars interested in empirical speculation have argued (e.g. Savransky et al. 2017, Wilkie 2017), demands a shift in register from analysing the manifestation, management and contestation of probabilistic futures – how typically ‘rational’ actors envision, model, predict, coordinate and, in turn, configure the future in the present – to the construction of adequate concepts and devices for exploring possible latent futures.

Arguably, two distinct realist approaches have recently emerged as ways to understand, explain and theorize process, novelty, becoming and individuation, which seemingly share similar concerns but in actuality differ quite markedly. In brief, the first, entitled ‘Speculative Realism’, is the philosophical preoccupation with realism and ontology independent of thought and language (for an introduction see Bryant et al. 2011). The various approaches associated with Speculative Realism have been inspired by Quentin Meillassoux’s (2008) ‘correlationist’ argument where thinking and being are viewed as indivisible, thus rendering knowledge of an independent ontological reality beyond thought and language a question of speculation. The second, which has occasioned considerable interest for social and cultural researchers interested in empirical speculation (see for instance the volume Wilkie et al. 2017), can be understood as a *constructivist* approach and draws on the work of A.N. Whitehead, Gilles Deleuze and Isabelle Stengers. Here, speculative thought is practiced as a means for designing and constructing adequate concepts and ‘devices’ that ‘actively relate knowledge production to the question it tries to answer’ (Stengers 2008: 92), a process in which it assumed that the research question, the researcher, the researched and research device are actively involved in a process of becoming-with one another. What counts as ‘real’ in such research practices is a question of the strength and robustness of more-than-human distributions (constructions), and not simply the meanings, discourse or imaginings of persons. This, then, relates knowledge production to the question it tries to answer and the means by which this is achieved, evoking Whitehead’s ontological principle that states ‘there is nothing which floats into the world from nowhere’ (Whitehead 1978 [1929]: 244), including the researcher, the researched and the instruments of research.

This constructivist approach to speculative method (see also Wilkie et al. 2015) can also be understood to follow Bruno Latour’s (2004) contradistinction between the ‘critical’ and the constructivist. Here, and for Latour, to engage in constructivist analysis involves the production of more adequate explanations, rather than deflating or debunking the explanations and claims of others. In this view, debunking can also be understood as associated with the impetus to provide access to truth hidden by explanation or abstraction. By contrast, constructivism aims to strengthen the production of knowledge by actively acknowledging the practices and techniques by which knowledge, and indeed abstractions, come into being and in so doing concerns itself with the fabrication of concepts and explanations as well as the devices and technologies that partake in the process of research – which, in the next section we characterise as the ‘research event’. This, then, leads scholars interested in speculation, process and change to engage in so called inventive methods (Lury and Wakeford 2012, Marres et al. 2018) and the question of devising instruments and devices that relate to the staging and animation of the question or topic at hand (e.g. Guggenheim 2017). As Wilkie (2017: 348) argues, this demands a move from device-centered analysis (Marres 2012: 81) to a device-centered method and the devising of associated concepts and more adequate modes of abstraction (Whitehead 1997 [1925]: 59) that this necessarily entails. If the speculative tools for philosophy are concepts that act as ‘lures’ to vectorize thought (Stengers 2008: 97) then the instruments and techniques of empirical social research can be understood as part of a speculative toolkit. In this respect, such empirical ‘methods’ act as ‘lures’ for the possible. However, they demand a practico-theoretical care in their crafting and deployment not least because there is always a danger of retrenching the probable (de la Bellacasa 2017).

# Research Event, Co-Becoming and the Possible

In the view adopted here, speculative research needs to begin with a version of the research event. This is because the event, as derived from the work of Whitehead, Deleuze, and Stengers is marked by the multiplicity of divergent elements that enter into it. Accordingly, events are situated unities that entail heterogeneous elements – which Whitehead (1978 [1929]) names ‘prehensions’ – that include both the micro and the macro, the social and the material, the cognitive and the affective, and the human and the nonhuman. These ‘concresce’ or combine to produce a singular actual occasion or entity. Importantly, in the process of the concrescence of prehensions those prehensions – the constitutive elements of the event – can, as Mariam Fraser (2010) argues, ‘become-with’ one other. This version of the event implies what Connolly (2010) calls ‘a world of becoming’ in which as elements combine to produce events (which in turn combine to produce ‘subsequent’ events), there is an unfolding of the world that can be unexpected or novel or, ‘possibilistic’.

