



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Care for the Future: Thinking Forward through the Past

Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future,

And time future contained in time past.

T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton' from Four Quartets (1936)

He who controls the past controls the future: he who controls the present controls the past.

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)

The relationship between the past, present and future shapes our understanding of the world around us. Whether it is the perceived consequences of past events, the urgency of present concerns, or the challenges of real or imagined futures, the structures of time intersect with and inform our sense of ourselves in myriad ways. 'Care for the Future: Thinking Forward through the Past' affords an opportunity for researchers in the arts and humanities to explore the dynamic relationship that exists between past, present and future through a temporally inflected lens.

On the one hand, the past is all around us. The very phrase 'warnings from history' is a call to safeguard the future by looking vigilantly to the past. By the same token, the future's uncertainties weigh heavily upon the past, and turn us back to history for insights into the age in which we live. Moreover, just as a concern for past can help us to reflect on the present, so, too, a lack of faith in the present can encourage us to retreat into idealised or romanticised pasts. On the other hand, there is a sense that we are entering a moment when the very notion of history as an effective guide to the future is in question. Faced with the challenges of global poverty, resource scarcity, and the consequences of the dramatically narrowing gap between the West and 'the rest', can the future any longer be perceived simply as an outgrowth or extension of the past? If not, what are the dangers of reading history backwards to gauge its implications for the present? Is it possible to write histories that do not in some sense envisage a future, or

which forgo the future as the implicit vantage point from which events are described as 'past'? The arts and humanities are uniquely placed to address these questions.

The 'Care for the Future' theme will encourage critical reflection upon the concepts that are used to join together past, present and future – including memory, legacy, heritage, and progress; upon different creative, artistic and literary modes of engagement with the past and the passage of time; and upon different emotions evoked by reflecting on the past – such as denial, forgetting, trauma, nostalgia, mourning and celebration. In exploring the question of whether and how understandings of the past – distant as well as recent – may provide pathways to the future, the theme will further consider the consequences of selectivity – whose voices are heard and whose are silenced by the past, as well as those which questions are asked about the past and those which are not. It will encourage researchers to explore different approaches to writing the past and how these may extend or restrict the possibilities of historical and critical interpretation.

Research and practice in the arts and humanities has long been concerned with how representations of the future of humanity can shed light on our hopes and fears for the present. This is not just a current preoccupation. However unknowable, the practice of predicting or forecasting the future has a long legacy; it stretches far back in time and crosses many cultures. Many and varied groups within society have over the centuries claimed for themselves future expertise. For others the future has been an important source of aspirations and dreams. Whether in relation to utopias and dystopias or revolutionary ideals, projections of renewal, growth and prosperity in the future have proved an important means of human expression. Imagining the future has also been important to a variety of professions – artists and writers, architects and urban planners, insurers and risk assessors, entrepreneurs and inventors, and promoters of science.

What we mean by 'care' in relation to the 'future' is likewise fundamental to how we have and continue to value cultural heritage and the historical work that informs our understanding of that heritage. Different types of heritage – tangible and intangible – need to be placed into historical context, since value and significance are never static but shift across generations. Whose heritage do we seek to preserve? Which elements of that heritage do we prioritise when we lack the resources to look after everything that seems worthy of attention? How are such decisions informed or constrained by public understandings of the past, especially when multiple and contested? Accelerated environmental change poses challenges to the ongoing preservation of heritage assets. In the light of this, how are we to maintain a cultural memory of the things allowed to change or even disappear? And to what extent can past ideas and debates about conservation – including the different social vantage points embedded in it, and the

dichotomy between stability/preservation and adaptation/evolution – illuminate the difficulties and dilemmas of a sustainable heritage practice for the future?

'Care for the Future' encourages researchers to explore new ways of thinking about these temporal relationships, yet not through a constraining sequential logic of past + present = future. Instead, we seek insights that question accepted understandings, including of the notion of time itself, and illuminate original lines of discovery, practice and reflection. In interrogating the 'care' element of the theme, researchers may wish to consider the institutions through which such 'care' is demonstrated (archives, museums, galleries, as well as a range of other organisations concerned with heritage, for example) and which may provide fruitful opportunities for collaboration under the theme.

Potential areas of engagement

There is no prescriptive description. The potential areas of engagement outlined below not only overlap and intersect: they are designed to stimulate researchers to come forward with their own perspectives and priorities for investigation. Work that places these elements into international and comparative contexts is particularly welcomed, as are projects in partnership with non-HEIs which co-produce new knowledge and ideas.

