

PhD course

New technologies and the future of the human

PROGRAMME and INFORMATION

PhD Course, 28. – 31. March 2022

Paris, Centre Universitaire de Norvège (CUNP), 54, Boulevard Raspail

WELCOME!

Welcome to this PhD course entitled *New technologies and the future of the human*! The PhD course will be held in Paris and will involve lectures, presentations of papers by PhD students and discussions—formal and informal. While grounded in social anthropological approaches to technology and the human being, we aim for the course to be fundamentally open in its approach to the theme and anticipate exchanges enriched by a diversity of experiences and perspectives.

Organizing a physical format PhD course in the current situation is challenging and we therefore ask for your understanding if changes are made to the programme in the months leading up to the course. Needless to say, please also note that the PhD course will be organized adhering to all relevant covid-19 policies.

Should you have any questions regarding travel or other practicalities, please contact Ms. Anne-Kathrin Thomassen (anne-kathrin.thomassen@uib.no) at the Department of Social Anthropology, UiB.

We look very much forward to seeing you all physically in Paris in March 2022! Should you have any questions concerning the academic contents of the course, please get in touch with one of us.

Yours sincerely,

Annelin Eriksen (annelin.eriksen@uib.no)

Bjørn Enge Bertelsen (bjorn.bertelsen@uib.no)

Knut Rio (knut.rio@uib.no)

The course is organized by the *Egalitarian Futures Research Group* at UiB:
<https://www.uib.no/en/egalitarianism>

With funding from the Norwegian Research Council

1. Theme of the PhD course

We invite PhD students of Anthropology and related disciplines to take part in a course dedicated to an investigation of the imaginary projects of technoscience, in which new ways of being human and new ways of being social are developed. This is going to be an exploratory course, mobilizing what we know about the human being into thinking and speculating about what the future might bring. In this effort the lecturers and students together will explore possible entries into an understanding.

Technological innovation in human-computer interfaces, medical breakthroughs in nano- and biotechnology, infrastructural transformations of urban orders, algorithmic government, new technologies to intervene in anthropogenic climate change, all seriously challenge established understandings of the human being and its environment. Mind-blowing questions are now being asked, namely:

What will be the nature of the human being in the future? What are the potentials of new genetics? Of cloning? Can Artificial Intelligence (AI) develop and enhance human qualities? What happens to social relations when we are primarily living in digital, virtual spaces? What social, legal and political status do robots, avatar and digital selves acquire? What is the future of cities when scientists predict radical life-threatening climate disasters, and even their extinction? And, what do the new technologies of surveillance, climate regulations and “greening” policies entail for the institutional frames for human life?

As reflected by these questions and in the age of technoscience, the very idea of what a human being is, has come to be fundamentally challenged: in new human-machine interfaces, in human enhancement technologies, in synthetic biology and genetic engineering, as well as new nature/culture relationships. Active transhumanist movements work for ideological and political backing for investments in science that can bring about a new and potentially enhanced and even immortal human form. The idea of a future where humans live in space are not only the fantasies of California billionaires like Elon Musk, or sci-fi movies, but has become imaginative grounds for social movements, especially in the U.S. and Russia but also across the globe.

One might argue that the notion of futurity – i.e. the horizon and orientation towards a time yet to come - is fundamental for understanding contemporary society. It might be key for an understanding of the larger structural aspects of the major issues and crises of our time. However, futurity, we propose, is also key to how people orient their own lives – in relation to for instance death, kinship, or generational shifts – as well as to their ideas of a failing environment or a less viable society at large. Perhaps paradoxically, the increased interest in technological sciences, apparently giving us direct access to the ‘future’ (e.g. political prognoses, economic models, weather and climate scenarios etc.), has created a blind spot for the social and human sciences in our understanding of what such futurity

represents for the human being. We encourage students to contribute to the course with empirically based, hands-on analyses of technological innovations and futurity at the ground level of people's lived lives and their relationship to larger economic, political, social, and historical processes.

How should we understand this turn to re-defining the human, re-defining life, and re-defining habitable space and sociality? We welcome students who are open to thinking about such a reconfigured human being – when facing all sorts of societal challenges such as ecological crises, economic uncertainty, deprivation and dispossession, food and energy management, urbanization, as well as rising trends of being placed inside new regimes of digital infrastructures, AI controls, pharmaceutical and medical doctrines, in new labor regimes, monetary regimes, and environmental protocols.