In applying this model of the event to research, the social scientific ‘research event’ becomes less a process in which, through standard methods, the researcher engages and documents the social world. Rather, it is an occasion in which the various elements that are involved in the research event – broadly, the researcher, the researched and the research (devices, settings, objectives, etc.) - can mutually co-become. In the process, there is no easy way of ‘finding stuff out’ for both ‘finding’ and ‘stuff’ might have shifted. Rather than seeking a solution to the research problem that originally underpinned the research, it is important to orient toward a different matter, namely: what has become newly interesting about the research event? In this sense, research becomes a case of asking better questions, or, as Fraser (2010) has framed it, of ‘inventive problem-making’. Put simply, the research event as articulated here implies that researchers need to be circumspect about looking for answers to pre-formulated research questions and should sensitize themselves to the co-becoming that occurs in the research event in order to derive more inventive problems. The corollary to this is that researchers are themselves entangled in the becoming-with of the research event, and, as such, they need speculatively to engage with – to practise what Connolly (2011) might call ‘exquisite sensitivity to the world of becoming’ - how the research event unfolds toward the possible (even when it unfolds into something other than an identifiably ‘research’ event). In the broadest sense, this perspective suggests a methodological sensibility that requires “an openly constructivist approach that affirms the possible.…actively resists the plausible and the probable targeted by approaches that claim to be neutral.” Stengers (2010: 57).

# Responding to the Idiotic in the Research Event

One way in which the researcher might respond to the novel or possibilistic unfolding of the research event is by becoming attuned to the idiotic during empirical engagement with participants. The ‘Idiot’ is a philosophical figure whose behavior ‘does not make sense’ within the assumed framework of the (research) event. The idiot thus “resists the consensual way in which the situation is presented in which emergencies mobilize thought or action” (Stengers, 2005: 994). Its analytic usefulness lies in the fact that it remains indifferent to the researcher’s concerns and thus opens up the possibility of prompting the researcher to wonder whether “there is something more important” (2005: 994)going on in the research event which the researcher has yet to grasp. In other words, is the research event comprehensible in other ways – ways that might challenge the assumptions on which the research event rests?

One implication of this framing is that certain burdens are placed on the researcher. In particular they must exercise care with respect to the idiot (and indeed the self), taking its ostensible waywardness seriously rather than neglecting, ignoring or dismissing it (de la Bellacasa 2017). It is, after all, often difficult to identify the idiocy at work in a research event: school students’ collective proliferation of accounts reflects not the pre-existing range of accounts but a competitive game of collective creativity. Or, it is easy to see research failure and to self-derogate: an interviewee’s unwillingness to answer the research questions reflects not the incompetence of the interviewer but the enabling copresence of her companion animals (see Michael, 2012). What such a careful sensibility toward idiocy does is enable speculation about the possible meaning of these events, to seek in them more interesting problems. Does the students’ playfulness suggest that the research event can be an occasion for testing the believability of accounts? Does the interviewee’s resistance indicate that the interaction of hybrids – combinations of humans and nonhumans - might be more useful ways of thinking about the unfolding of interview research events?

In this section the focus has been on carefully detecting the idiotic in the research, sensitising the researcher to the ways in which the idiotic prompts new possibilities, and, in particular, more interesting problems. The idiotic is used here simply to indicate those actors or moments or behaviours that can be understood as not ‘making sense’ within the framing of the event as a research event. On this score, the idiot is indicative of other ways that social scientists engage with the possible through ‘making the familiar unfamiliar’ (Highmore 2002), ‘attunement’ (Stewart, 2011), ‘breaching’ (Garfinkel 1967) or ‘idle walking’ (De Certeau 1984).

However, it should not be forgotten that the researcher too might appear idiotic to participants in research events, not least when their questions, framing, or problems make little sense to the participants. This raises the interesting prospect that researchers can deliberately introduce idiocy as a part of a research strategy that potentially entails the novel unfolding of the research event in ways that engage the possible and are generative of more inventive problems. The above, however, also warrants a caution to resist anthropomorphising the idiot, which for our purposes is a figuration of certain kinds of processes taking place in the (research) event.

# Introducing Idiocy into the Research Event: The Probe

To introduce idiocy into the research event involves the staging of a mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar. Firstly, the ‘idiotic device’ or ‘idiotic moment’ must be sufficiently unfamiliar (strange, opaque, playful, open) that the participants in a research event find themselves curious, intrigued, and, crucially, willing to engage with it. The idiot cannot be too unpredictable, other-worldly or threatening otherwise it will simply alienate participants, who will dismiss it, or ignore it (much as researchers might disregard participants who are ‘idiotic’ – see above). Needless to say, it might be the case that participants are themselves resistant to the strangeness and undecidability of the idiotic device, might have recourse to ‘conventional wisdom or power’ as Connolly (2011: 159) has remarked.

So, what forms can these introduced idiots take? Here, the emphasis is placed on a particular sort of idiotic device, drawn from a speculative and critical traditions in design: this is the probe. In what follows, we consider and illustrate its broad characteristics.

