

## **Panel: Contingency, Risk, Judgment, Policy**

**Chair: Ben Authers (School of English and Theatre Studies, University of Guelph)**

**Sara Ramshaw**

### **Abstract**

#### ***Giving Time to Social Policy: Improvisation and the Temporality of Justification***

This paper explores social policy as judgment, as justification for certain societal action or change. Unlike the Western Common Law, which judges in the present based on what has happened in the past, social policy judges in the present based on what changes it hopes to bring about in the future. The problem with both these approaches is that one can never judge in the present because the present is always past before judgment can be passed. Social policy-makers are presented with unique problems for which judgment is needed or sought. Uniqueness is necessary for if neither original nor new no fresh judgment would be required.

To be truly just, or *justified*, however, each policy decision would have to break with the past – as well as any future that is based on the past – and offer an absolutely unique interpretation which no existing approach could or ought to guarantee absolutely. This, of course, is impossible, especially in the time available for policy- making. Judgment thus entails both a (singular) act and a (general) process: the uniqueness of each problem can only be addressed or understood through pre- existing structures of language/thought/etc. and the temporality of judgment rests on the paradoxical relation between the singular and the general.

Judgment as paradox means that no social policy can ever be completely just or justifiable; we can never have all the information or knowledge necessary to make a judgment that is fully faithful to the singularity of a particular situation; we can never have thought through an issue from every single different angle, perspective or viewpoint. There is always an element of justification that is beyond comprehension and knowledge. This deficiency, though, is not necessarily a bad thing. The unknown outside that is also inside the time of judgment is actually what keeps times a- changin'. In other words, if everything was always fully explainable and completely justified, there would be no call for change in society, no call for judgment. Eventually social policy would find itself redundant. The continued legitimacy of social policy thereby rests not on its having all the answers, but on uncertainty and incompleteness.

What musical improvisation offers to social policy is the opportunity to rethink

the temporality of judgment and a chance to *just-ify* outside of linear time. Improvisation dances in the paradoxical space where the present meets the past meets the future. This is not to say that improvisation escapes this paradox or more generalized conceptions of time. However, thinking through the relationship between improvisation and time is useful to those interested in social policy for it enables us to view the temporality of justification as far less static and linear. Time in improvisation is a gift outside of time, outside of the economy of exchange and restitution. The timeline given by the jazz rhythm section to the improvising soloist may change in character in response to changes in the character of the improvising solo. Time responds to change and in so doing changes time. By giving time to social policy in this manner, a more nuanced conception of justification may be possible.

### **Biography**

**Dr. Sara Ramshaw** is the 2008-2009 postdoctoral fellow with the Improvisation, Community and Social Practice project in conjunction with the Centre de recherche en éthique de l'Université de Montréal (CRÉUM). She is also a lecturer in Law at the School of Law, Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland. Having completed both a LL.B. and LL.M. from the University of British Columbia, she clerked at the Ontario Court of Justice (General Division) in 1998- 1999 and was called to the Bar of the Law Society of Upper Canada in 2000. Sara then worked as a research lawyer at the Superior Court of Justice, Family Court in Ontario before commencing postgraduate studies at Birkbeck School of Law, University of London, England. Her doctoral thesis, completed in 2007, examined the legal regulation of jazz musicians in New York City (1940-1967) through the lens of poststructural theory informed by feminism, race theory and musicology.

### **Silvana Figueroa-Dreher**

#### **Abstract**

#### ***Translating Free Jazz Improvising Practices to the Field of Social Policy***

Is it possible to deduce models of sociality from improvisational practices and to apply them to social policy practices, for instance, to improve creativity or cooperation within social policy organizations?

The dilemma we are confronted with, when we try to think of a possible 'translation' or application from the artistic improvisation sphere to the public policy sphere, is that practices within these spheres are fundamentally different in character: while practices within social policy spheres are oriented towards goals or results, improvising artistic practices concentrate on the process of improvising itself; while public policy practices focus on elaborating and implementing projects within specific social areas, improvising artistic practices evolve without implementing a previously designed project; while policy practices look for measurable improvement in specific cases, improvising practices are not measured to evaluate their success in achieving

planned goals afterwards, but are judged regarding their value as aesthetic experiences; the target group of social policy practices are other social groups, while the 'target' group of improvisational practices is the improvising group itself in the first place, etc.

Nevertheless, both kinds of practices have a central, fundamental feature in common: if one can say that in social life, order is the child of disorder, then both social policy and improvising practices stem from the same problem, that is, the 'production' of order. But they 'solve' this problem in fundamentally different ways.