Examples of issues to be considered during the course (illustrated by case studies) in student essays:

- Arguments about cultural change and the way new technologies might rephrase what the human being and the social is, particularly vis-à-vis the material world.
- An understanding of the human being and the inherent pitfalls with such concepts as mind, consciousness, body and organs, intelligence, relations, agency, and environment.
- Demonstrate critical and experimental approaches within both theory and methodology when it comes to the domain of what defines the human being in the world.
- An understanding of the particular contributions anthropology may make into debates on new technologies and futurity; and to demonstrate how anthropological analyses and perspectives may overlap, complement or contradict perspectives on the nature of technology and the human found in other sciences.

2. Course work and examination

The reading list will include various contemporary texts on the human and technology relevant to the issues outlined above. Before the course starts, PhD students will prepare a paper for pre-circulation, addressing their research project in relation to the course theme. In the course seminars, each paper will be allotted around 45 minutes, beginning with the PhD student presenting a 15 minute summary of its contents. This is followed by a 10 minute commentary from one of the other PhD students (selected in advance), after which they will chair an open discussion on the paper for approximately 20 minutes.

The **pre-circulated paper** need not be the full-length of the final essay but a minimum of 3500 words is required. The pre-circulated paper should not exceed 7,000 words.

Students who aim for 10 ECT will within two months after the course participants will submit their **final written essay** for evaluation. Essay length: 7,000 words +/- 10 percent, including footnotes but excluding bibliography.

Both the pre-circulated paper draft and the final essay is to be sent to contact Anne-Kathrin Thomassen (anne-kathrin.thomassen@uib.no) at the Department of Social Anthropology, UiB.

3. Lecturers

Joffrey Becker - Human Technology Center, RWTH Aachen (<http://www.joffreybecker.fr>)
Anya Bernstein - Harvard University (<http://anthropology.fas.harvard.edu/people/anya-bernstein>)
Bjørn E. Bertelsen - University of Bergen(<https://www.uib.no/en/persons/Bjørn.Engje.Bertelsen>)
Kerry Ryan Chance - University of Bergen (<https://www.uib.no/en/persons/Kerry.Ryan.Chance>)
Annelin Eriksen - University of Bergen (<https://www.uib.no/en/persons/Annelin.Eriksen>)
Knut Rio - University of Bergen <https://www.uib.no/en/persons/Knut.Mikjel.Rio>)
William Dawley -University of Bergen [William Dawley | University of Bergen \(uib.no\)](http://www.uib.no/en/persons/William.Dawley)

4. Credits

Optional to do 5 or 10 ECTS.

5. Admission, accommodation, travel and costs

The course is open for PhD students in anthropology and other related disciplines. There is no participation fee. Students will be expected to cover their own travel and accommodation. Some of the meals during the week will be covered by the organizers and some by the Centre Universitaire de Norvège à Paris (CUNP).

Course attendance is limited to 16 students, so please register quickly with your topic of interest.

Please book rooms in hotels well in advance; this is a list of some hotels with a convenient location with a walking distance to meeting venue, all recommended by CUNP:

Hôtel des 3 collèges **

16, Rue Cujas 75005 Paris

tlf. +33 (0)1 43 54 67 30, hotel@3colleges.com, <https://www.3colleges.fr/>

Hôtel du Brésil **

10, rue Le Goff 75005 Paris

tlf. +33 (0)1 43 54 76 11, hoteldubresil@wanadoo.fr, <https://www.hoteldubresil.com/>

L'Hôtel de Senlis **

7-9, rue Malebranche 75005 Paris
tlf. +33 (0)1 43 29 93 10 hoteldesenis@wanadoo.fr

Hôtel Excelsior Latin ***

20, rue Cujas 75005 Paris
tlf. +33 (0)146347950, contact@excelsior-paris-hotel.com, <https://www.excelsior-paris-hotel.com/fr/>

Hôtel Design de la Sorbonne ***

6, Rue Victor Cousin 75005 Paris
tlf. +33 (0)1 43 54 58 08, reservation@hotelsorbonne.com, <https://www.hotelsorbonne.com/>

Select Hôtel ****

1, Place de la Sorbonne 75005 Paris
tlf. +33 (0)1 46 34 14 80, selecthotel05@gmail.com, <https://www.selecthotel.fr>

6. Important dates

- Deadline for registration for course: **11st February 2022**
- Notification to admitted participants **14th February 2022**
- Submission of pre-circulated papers: **18th March 2022.**
- Appointment of discussants: **23rd March 2020.**
- Submission of final essay: **1st June 2022**

7. Readings and lecture titles for PhD course, Paris, March 2022

1) *Organization of lectures and readings*

There are six lectures planned for the PhD course, below we list the relevant themes and literature for each of these. Participants are meant to have familiarized themselves with these readings in advance. At the end of this list there is a list of further books and participants as resources for students in their work with their essays.

