

A close-up photograph of a desk. In the foreground, a brown notebook with the words 'FIELD NOTES' printed on it is open. A silver pen lies diagonally across the notebook. In the background, a grey pen holder contains several pens and markers. A blue notebook is also visible. A paperclip is attached to a piece of paper in the upper left.

the note

Staff and student magazine for the [School of Sociology and Social Policy](#)

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Cover image: 'Field Notes @ XPLANE' by Bill Keaggy (Flickr: @★Keaggy.com)

A note from the Editor:

This is the third issue of the note and my last as editor. I realise this might seem like a short stint but I think I have lasted about as long as the average football manager. I would like to thank everyone who has helped get the note off the ground. A special thanks to Emma Craddock and James Tangen for all their help with some of the more technical aspects of putting an on line magazine together. Just to say my best wishes to the new editor...and hope you enjoy the new issue.

Nick Stevenson

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On Doing Things Differently

It's very easy to get caught up in the rat race, even (especially?) for those who work or study at a university. But as every good Sociologist knows, sometimes it's good to take a step back, question what's going on, and consider if things might be otherwise. Every so often it's good to be reminded that there are alternatives....

In the wake of the Syriza victory in Greece, the BBC's Newsnight did a small feature on the popular appeal of radical left politics in the UK. It wasn't about polling stations, party politics, or even public protests. It was about bookshops. More specifically, it was about independent radical bookshops. Those where the sales of *Das Kapital* are buoyant not just despite but more importantly because of the economic crisis. UKIP may be hogging the headlines, but the 'Marx was Right' t-shirts were sold out (again) as Newsnight went to air, and London isn't the only home of such bookshops. Nottingham got a mention too.



Image courtesy of Five Leaves Bookshop

In case you haven't found it yet, our independent bookshop, Five Leaves, is situated off the main street (tucked away in an alley off Long Row), just as it is off the mainstream. It's a treasure trove of shelves stacked high with literature significant for its alternative politics, but also for its alternative production in small independent publishing houses. It also has a fabulous programme of events, including January's sell-out talk introduced by our very own Nick Stevenson and featuring sociological work from the School focussed on the Nottingham area of St Ann's. Recently, Five Leaves hosted a talk by Jack Halberstam - author of *Female Masculinity*, *In a Queer Time and*

Place, *The Queer Art of Failure*, and *Gaga Feminism*, among other titles - who had come to speak 'On Behalf of Failure'.

The neo-liberal regime is a tyranny of success, Halberstam tells us. Yet we do not have to be so accepting of the narrow confines of externally defined progress, and in the intelligent, irreverent and provocative *The Queer Art of Failure* Halberstam argues not for us to reclaim success and define it in our own terms, but rather to lay claim to failure, both as a rich alternative experience and as a political tool.

Our society teaches us a deep horror of failure, yet we rarely if ever reflect on its (potential) significance within a larger system geared towards success and progress at any cost. Surely something afforded a status of such unquestionable toxicity deserves further attention. What does failure threaten, that we are so allergic to it? What is its power?

Failure is, at heart, a refusal; a rejection of the task of



Image courtesy of Beat Küng. Flickr: @'pixelplacebo'

appropriately purposeful living, of pushing for progress and beating ourselves up when we can't achieve it fast or fully enough. Here Halberstam refers to the eponymous anti-hero of Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. He who when required to continue simply says 'I would prefer not to'. Failure, then, functions as passive resistance. It's the go-slow on the production line of conformity. For Halberstam, failure is a queer speciality in the context of a heteronormative world, but it's not, of course, limited to queer lives and identities; nor are its uses limited to queer politics. Rather it's within all our grasps. It's not a strategy which demands we articulate an alternative vision of success, simply one that allows us the space to step off the treadmill and have a look around.

I'm not, of course, calling upon you all to actively pursue failure in your exams, your careers, your relationships, your lives. But I do ask that we seek to recondition ourselves to have less of a fear of doing things differently, and to see failure as an opportunity to reflect on what it is that pushes us forward and where it may be pushing us. It may not sound very dramatic or heroic, but failure to inhabit the world quite as we are supposed to can function as a mode of resistance, a way of finding a space to question what is 'natural' and to think about how things might be otherwise. It is the chance to refuse mainstream normality and every so often visit those alternative spaces, the 'independent bookshops' of life.

Aimie Purser is Lecturer in Sociology.