Boehner, Gaver and Boucher (2012) describe probes (shortened from the original term, ‘cultural probes’ – Gaver et al. 2004) as designed to access ‘what might be’. Instead of pursuing accurate representations and generalizable findings, probes are focused on rather more partial, risky and idiosyncratic accounts that can be understood to serve as speculations on how the research event might unfold. They are usually comprised of objects and instructions that ask the participant to engage in an odd exercise. Often probes are collected together in a package that is sent to volunteers or distributed at research events. The following is a selection of probe tasks that Gaver and his collaborators have designed and distributed:

* A ‘Listening Glass’ which is a standard drinking glass with instructions that ask the volunteer to press the glass against a wall so as to hear the unusual sounds produced by the house. A marker pen is also included so that the perceived noises and their meanings can be recorded directly onto the surface of glass.
* A customized disposable camera that includes instructions to the volunteer to photograph something observed from their kitchen window, or to photograph the spiritual centre of their home.
* The ‘Telephone Jotter Pad’ allows participants to add to doodles to it in response to the images or questions it incorporates, and while engaged in other activities (not least answering the telephone).
* Community maps where members of different constituencies interested in energy demand reduction were asked to produce a visualisation of their ‘common community’ using a pre-prepared map projection with pens and a variety of specifically designed stickers that included depictions dinosaurs, spiders’ webs, cups of tea, alien spacecraft and the like.
* Participants were asked to write their guilty energy-use secrets, or an obituary for a favourite appliance on a specifically designed pre-addressed and postage-paid letter or an obituary template respectively.

By virtue of their oddness, playfulness, opaqueness, and so on, each of these probe exercises were designed to leave open the sorts of responses that were possible, to prompt their users to think otherwise, and, indeed, to trouble any presumed framing of the research event in which they (and the researchers) were involved. For instance, in the examples mentioned in last two bullet points, which were part of a large research programme investigating the role of community on energy demand reduction (Boucher et al. 2018), part of the aim was to challenge the typical meanings of ‘community’ that inform such research. Does constructing a collective community open up the possibility that ‘community’ is at once fragmented, contested, competing in unexpected ways? How does admission of guilty energy usage situate the participant in relation to their energy demand community (which might be composed of many guilty energy usages)? Does writing an obituary for a favourite appliance imply that appliances are part of a community, and what does being a ‘part of’ mean in this context?

In summary, the use of probes, because it renders the research event uncertain, opaque, playful, etc., serves as a means to prompting speculation amongst participants. This speculation, in turn, serves as a prompt for the researchers to open up their assumptions about what their research is about, and to facilitate their own speculations about the possibilities of what might count as an interesting research problem.

Now, the probe is just one technique by which the possible is prompted. Other researchers might craft a set of speculative objects or activities in collaboration with the participants themselves (e.g. Dantec and DiSalvo 2013) or might invite participants to speculate on the possible by considering or contemplating (rather practically engaging with) exhibited, more or less highly finished technological designs whose functions remain opaque or uncertain (e.g. Dunne and Raby 2013). Once again, having made these points, there are no guarantees that the probes (or other such objects) will work: designers and social scientists who use probes acknowledge that not everyone responds positively, or at all, to the tasks set in the probes.

# Analysing Idiotically: Speculating with Others’ Speculations

The materials – the texts, images, recordings, etc. – that are returned from the probe exercises need not be treated in the usual social scientific ways. These ‘data’ need not be studied and mined in order to discover common themes, or analysed in order to identify patterns of meaning (such as opposing discourses, or an array of imaginaries, or a nexus of significations). Rather, the ethos of engagement with these can be more idiotic insofar as it seeks those elements that ‘make no sense’: images, juxtapositions, text, scribbles, murmurings that invite speculative researchers “…(to) slow down, so that (they) don’t consider (themselves) authorized to believe they possess the meaning of what they know” (Stengers 2005: 995). In relation to the present formulation of the research event, the researcher is opening themselves up to co-becoming with these materials in novel ways. Put otherwise, the research needs to “bestow efficacy upon the murmurings of the idiot” (Stengers 2005: 1001) so that what counts in the research can be interrogated, revisited, or re-invented. It is important to note, however, that any ‘data’, whether derived through speculative research or through more traditional social scientific methods, can be subjected to this sort of speculative engagement (e.g. Stewart, 2007).

This speculative engagement with data can involve several activities. For instance, data can be analysed in terms of what appears especially unexpected or unusual. Or they can be situated in relation to a range of other materials both academic and non-academic (Highmore, 2002). Regarding the former, inviting others into the analytic moment can yield unexpected readings, especially if they themselves have a peculiar, distinctive or idiosyncratic perspective on the more or less relevant academic literature (what Billig 1988: called 'scholarship'). With regard to the latter, links, juxtapositions, comparisons, etc. with texts and images drawn from a variety of media (such as magazines or newspapers, from the histories of design or art, etc.) can cast a different light on these data that open up the possibilities of attunement and engagement. It is also possible to treat such data ‘aesthetically’ as a way of accessing the potential, or possible (see Michael et al. 2018). Specifically, as Massumi (2011) suggests, in the aesthetic encounter the experience of the artistic object or event can be fleeting, highly affective, emergent and generally difficult to pin down. In the process, multiple possibilities can become available for how one grasps that object or event. The same can be said for the researcher’s engagement with their data: data become an opaque, shifting field of affects which enable the researcher to seek in them clues to the potential and the possible.

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