2) *Lectures, themes and readings*

Anya Bernstein: The Future of Immortality: Remaking Life and Death

As long as we have known death, we have dreamed of life without end. In the session, *Remaking Life and Death*, we will explore the contemporary Russian and American communities of visionaries and utopians who are pressing at the very limits of the human, focusing on how these techno-scientific and religious futurisms hope to transform our very being. Bernstein will talk about a diverse cast of characters, from the owners of a small cryonics outfit to scientists inaugurating the field of biogerontology, from grassroots neurotech enthusiasts to believers in the Cosmist ideas of the Russian Orthodox thinker

Nikolai Fedorov. She puts their debates and polemics in the context of a long history of immortalist thought in Russia, with global implications that reach to Silicon Valley and beyond. She also discusses two articles by anthropologists Farman and Romain on similar movements in the United States, which focus on how the respective American communities conceptualize time, matter, and the body. If aging is a curable disease, do we have a moral obligation to end the suffering it causes? Could immortality be the foundation of a truly liberated utopian society extending beyond the confines of the earth—something that Russians, historically, have pondered more than most? If life without end requires radical genetic modification or separating consciousness from our biological selves, how does that affect what it means to be human?

Suggested readings:

Anya Bernstein. 2019. *The Future of Immortality: Remaking Life and Death in Russia*. Princeton University Press.

Abou Farman. 2013. "Speculative Matter: Secular Bodies, Minds, and Persons." *Cultural Anthropology* 28(4): 737–59.

Tiffany Romain. 2010. "Extreme Life Extension: Investing in Cryonics for the Long, Long Term." *Medical Anthropology* 29(2): 194–215.

Annelin Eriksen: *The Human Version 2.0*

In this lecture Eriksen will present the ethnography of the US-based Terasem movement and the Bina48 experiment as an entry into a discussion about US-based techno-scientific immortality practices. She gives an outline of the wider "landscape" of these practices, and the relationship between mind-upload/mind-cloning and cryonics, transhumanism and religion, and relate this to discussions in anthropology (and beyond) about the role of techno-science for imaginaries of what a human being is. She will draw on discussions about secularization, individualization and material ontologies.

Suggested reading:

Eriksen, A. (2021). The Human Version 2.0: AI, Humanoids, and Immortality. *Social Analysis*, 65(1), 70-88.

Farman, A. (2020). *On not dying: Secular immortality in the age of technoscience*. U of Minnesota Press.

Guyer, Jane 2007. Prophecy and the Near Future. *AMERICAN ETHNOLOGIST*, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 409–421.

William Dawley : *Homo habilis- Social Technologies and Technologized Societies*

In this lecture Dawley presents his research on transhumanism as one of several religious and secular social movements in the Americas spurred by new technologies. His research focuses both on the unexpected consequences of "social technologies" (including new forms

of social organization promoted by these movements), as well as on the sociocultural and political-economic consequences of technologies like contraception, social media and smart phone sociality on the internet, and life extension technologies coming in both biomedical and digital forms. The lecture will touch on what is produced by the interaction of these technologies (biomedical, digital, and social) with the family and gender (especially masculinities), with secularism, religion, and spirituality, and with projects to shape the future of culture, society, and the political economy.

Readings:

Farman, *On Not Dying*, esp. chs. 4 and 6

Bernstein, *The Future of Immortality*, esp. Introduction, last sections of Chapters 1 and 2

Huberman, *Transhumanism: From Ancestors to Avatars* (2020, Cambridge UP). Read Introduction

Pilsch, *Transhumanism: Evolutionary Futurism and the Human Technologies of Utopia* (2017, U Minnesota Press). Read Introduction

Bjørn Enge Bertelsen: *Urban postcolonial politics and (non-)futures: In/visible forms of mobilization against the end of time*

Based on empirical material from urban Africa - especially Ghana and Mozambique - this lecture will focus on urban politics and its articulations, especially underlining their key links to temporal configurations, such as potentiality, (non-)futures, (non-)linearity and chrononormativity. Treating the urban order also as technology (in its material, ideational and governing sense), it will be underlined how contemporary postcolonial urban politics does neither only centre on liberal-political notions (such as citizenship) nor only revolves around urban space/place: Instead Bertelsen will attempt to show how urban politics' orientation around time also involves conjuring new forms of the human and, with that, novel possible forms of politics. He will ask: What are the relations between globally hegemonic and future-oriented notions of "resilience" and urban politics and its forms and reformatting of time? How can we conceive of political mobilization in postcolonial Africa as demonstrating novel and, perhaps, future urban political subjects that have global relevance?