*Judith Halberstam (2011) The Queer Art of Failure
Durham, NC: Duke University Press ISBN: 978-0-8223-5045-3 (pbk)*

Albert Einstein once wrote "one should not pursue goals that are easily achieved. One must develop an instinct for what one can just barely achieve through one's greatest efforts". I am as certain as I can be that, when he penned these words, he did not have in mind an image of a middle aged woman attempting to learn a martial art. Nevertheless, when I am standing in a draughty sports hall in Sneinton on a Monday evening, along with a large number of people who are less than half my age, they provide me with considerable comfort. And as soon as the class starts, I am too busy trying to remember my side kick from my axe kick (and my left from my right) to worry too much about the fact that the average 10 year old boy evidently finds this much, much easier than I do.

In cultural lore, the mid-life crisis commonly takes one of three forms: an extra-marital affair; the purchase of a fast car; or a drastic overhaul of image. All of these options have limited appeal for me; I don't have the time or inclination for an affair, and as a committed cyclist I've never been remotely interested in cars. Being a cyclist also means that, whilst an image overhaul might be attractive in theory, in practice it would only ever be likely to result in me arriving at places in a marginally less dishevelled state than usual. So, I needed to find another means of reacting against the advent of my fourth decade, and I stumbled across Taekwon Do pretty much by accident. When an evening class started at my youngest child's primary school, he was keen to give it a go, and I spent the first couple of sessions sitting at the side, waiting for him. But watching made me cold and bored, so I thought I might as well join in. What took me by surprise was both how much I enjoy it, and also how therapeutic it is to hit and kick things after a frustrating day at work! Taekwon Do is sometimes described as the 'crowbar' of martial arts, which I think is meant to convey that its emphasis is on effective self-defence rather than style, and it isn't necessarily very pretty to watch. For me at least, it's also been very tricky to learn. Readers of previous issues of this magazine will know that I have already confessed to an almost total lack of

'Breaking Boards': Overcoming stumbling blocks

spatial awareness, which is not a strong point from which to start any kind of activity that requires a high degree of physical co-ordination. Perversely, though, I think this is part of the appeal for me, and takes me back to Einstein's statement. Over the years, I have tried all kinds of classes as a way to unwind after work - Pilates, yoga etc - but though I didn't dislike any of these things, they also didn't fully occupy my mind. Whilst I was supposed to be visualising a beautiful garden, or concentrating on my breathing, I would instead find myself remembering that we didn't have any milk at home, or that I needed to finish marking essays by the morning. For the hour that I'm doing Taekwon Do, I can't think about anything else at all. This is partly because it requires every ounce of concentration I have to try and make my arms and legs do what they're supposed to be doing, and partly because if I let my concentration slip I am quite likely to get hurt by the person I'm sparring with, through my own failure to block their attack. I often come home bruised, but I'm keen to avoid the occasional black eye becoming a more regular occurrence.

Two years on from when I started, I am totally hooked, though in deference to my son's embarrassment I have since joined a different class to him. My new class also contains more adults, so at least when I lose a fight now, it isn't to someone half my height. I am fortunate enough to be taught by a 7th degree black belt, and under his guidance I am slowly progressing through the grading system myself. ITF Taekwon Do,



Image courtesy of Grotos. Flickr: @grotos

which is what I study, is different to WTF Taekwon Do (which famously featured in the London Olympics), focusing more on movements using the hands and upper body, as well as kicking. It also has a grading system where there are two belts to every colour, so you progress from white to yellow stripe to full yellow, and so on. By the time this piece is in print, I will hopefully have successfully attained blue stripe, and be working towards my blue belt, though first I will have to master a tricky circular block that I seem to have been attempting for months.

In truth, there aren't many advantages to being older than most of my classmates, but I have discovered an unexpected one. As well as learning patterns of movements, the philosophy behind Taekwon Do, and sparring techniques, at gradings we are also assessed on power, judged by the ability to break a board with your hand and foot. As I've learnt, the secret of board breaking is mostly in the visualisation. Not only do you need to visualise beyond the board, so your strike doesn't end on contact with it, but it also helps to visualise something - or someone - as you strike. The average 10 year old may be much quicker, and much more co-ordinated than me, but my greater life experience means that I have a far greater range of resources on which to draw when it comes to visualising! I think this probably accounts for why I always return from my class in good spirits, even when people or things have frustrated me during the day...

I'm told by my instructor that less than 5% of people who begin a martial art go on to achieve a black belt. At the moment I'm not sure this is an attainable goal for me, and at my current rate of progress I would be pretty close to my fifth decade before I got there. For now, my aim is just to get my blue belt and carry on enjoying my classes. And since all Taekwon Do students undertake not to use their skills outside of training sessions unless they are in danger, submitters of late Sociology essays need not be too anxious-though they might just help with my board breaking!