- Questions of temporality and history
- Inter- and cross-generational communication, justice and exchange
- Trauma, conflict and memory: transitions to new futures
- Environmental change and sustainability
- Cultural notions of the future

Questions of Temporality and History

The theme encourages reflection on the notion of time – how views of time shape our sense of ourselves and others, and how the way we order and experience time influences our expectations of the future as well as approaches to writing the past. This strand encompasses different beliefs, meanings and values attached to time and change over time (for example, the critique of time simply as a linear, progressive or evolutionary process, flowing inexorably in one direction); competing and culturally-specific senses of time, especially in western and non-western societies (for example, the representation of cultural difference as difference in time); and how different concepts and rituals of time have been used by one culture to exercise power over others. It also opens up the question of history's own embedded senses of time, namely of how we distinguish between mere temporal succession and historical explanation, and of how different modes of temporal practice and perception may work to privilege certain viewpoints while marginalising others. Examples of history that think of time in different ways and are written accordingly might, for example, include 'alternate' or 'counterfactual'

histories: how the world might have changed if one seminal event had turned out differently, or the exploration of future scenarios through imagining alternative pasts.

Inter- and Cross Generational Communication, Justice and Exchange

The theme explores the role of a range of institutions in communicating and contesting knowledge, values and beliefs between past, present and future generations. These might include the family (for example, family histories and genealogies); how what is taught in schools, colleges and universities, and displayed and represented in museums, archives and galleries contributes to the construction of cultural memories of the past; charities, non-governmental and third sector organisations seeking to learn the lessons from and better understand their own pasts; or a variety of social groups and their advocates reflecting on their histories to negotiate the problems and possibilities of generational change. This strand also provides scope to consider the role of the politics of the present in shaping our views of the past, as manifested by calls to apologise for wrongs committed by previous generations and whose legacies are believed to persist into the present; the responsibilities of generations to those that preceded them and/or to those that follow them (for example, the 'social contract' between generations over the funding of welfare, or the transmission of socio-economic disadvantages between generations); philosophical, legal and historical questions of how far moral responsibilities can be passed between generations, and how far one generation can be held responsible for the injustices of another; and contemporary debate on the mechanisms for coming to terms with historical injustices and righting past wrongs.

Trauma, Conflict and Memory: Transitions to New Futures

The theme addresses the question of what it might mean to come to terms with the past. It explores the reproduction of past conflicts across generations and the dynamics of cultural memory – including the reconciling of competing memories of past traumas, and how (far) individuals and societies are able to mourn, forget and forgive. Traumas in this context could range from individual traumas and life changing events (injury, bereavement); local events (landslides, volcanic eruptions, collapse of local economies); through to broader societal or global traumas such as famines, earthquakes, epidemic diseases, civil wars and insurgencies, and global recessions. There is opportunity to consider issues of restitution, reparation and reconciliation, and their effects on how aspects of our past are invoked and interpreted, as well as the ways in which the past is politicised for the purposes of shaping different and alternative futures. Proposals under this strand could, for example, consider the role of humanitarian organisations, community groups, and representatives of victims in the reproduction of or recovery from conflict, and in the development of resilience to trauma.

Environmental Change and Sustainability

The theme explores the relationship between historical and contemporary experiences of environmental change, and how the study of difficult and complex environmental legacies of the past might shed light on ecological challenges of the future. How, over time, have responses to environmental change been influenced by different cultural ideas, values and beliefs (e.g. 'custodianship', 'stewardship', and inter-generational equity) and different public understandings of 'security', 'stability' and 'sustainability'? To the extent that climate change is seen as a potentially catastrophic process like war or invasion, how far can the arts and humanities draw from history to provide novel perspectives on how communities understand and respond to such challenges? In contemporary environmental debates, there can be very different perceptions of the processes and timescales of change, the 'natural', the 'evolutionary' and the role of human agency. The arts and humanities bring environmental questions into a historical perspective. They can offer insights into the diversity of scientific, religious and lay responses to environmental change, as well as our emotions and attachments to landscapes, and individual and social adaptive capacity.

Cultural Notions of the Future

The theme considers cultural notions of the future from multiple perspectives. It looks at the future as both a warning and an opportunity, and examines how aspirations and anxieties relating to the future influence how we live in the present. Projects might challenge the view of the past as fixed and the future as mutable by paying attention to how divisive, contested and unpredictable pasts are a source of anxiety and uncertainty for the future. They may consider notions of trusteeship, custodianship and stewardship, in the context of what it means to protect the future of heritage, and technology's impact on access to that heritage. Questions might also be raised about the selectivity of acts of memory and commemoration, and related issues of what we decide to preserve as being of value to future generations, or what is chosen to represent our heritage, and the impact of such choices on understandings of identity and future mindsets.

Summary

The theme will bring into sharper focus the unique insights which the arts and humanities can provide into the relationship between the past, the present and the future – a relationship inherent to all human activity and experience, of compelling interest to society, yet inadequately and incompletely understood. Exploring how the past, present and future interact with and shape each other, the theme will promote and give a higher public profile to cross-disciplinary research into:

- How the way we account for the past can influence our interpretations of the present and provide a mandate for the future.
- How what happens in the present can shift our views of the past.
- How the past can be better cared for in the future.
- How the future may be better cared for through an appreciation of the importance of the past.
- How different and diverse ways of thinking about time can shape our sense of connection to the past as well as our conceptions of the future.