Reading:

Bertelsen, Bjørn Enge. 2021. [A lesser human? Utopic registers of urban reconfiguration in Maputo, Mozambique](#). *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 29(1): 87-107

Goldberg, David Theo. 2021. *Dread. Facing Futureless Futures*. Cambridge: Polity, pages 1-35, 198-214.

Simone, AbdouMaliq 2019. *Improvised lives. Rhythms of endurance in an urban South*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Kerry Ryan Chance: *Urban Inequality and the Concept of the Human in the Time of Climate Change.*

This lecture will examine how urban inequality is transforming the concept of “the human” in the time of climate change. Drawing from social theory and ethnography, we will explore the following questions: How do we reevaluate “the human” in relation to new scientific and technical knowledge about the increasing impact of pollution and climate change upon urban life? How is the intersection of the amplification of divisions in major democracies and the rapid growth of urban inequality affecting local and national communities at different scales of climate governance, law, and policy? What are the community strategies and tactics in cities of the global South and North, for instance resonate claims to rights, recognition, or reparation, that reflect new forms of politics, value, and speculation about the human and non-human? By interrogating these questions in interconnected petrochemical hubs of South Africa and the United States, we also will attend to the role of energy industries in the making of the current world order.

Readings:

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2021. *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Nixon, Rob. 2013. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press.

Povinelli, Elizabeth. 2016. *Geontologies: a Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Chance, Kerry. 2020. “Governing Through Eco-Anxiety”, *Cultural Anthropology*, March 24, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/governing-through-eco-anxiety>

Joffrey Becker: *Humans, machines and the anthropology of cybernetic practices*

For more than a decade now strategy and foresight experts have been working to anticipate the impact of robotics and artificial intelligence on human activities. But the problems associated with automation are certainly not recent. They point to a long history of the stormy yet passionate relationship between humans and machines that began during the first industrial revolution. But today, as so-called intelligent autonomous systems integrate more and more domains of our social life, these issues find new expressions. Recent research conducted in mechanical engineering and computer science arouses both concern and hope. They now stir social questions that are no longer possible to ignore. At the first glance the presence of these objects in our societies are mainly connected to technological issues. But on a social level they also raise deep and fundamental questions related to their power to transform society. What kind of society is being created around robots and artificial intelligence? How can we anticipate their impact? Using examples from an ethnographic survey conducted since 2010 with manufacturers, researchers in robotics and artificial intelligence and users, Becker will seek to show that the relationship between humans and machines is crossed by at least three categories of problems. The first one

refers to the status of these objects and to the way they rely on life processes to function. The second emerges from the very particular interactions humans can have with them. Finally, the third issue is related to the ways they reconfigure our activities and the way we organize them. Leaning on the description of these ontological, interactional and organizational dimensions, Becker will argue that we cannot fully grasp the impact of robots and artificial intelligence without taking these dimensions into account.

Reading:

Helmreich Stefan, 1998. *Silicon Second Nature, Culturing Artificial Life in a Digital World*. Oakland, University of California Press.

Riskin Jessica, 2003. The Defecating Duck, or the Ambiguous Origins of Artificial Life. *Critical Inquiry*, 29(4):599-633.

Suchman, Lucy 2007. *Human-Machine Reconfiguration, Plans and Situated Actions, 2nd Edition*. New-York, Cambridge University Press.

Vidal Denis, 2007. Anthropomorphism of sub-anthropomorphism? An anthropological approach to gods and robots. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13(4):917-933.