Alison Pilnick is an Professor of Language, Medicine & Society.

More on those "songs": or the difference between "opinion" and sociological analysis

We all experience some brief but defining moments that haunt us for the rest of our lives. One of mine was this: I was 19 years of age, when my then best friend shared what he thought of as a joke. It was one of those we have all heard, combining racial and sexual stereotypes, pretending it's all "harmless fun", especially when "told in private". I didn't laugh, couldn't laugh. All I mustered was badly articulated disapproval. In hindsight, I know this was the beginning of the end of our friendship.

My friend was the closest friend I have ever had. We had grown up together, we were much more like brothers. I know I will never have a friend like him again. After that we drifted, the joke didn't break the friendship, but it was one of many steps in the long road of our friendship's - no, our fictive kinship's - decline. The last time I saw him was more than a decade ago, when "we" were already damaged beyond repair. I miss him to this day. He is now an upstanding member of his society, a successful scientist, family man and father of two. And he is most certainly not what the public imagination associates with "a racist", far from it.

Sadly, when I was 19, I lacked the sociological armoury with which to take on "jokes" of the kind that did so much damage to this friendship. A few years later, I would have been able to point out that all language and all images have a social context, which they in turn help reproduce. I would then have been able to point out that the most banal of statements are real in their social and political consequences; indeed, that they play a vital role in the daily, structural reproduction of racism, xenophobia (and yes, this absolutely includes the quickly rising tide of nationalism in this country), sexism, homophobia etc. As such, there is no such thing as "harmless humour" or "banter", it all comes from somewhere, it all goes somewhere. It is not the only, but one of the ways in which we are all part - albeit often without realizing - of maintaining injustices and exclusions.

Even more sadly, it could all have been so different. I know my old best friend would have been persuaded

by an argument of this kind. Perhaps we would still have been best friends. As it was, all I had then was a "diverging opinion", as he saw it; an unproductive stalemate between contrasting perspectives that began to drift further and further apart... Had I been able to offer an analysis, rather than just poorly articulated disapproval, I know the stalemate would have been broken.

Predictably, some recent discussions surrounding the deplorable "songs" chanted during Week One revolved around similar issues: apologetics have described them as "mere banter", pointing out that these weren't isolated incidents, as if this somehow deprived them of their toxic, misogynistic origins and social consequences. And it is not difficult to imagine how some of the resulting discussion may unfold further: it is precisely such circumstances that often trigger invocations of the "freedom of opinion" or complaints about a purported "thought police"....

This is precisely where - as sociologists - we have to enter into the debate. It is in such circumstances that our analytical and critical skills are most urgently needed - not to "moralise", not to control, but to point out what is, in sociological terms, obvious: that the purportedly "trivial" is very real in its immediate and wider, political effects; that we are all - and this includes ALL of us - part of social fields that perpetuate some of their dehumanizing injustices precisely through such supposedly "innocent" practices. Pointing this out is part of what the sociological imagination obliges us to do.

I am not a believer in sociological "moralising". Like the late Irving Horowitz, I worry about scientific work that predefines its conclusions and recommendations at the outset; this kind of pre-defined, self-attributed moral high ground strikes me as circular, self-righteous and often counter-productive. But this is precisely where "opinion" and "analysis" differ so profoundly: the former defines itself at the outset, rarely bothers with evidence and is often highly reluctant to challenge or revise itself; the latter - analysis - is the endpoint of a process of self-critical engagement, it

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requires evidence and demonstration, it reflects on its premises and conclusions and how they square with further evidence. My old best friend's "joke" (it wasn't, of course, "his" joke, no more than those songs were anyone's in particular) and those now infamous "hall chants" cannot be taken on through the medium of "opinions"; if they are, all we end up with are assertions and counter-assertions, a game of pointless relativism. The only way of taking them on, is through analysis, by demonstrating what we know about "everyday racism" (Philomena Essed), about patriarchy, about homophobia: and how those ideological forces are all around all of us, and infiltrate our most immediate surroundings, relationships, and our psyches.... dehumanizing us, and sometimes destroying the closest of friendships.

