This meeting comes as a reflection on and response to the difficulties in articulating or finding a space for the question of the social and legal bond in poststructuralist theory. Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault all can and have been accused of a particular sort of nihilism in which the possibility of thinking about actual social relations is rendered impossible. We offer our thoughts and discussion as a way of countering this narrative and exploring sociality in a poststructuralist frame.

The day will be organized around three discussions, entitled:

“The Sense of Being Social”
“Being Social, Democratically”
“The Law of Being Social”
(see reverse for descriptions)

With contributions from:
Marie-Eve Morin, University of Alberta
Ian James, Cambridge University
Ignaas Devisch, Ghent University
Peter Fitzpatrick, Birkbeck School of Law
Patrick Hanafin, Birkbeck School of Law
and many others

The symposium will emphasize and encourage active participation in discussion from all participants.

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Space is limited. Please reserve your place by emailing Tara Mulqueen t.mulqueen@bbk.ac.uk.
The Sense of Being Social
Sense, Nancy suggests, it is a “concretion of the world where existence makes sense” (Sense of the World, 14). The excess that is ‘sense’ is something that we do know—something that is understood within the same world and existing.

Thoughts for reflection (on sense):

How might Nancy’s notion of ‘sense’ be similar to Derrida’s spectres, to ‘ontologising remains’ and hauntologies? Does a discussion ‘sense’ require a distinctive orientation—through art and creative, sensual exploration: images? movement? non-verbal and non-textual forms of communication? How might these forms serve to explore the ‘concretion of the world where existence makes sense’ as something that “we have always already understood”?

How might all this make sense when applied to the challenges facing our world today: globalisation and belonging; education, knowledge production and marketisation; the role of markets in the state and society; family, community, neighbourhoods and relationships; resources, scarcity and rapid environmental changes?

Being Social, Democratically
In The Truth of Democracy Nancy writes: ‘democracy means that neither death nor life has any value in and of itself, but that value comes only from shared existence insofar as it exposes itself to its absence of ultimate sense as its true – and infinite – sense of being’ (2010, p. 31).

Democracy in Nancy’s terms would not simply be one political regime to be chosen amongst others. Nancy presents democracy as an originary sharing out of being that makes possible the constitution of the political itself. Echoing Derrida’s claim that ‘the democracy to come would be like the khora of the political’ (Rogues, 2004, p. 82) we might call this “truth” to democracy arche-political, describing an originary sense of being social which must be presupposed for politics proper to take place.

To what extent do Nancy, Derrida or other post-structural thinkers escape a certain reliance on sovereign ipseity as the pre-condition for democracy? Does Nancy’s notion of democracy as an ontological presupposition of the political reanimate our thinking of praxis, decision and resistance? What resources, if any, do we find in the post-structural engagement with democracy for deepening democracy in existing institutions and communities? To what extent might this thinking of democracy help us understand the democratic politics that inhabited the occupations of the squares and other public spaces in early 2011?

The Law of Being Social
In “Abandoned Being” Nancy describes ‘the law of abandonment’ as ‘the other of the law’. This law is a voice which “constitutes the law, to the extent that it orders” (45). This ordering can be seen as the setting of a limit, beyond which lies an unfathomable outside. In the “limitless severity” of the law to which being is abandoned, this outside remains elusively and constitutionally beyond reach. Similarly, in “The Thought from Outside,” Foucault writes of a law which is the “opposite of punishment,” a law which is “the outside that envelops conduct,” and is present only in its concealment (Foucault 33-35). It is precisely when one thinks they have escaped the law that they are in fact closest to it.

Bataille suggests that we can transgress this limit of the law and reach the outside, but only for a moment before falling back into the labyrinth which is constitutive of being. On this account, it is possible to have a transformative experience of the outside. If such an experience is possible, what relation does it have to law (or the other of the law)? How does transformation occur? Or, more broadly, how does being shape and reshape the world? Can the world be constituted otherwise? Is being’s abandonment finite and immutable or is it infinitely finite? What are the implications of a thinking of the limit and transgression for our notions of history and community?