Knut Rio: *The android as our future humanity: A view from science-fiction*

Rio will discuss sci-fi films and literature as an entry-point into the question of technology and human being. The android, humanoid, cyborg, the robot or automaton, or other scientific animate creations, have figured in the popular imagination of the future for a long time. Rio departs from Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* to move into recent popular films and series like *Her* (2013), *Automata* (2014), *Ex Machina* (2014), *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), *Devs* (2020) and *Finch* (2021). Treating them as ethnographic material, Rio discusses how they imagine human families, kinship, gender, community and the issue of how to preserve human qualities beyond the predicted apocalypse. We have since 2010 seen a growing techno-optimism, and cinematic disaster myths have perhaps changed in the way symbolic value is attributed to social relations. Whereas disaster movies used to feature human children as the hope for a human future on earth, now the search for a new and better world is often about creating an android for advancing and extending humanity into the future. Rio will talk about how such android heroes are portrayed, and what human qualities they carry; these new creatures that both frighten and fascinate us with their unknown potentials of both love and violence. For the discussion we raise the question of what the relation is between human consciousness, cinema and reality.

Reading:

Heffernan, Teresa 2019. "Fiction Meets Science: *Ex Machina*, Artificial Intelligence, and the Robotics Industry", In Heffernan, Teresa (ed.) 2019. *Cyborg Futures. Cross-disciplinary Perspectives on Artificial Intelligence and Robotics*.

Heidegger, Martin 1977. "The Question concerning technology", in (ed.) *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 3-35. New York: Harper & Row
(An option here is to also read: David I. Waddington (2005) "A Field Guide to Heidegger: Understanding 'The Question Concerning Technology'", *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 37:4, 567-583)

3) Further readings of choice:

Battaglia, Debora (2017) Aeroponic gardens and their magic: Plants/persons/ethics in suspension, *History and Anthropology*, 28:3, 263-292, DOI:10.1080/02757206.2017.1289935

Boellstorff, Tom 2008. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton University Press.

Bryant, R., & Knight, D. 2019. *The Anthropology of the Future* (New Departures in Anthropology). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108378277

Buck-Morss, S. 2002. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe. The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Dove, Michael R., ed. 2013. *The Anthropology of Climate Change: An historical reader*. John Wiley & Son

Heffernan, Teresa (ed.) 2019. *Cyborg Futures. Cross-disciplinary Perspectives on Artificial Intelligence and Robotics*. OPEN Access <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21836-2>

Guyer, Jane 2007. Prophecy and the Near Future. *AMERICAN ETHNOLOGIST*, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 409–421.

Jameson, Fredric 2005. *Archaeologies of the Future. The desire called Utopia and other Science Fictions*. London: Verso Books

Kurzweil, Ray. 2005. *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. New York: Viking.

McKenzie Wark 2019. *Capital is dead, is this something worse?* London: Verso

8. Tentative Programme

Venue: Centre Universitaire de Norvège à Paris (CUNP), 54, Boulevard Raspail.

Monday 28th March

On Monday morning we meet at Place de la Sorbonne, outside *Select Hotel*, at 9.30 to walk together to the venue at Bvd Raspail.

10:00 Welcome by CUNP Centre Leader

10:15 – 11.00 Round of presentation and introduction to course theme

Session on Transhumanism and Technoscientific Immortality, Part 1

11: 00 – 12.00 Annelin Eriksen: *The Human Version 2.0.*

12:00-14:00 Joint lunch

14:00-15:00 William Dawley: *Homo habilis- Social Technologies and Technologized Societies*

15:00-15:30 Break

15:30-17:00 PhD student presentations with commentary and general discussion

19:00 Joint dinner

Tuesday 29th March

Session on urban orders and the human being

10.00 – 12.00 Bjørn Enge Bertelsen: *Urban postcolonial politics and (non-)futurity: In/visible forms of mobilization against the end of time*

Kerry Chance: *Urban inequality and the concept of the human in the time of climate Change.*

12:00-14:00 Lunch

14:00-17:00 PhD student presentations with commentary and general discussion

19:00 Joint dinner

Wednesday 30th March

Session on humanoids, robots, AI and the techno-scientific imagination

10.00 – 12.00 Joffrey Becker : *Humans, machines and the anthropology of cybernetic practices*

Knut Rio: *The android as our future humanity: A view from science-fiction*

12:00 – 14.00 **Lunch**

Time for joint excursion of relevance to theme

19.00 Joint dinner

Thursday 31st March

10:00 - 11.00 Discussion and impressions from the course so far

11:00 - 11:15 Break

11.15 – 12.00 PhD student presentations with commentary and general discussion

12:00-14:00 Lunch

Transhumanism and Technoscientific immortality, Part 2

1400-1500:

Anya Bernstein: *The Future of Immortality: Remaking Life and Death*

14:00-17:00 PhD student presentation with student commentary and general discussion

17:15-18:00 **Summary and evaluation of course**

19:00 Joint dinner

Friday 1st April

Departure