Again, my old best friend was not and is not "a racist" as we stereotypically imagine them. I still think of him as one of the most giving and compassionate human beings I have ever known. But both he and I were part of a situation that day that we all know, where injustice manifests itself, in the things people say and do. Such injustice never has a single perpetrator, but always many, most of whom aren't even present when it gets committed. And some such injustice gets misunderstood and misportrayed as "just fun" or "mere opinion". It calls for analysis, not moralising, for honesty, and not for a simplistic scape-goating of individuals. What happened a couple of months ago and is recorded on YouTube is awful and should worry us all. For us, as social scientists, it is a reminder of how important what we do is: not because we occupy - a priori - the "moral high ground", but because our work is all about understanding, about analysing, the connections between the everyday and the enduring.

A last word about my friend, to my friend, should he ever read this: "Alter, du fehlst mir noch immer, nach all den Jahren ... und trotz allem...."

Christian Karner is an Associate Professor of Sociology.

Kraftwerk in Birmingham

It is not often I go to a conference to find that it has been literally invaded by the media. The recent international conference on [Kraftwerk held at Aston University](#) caught a surprising amount of public interest. As I arrived I was immediately courted by a journalist from the Independent who was polite but did not seem to be entirely sure why he was there. The main interest in the conference seemed to buzz around the idea this was the first ever conference on this theme, and what could anyone meaningfully say about it? Indeed when I mentioned this to a group of friends in the pub on a Friday night they all readily agreed with the latter point. Perhaps predictably some of the interest of the media became caught up in high versus low culture debates from the 1980s and failed to catch that most of the conference was concerned with the relationship between music, the history of art and German national identity. The conference itself was attended by (yes) academics, but also musicians, fans and people from the music industry. Again in my experience this is an unusual mix - most conferences on specialist themes attract little outside interest.



The conference organiser, Uwe Schütte, did a brilliant job of structuring the two days, carefully integrating presentations from academics, musicians and journalists. There was even an electronic disco in the evening hosted by Rusty Egan — well known as something of a pioneer in electronic music. Uwe did well to hold his nerve when a former member of Kraftwerk didn't show up at the appointed time and the BBC cameras arrived mid-morning. However, most of the excitement seemed to come from fans. This struck me as after my presentation two men (who I didn't recognise) approached me claiming they could remember me from the night clubs of Derby back in the 1980s. This was a bit worrying, because I am either a really bad dancer (the court is currently out on that question) or (as I had a tendency to do back then) they

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had caught me forcibly expressing an opinion on Thatcher's government over a gin and orange.

However, for myself, the excitement was less attached to the media, and more to do with my own session. Back in the early 1980s I had been a very big fan of the Kraftwerk influenced Cabaret Voltaire. The opening address of the conference was given by Stephen Mallinder (the lead singer of the Cabs) who at a later session offered a response to my fan letter (cunningly disguised as an academic paper). He was very generous in his criticism and the dialogue between us both touched on the history of electronic music, the troubled class conflicts of the early 1980s, the music industry and the cultural politics of music. Of course it is really strange to meet someone in the flesh you have been a fan of over a long period. His music meant a great deal to me as it seemed to capture the mood of the early 1980s better than anyone else. However the feeling of being star-struck did not last that long as he turned out to be very approachable. I once did some research on fans of David Bowie and one of them described to me how he had won a competition to meet his favourite star. On the trip down to London the fan told me he had got off the train in Luton because he had begun to worry what would happen if he met him and did not like him. He stood there for twenty minutes or so before getting back on the train to London. He told me he need not have worried as he was only with him for about thirty minutes and was clearly used to meeting intimated members of the public. Of course Stephen Mallinder is hardly a household name, but he had meant something to me and I was glad it had gone well.

On returning home I excitedly played some of the music featured at the conference to the children to be met by the usual chorus of criticism and lack of relevance. We play a lot of music together as a family and inevitably no one ever agrees about who is the best. I am yet to find the track by Cabaret Voltaire that is not met by everyone walking out of the room, but I have had more success with Kraftwerk. If you are new to their music I suggest you start with their number one single 'The Model' or one of my children's

favourites 'The Robots'. However that evening despite my enthusiasm they were all in the mood for something else. They have now all seen my robot dance, but I am not sure they want to see it again.

Nick Stevenson is Reader in Sociology

Sociology as a Martial Way

The debate about the point of sociology, and how we engage our publics has raged for many decades, though most recently it was renewed by a [speech delivered to the American Sociological Association](#) by then President of that association, Michael Burawoy. This was followed in 2008 when Burawoy initiated a series of imaginary conversations with Pierre Bourdieu, [starting with a critique](#) of Bourdieu's famous description of sociology as '*a combat sport, a means of self-defense*'. Burawoy's criticism is that all of Bourdieu's opponents appear as ghosts, or are 'slain off stage'. In a debate between visions of public sociology, Burawoy focuses on the mis-translation of the French 'sport de combat' to the English 'martial art' as he challenges Bourdieu for evading direct confrontations in his work. Burawoy himself [has been criticised](#) for attempting to outline a *Public Sociology* based on an overly romanticised imagining of civil society as receptive to sociological ideas.