Within my presentation, a particular musical improvisational practice, namely free jazz, will be reflected upon. Characterized as a radical improvisational genre, and historically seen as liberation from the musical traditional (jazz) conventions, free jazz improvising takes place under the refusal of harmonicmetrical binding patterns, the regulatory effect of the rhythm and the structuring principles of the "jazz-piece". As a result, the conventions regarding instrumental technique, ensemble playing and formal musical organisation in free jazz are not universally binding, as opposed to traditional jazz. Hence, interaction is not regulated by previously fixed rules. Musical form and structures emerge interactively within the playing process and not with recourse to composed works. In addition to this, interaction within free jazz takes place on the basis of flat hierarchies and decentralized self-coordination. In other words, interaction takes place on the basis of absence of a coordination instance, such as in the case of an orchestra. Each musician can play, or stop playing, at almost any time, resulting in a dialogic, constantly changing, and highly dynamic interaction. Moreover, improvising within free jazz takes place in the absence of fixed roles for each instrument – the drums, for instance, can generate "melodic" sounds, whereas the piano can contribute with rhythmic elements. Herein, interaction rules emerge within the process of playing. What makes free jazz worth reflecting upon as a sociality model is that experimentation and risk belong to this highly contingent interaction context, within which even 'mistakes' can be accepted and seen as an opportunity for the emergence of new forms of action and interaction. In this way, it can serve as a model for social organizations that seek to improve cooperation, creativity or participation. After defining the central features of free jazz as an action and interaction order, ways to apply them to the area of social policy will be proposed. Herein, the central argument will be that social policy practices can reflect and incorporate features of improvising practices that can improve the planning and realization of projects, adopting specific features of the improvising sociality model for particular stages of project designing and realization.

## **Biography**

**Dr. Silvana K. Figueroa-Dreher** studied sociology at the University of Buenos Aires (Argentina) and wrote her doctoral thesis at the University of Konstanz (Germany). Her current position is research fellow at the Section of Humanities of the University of Konstanz. She is conducting the research project *“Improvisation as a ‘new’ Type of Action: An Exploration of Musical Improvisation from the Point of View of Action Theory”* which is funded by the German Research Council. Her research areas are improvisation, free jazz, flamenco, tango, interdisciplinary action theory, interaction theory, theories of social order, creativity, identity, sociology of culture, sociology of music, sociology of knowledge, and ethnomusicology.

## **Gregor Campbell**

### **Abstract**

#### ***Improvisation and Systems Theory***

This year’s conference theme on “Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice” has many utopian aims not the least of which is finding a place for music in government policy. But what if we call these aims into question from both the far left and the far right at the same time? The different trajectories of right and left meet in Margaret Thatcher’s claim that “society does not exist” – is this claim not echoed in the major ideas of Lyotard that metanarratives no longer orient contemporary discourses or that postmodern science studies not the known but the unknown through the study of language games? Who could actually deny that we are living in a postmodern condition? Certainly not Adorno, who opened his *Aesthetic Theory* in 1970 with the thesis that “it is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.” There is no longer any ground under our feet. In what I see as a decisive event in the history of contemporary philosophy, nineteen different French philosophers agreed in 1988 that the era of the subject was at an end and thus the pressing question to ask was “Who Comes After the Subject?”

Answers to the question of who or what comes after the subject have emerged since 1988 within the confines of each discipline. Computer science emerged as the truly revolutionary discipline. The Soviet Union collapsed in 1989 and ever since consumer society has lost its demonic other, it has come to seem more and more trivial and not only to its countercultures. Globalization is our current system of improvisation through the network society that establishes a space of flows for information and for capital. I think we can reach a consensus of sorts that every discipline of the University is in crisis as is the University itself. If risk serves as the ground of defining improvisation as an object of study, then surely we should note that risk is equally important as a concept in economics and many other disciplines. As an example, I note a journal such as *Games and Economic Behavior* which for twenty years has found ways of integrating game theory with economics, political science, biology, computer

science, mathematics, and psychology. What theory of society can serve our postmodern condition? Has traditional sociology simply served the technocratic needs of the modern state? What theory of society will allow a genuine interdisciplinarity to emerge?

I shall suggest in this paper that Niklas Luhmann's work on social systems might be up to the task of understanding not only social change but the risk elements of improvisation. The power of Luhmann's theory is that it is a theory of self-referential systems, systems that are able to include themselves in their own systemic operations. Language is only one of many semiotic systems; music is clearly another. I will suggest that improvisation is self-referential aspect of music as a system, in other words there is an element of music that allows improvisation to take place as a specific event in the sense that event has become a privileged term in postmodern thought. Music performs many functions; it carries meaning; it is a system. A system, according to Luhmann stands in a unique relation to other systems: "one must distinguish between the *environment* of a system and *systems in the environment* of this system.... Thus one must distinguish the relations of dependence between environment and system from those among systems. This distinction blows apart the old thematic of domination / oppression." The autopoietic or self-referential element of the system maintains each system; monarchy falls when its self-sustaining systematic self-reference can no longer be sustained when facing challenges from the environment of essentially other systems. Monarchy, however, will survive if others systems cannot sustain themselves.

The paper will briefly discuss some of the elements that distinguish a system from its environment. Of particular interest within complex patterns of differentiation is how a system opens up a space for observation from a location that must be, logically, outside of the system. I hope that the complexity of systems theory might appeal to musicians who engage in the risks of improvisation: I conclude with Luhmann: "Complexity... means being forced to select; being forced to select means contingency; and contingency means risk."

## **Biography**

**Gregor Campbell** teaches in the School of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph and in Media Studies at the University of Guelph Humber. He has published on American literature and cultural theory.