The kind of semantic distinction offered by Burawoy can also be applied to different forms of martial art. I have studied jujitsu ('the gentle art') for nearly two decades, and have taught it for the last ten years. I also train in aikido ('the way of harmonious energy'). The distinction between the two lies in the philosophy underpinning them: *Jitsu*-style practice focuses on the combative encounter—much as Burawoy does; *Do*-styles are a more complete philosophy for living life both inside and outside of the *dojo*.

Japanese martial arts contain many phrases and aphorisms intended to explain the esoteric elements of practices that seem completely at odds with the habits of contemporary society. By the end of

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adolescence we are taught that rolling around the floor is inappropriate behaviour! I wish to focus on just three concepts that may be helpful for thinking about sociology as a martial way.

Embu is most often applied to public martial arts demonstrations; a way of showing others how hard you have trained. But *Embu* is also an approach to training where neither opponent is trying to 'win'; their only concern is improving their technique. The intensity of the practice increases as their technique improves, preparing students for the test to come. Consequently, and as [Bell Hooks has advocated](#), the classroom cannot be a totally safe environment. As we debate with colleagues, students and our tutors we must be willing to risk being unbalanced by our 'opponent' so we can improve our technique. This is a difficult challenge, particularly for undergraduates used to the security of knowledge-giving practices in the classroom. Our task as instructors is to develop the critical thinking that allows our students to apply the theory we teach in their practice of sociology.



Image courtesy of NTU Jujitsu Club

Shoshin is a beginner's state of mind, when there are innumerable possibilities in each encounter. It reminds senior practitioners not to become obsessed with solving all of their problems with a single approach. The essence of *Shoshin* is evident in [John Holmwood's response](#) to Burawoy's complaint that contemporary sociology is unhelpfully fragmented by suggesting this very multiplicity of perspectives is

what makes sociology a useful practice for anyone wanting to influence society.

Zanshin, or 'the remaining mind', describes a state of constant awareness of your surroundings, but in a natural and relaxed manner. The key to this aspect of training is to be in a position to respond to threats decisively and immediately. It is one of the most difficult skills to develop, as most students become tense with the expectation of being attacked or thrown, which hinders their ability to receive the technique (*'Ukemi'*). Without this final concept, students may [become frustrated with the discipline of sociology](#) and move on to other things. Certainly, Burawoy raised concerns in his 2004 address about the likelihood of experienced academics leaving sociology if we cannot find a way to respond to current funding arrangements.

In Japanese, sociology is called *shakaigaku*. Interestingly, the word *shakai* can be translated into English as either 'society' or 'public'. The way of sociology as a martial art would be *shakaigaku-do*. A student of this way is engaged with their surroundings, willing to respond decisively when necessary. A student of this way is open minded about how to resolve the challenges they face. They do not fear failure. Perhaps this is the way Burawoy and Bourdieu were seeking.

James Tangen is a Postgraduate Researcher in Sociology and Social Policy. He also teaches jujitsu at Nottingham Trent University.

Sensei Mia Bellusova is the Lead Instructor at the University of Nottingham Jujitsu Club. Training takes place during term-time on Wednesday and Friday evenings.

Life as an academic: hypocrisy and failure?

When I was asked to write for The Note regarding my time as a new lecturer within the School, I intended to produce some prose reflecting on my cherished and enjoyable job here in Sociology & Social Policy and my love for social science generally.

However, I now feel that such an account might be somewhat unexciting for the reader. Thus, I'll focus instead on two of my current anxieties regarding my own academic career: potential hypocrisy and potential failure.

This piece narrates the brief niggling thoughts that occasionally enter my mind whilst walking my ageing ginger dog across the fields by my home. I do not know the disquiets of fellow colleagues (and I certainly do not know if they frolic in the countryside with canines). This narrative is just about me.

Potential hypocrisy: I used to return home from writing my PhD or Research Fellow work to read Feyerabend, Foucault, Lemert, Durkheim, *etc.* I would then utilise this knowledge at work the next day by including it in on-going analyses or papers. I now get home from a day at the university and relax with a P.D. James, or an Iris Murdoch, or something similarly non-academic. I no longer read social theory at home. This worries me.

I also used to consider myself an active social scientist beyond the boundaries of the university. I wonder if I still am sufficiently. Preaching social change, social equality, and social justice at university, but now not always practising this actively after work. Am I becoming a hypocrite perhaps?

For example, I recently suggested to a seminar group that they read Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. One astute student then asked me how I changed my personal life as a result of this tome; what did I do to equal out our society after studying this book? In truth, nothing. I enjoyed and supported the theory and still do suggest this text to students and colleagues, but I did nothing personally as a result of the knowledge gained from this book.

I am concerned that the further I progress into

academia the further I might move away from participation in the real-world regarding the topics that impassion me at work. Rest assured I will strive to avoid this outcome. Nevertheless, this aphorism is beginning to trouble me: "One should examine oneself for a very long time before thinking of condemning others" (Molière).

Potential failure: As an undergraduate student I attended lectures and thought: "I think I would like lecturing and I think I would make a good lecturer. Yes, I should be an academic". I guess I presumed lecturers delivered just one or two lectures a week and that was the job. However, I now know that academics have – as I see it – a four-stranded workplace existence balancing research, writing, teaching, and administration.

This anxiety is heightened further – at least for me – as I perceive each of these four tasks as having different audiences and thus assessors. Research work affects your research team members. Writing outputs affect your place within the wider academic field. Teaching quality affects students. Administration efficiency affects School colleagues. I am conscious that I should not fail in any of these four realms.

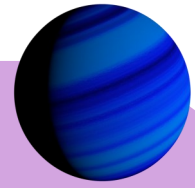
Overall, I'm glad of these passing moments of anxiety regarding my career. Complacency would be worse, I predict. Billy, the aforementioned ageing ginger dog, has little of use to say on these matters but he does appreciate the background noise as I chatter to myself out-loud amongst the flora and fauna of North Nottinghamshire.

In order to unwind after this piece of personal writing, which is not my usual style (indeed where are the references and bibliography?), I'm off to the freezer for some Arctic Roll[®]. No doubt I'll then feel guilty about the calorie content tomorrow morning.

C'est la vie.

Melanie Jordan is Assistant Professor of Criminology.

Reading Sci Fi



A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away ...

... the younger me had a third encounter with science fiction. The galaxy was Birmingham, and the long ago was 50 years. The third party was Boots the chemist, who sold hardback copies of 'classics' at pocket money prices. My introduction to sci fi was via the work of Jules Verne – Boots sold his three best known works *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Verne's books were promptly followed by paperback editions of John Wyndham's adventures, and I've been reading sci fi on and off ever since.

Why? Personally, I need a counterbalance to the reading I do for my academic work. My research interests focus around social security and issues to do with equality, and the related academic, policy and practitioner literature tends to highlight such startling injustices and absurdities that a counter-narrative is needed to lower my blood pressure and keep me sane(ish). Sci fi does this for me. Sci fi is, however, more than a form of escapism or respite. One of the joys of sci fi is that it provides a window on alternative social worlds. Isaac Asimov's Foundation series provides a good example of the rich tapestry that can be woven, in this case of a history of a galactic empire. (As an aside he creates a new sub-discipline, psychohistory, which could be seen as a form of mathematical sociology.) Sci fi stories reinforce that it is possible to conceive of other societies; so potentially it is possible to make a difference to this world.

Works of sci fi can offer social critiques or warnings about the future – George Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* being exemplars. To-date I've not written a piece that compares the bureaucratic nightmares of Frank Kafka's *The Castle* to the administration of UK social security, but even dystopian texts can be a source of academic inspiration. These 'dark' novels can be matched by more optimistic works, such as William Morris' *Road to Nowhere*, or even Thomas Moore's Utopia. These texts map an alternative way of living.

Of course, sci fi should not be read uncritically. Some works, including some so-called 'classics', are decidedly 'dodgy', especially when it comes to gender, if not unacceptable in their objectification of women. Even when a female has the lead role, such as Ripley in the Alien series, the characterisation can be one-dimensional. The constraining influences and nuances of institutions and structures can also be lost in a highly individualistic approach to problem solving, with the all-action lead characters simply zapping and out-witting the baddies.

I don't just read sci fi, and some sci fi I've avoided – I've never read a Dr Who, Star Trek or Star Wars book. The quality of sci fi literature is highly variable, but when it's good, it's good.

Bruce Stafford is a Professor of Public Policy and Head of the School of Sociology and Social Policy.

