Not Going Back to Normal: Designing Psychologies Toward Environmental and Social Resilience

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Received: 30 October 2020 / Revised: 11 February 2021 / Accepted: 13 February 2021 /

Published online: 8 March 2021

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Abstract

The new life circumstances COVID-19 brought to the fore created new designs of everyday practice, either imposed by states or adopted by individuals to avoid contracting the virus. Despite the reasoning behind the implementation of certain measures in conditions of lock down or while pursuing herd immunity, they entail socio-political ramifications that will most likely impact the day after. This article investigates their connection to aspects of life such as democratic and human rights, privacy, and individual and community protection as well as their impact on environmental and social resilience. Concerning the latter, it questions institutional unpreparedness or unresponsiveness in the face of the pandemic and the role economic development and mass production have played in causing it. In light of this, it additionally explores states' expectation for individual accountability, as a means to contain the virus and identifies a shared pattern of dependence on individual behavioural change found in both COVID-19 and climate change responses. Reflecting on all of the above, the last part of the article evaluates the rescuing ability of individualisation, nominates a critical view of the current psycho-behavioural context and puts forward the pursue of a psychological turn driven by existing alternative models of production and consumption.

Keywords Design · Psychology · Transitions · Resilience · Behavioural change · COVID-19

COVID-19: The Socio-political Implications of an (Un)Expected Shock

Everyday life, before Coronavirus (COVID-19) started spreading around the globe from December 2019 onwards, was normal. Actual threats, like sea level and temperature rises, were invisible due to people's activities taking place as planned. With the spread of the virus rapidly increasing, the first instinct of state leaders was to reassure their citizens that it would not reach their country or to assert that the virus was just like the flu, in order to prolong their sense of normalcy for as long as possible (Benvenuto, 2020).

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Then, when the loss of life and complications from the virus started impacting most countries around the world, lifestyles had to change, effectively immediately.

After COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in April 2020, and earlier on in countries like China and South Korea, a behavioural change was expected in order for people to protect themselves and the most vulnerable groups, including the elderly and individuals with pre-existing conditions. Thus, going to work, to school, shopping and entertainment were replaced with at home isolation and social distancing, making evident a shift to uniform behavioural change. Despite its expected temporariness, this situation has revealed how vulnerable humanity is in the face of a disaster and the urgency to change individual and social perceptions and practices in order to address omnipresent risks. To explore the potential of not going back to normal requires an evaluation of the contemporary institutional responses to COVID-19, their motives and socio-political implications and how they are actually related to social and environmental resilience. It also necessitates an exploration of which psychologies and behaviours will enable a new normal and how they can be enacted in the face of climate change, new pandemics and similar crises, as they unravel now and not in the distant future.

Starting with the reactions to COVID-19 from states and global organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), there have been a number of directives dictating various behaviours against the virus. The most common instructions provided by global health agencies have been compulsory social isolation, the cease of all social interactions including going to school and work, and putting a pause on population movement (WHO, 2020; ECDC, 2019). Nonetheless, the adoption of such measures has not been homogenous; while some countries went into complete lock down to protect vulnerable populations, others did not implement strict measures and instead pursued herd immunity. Depending on the adopted approach, people's behaviours have been severely impacted by either 'a combination of proactive surveillance, routine communication, rapid isolation and personal and community protection (e.g. social distancing) measures' (Muggah & Katz, 2020), or letting the virus take its course.

As a consequence, the first approach has led to significantly containing the virus in countries that acted swiftly (New Zealand, South Korea), while it has not had the same results where the leadership delayed its implementation (Italy, France, Spain) (Zhou, 2020). Notwithstanding its effectiveness, it has been critiqued as a slippery slope concerning democratic rights, state interventionism and setting a precedent for totalitarian measures. Italy's state position to being severely hit by COVID-19 involved controlling population movement and imposing social isolation, which have been characterised as a power abuse and an imposition of a state of exception, undermining civilians' freedom (Agamben, 2020). Concerns about the impact of present and future derogation on civil rights are reinforced by examples like Hungary, which adopted emergency laws that interfered with the implementation of active legislation and enforced measures by decree, bypassing parliamentary procedures and agreement (Thomson & Ip, 2020).

The possibility of imposed surveillance measures becoming accepted as the norm in post COVID-19 conditions while in a state of emergency is another implication that has emerged from the imposed measures. There are many cases that exemplify how state efforts to contain the virus qualified an extensive access to civilians' physical and online activities (French & Mohanan, 2020). To name a few, South Korea used footage from CCTV, GPS data from mobile phones and banking activities to document COVID-19 patients' activities and movements; Italy harvested GPS data through mobile phones to detect population movement; and Israel was prepared to employ technology designed

for counterterrorism purposes in order to identify individual exposure to COVID-19 (Singer & Sang-Hun, 2020).

In regard to 'routine communication, rapid isolation and personal and community protection' and their connection to democratic rights, an issue to consider is the adoption of measures against the virus based on previous experiences with widespread diseases without evaluating the socio-political uniqueness of each situation. For instance, China's practices to contain the spread of the disease, which was applauded by world leaders, were enabled by the Chinese president's political power to impose a dictatorial approach (Peckham, 2020). The Chinese demonstration of political strength was fitting to its economic and political position, considering Hong Kong's ongoing political unrest and America's unfolding aggressive economic policies, including export and import controls, investment restrictions and sanctions against China (Harrell, 2019).

For the aforementioned reasons, directives concerning public health such as lock downs and social isolation could challenge democratic rights and put at risk civic liberties (Greer et al., 2020). From a different angle, the alternative approach aiming at achieving herd immunity excludes any form of institutional protection, leaving vulnerable groups exposed to disease and death. Countries including the USA, the UK, Sweden and the Netherlands pursued normalcy and prevention of financial collapse, by ending the pandemic through population immunity. The statistics illustrating mortality percentages in these countries have showed that this approach exposed the elderly and disadvantaged socio-economic groups to the risk of dying (Aschwanden, 2020), making obvious the ethical and political implications of this decision, on the account of prioritising economic growth over social welfare (Brown, 2020). The common denominator between the countries that adopted herd immunity was 'right leaning, economically liberal, socially conservative and individualising policy trajectories' (Brown, 2020, p. 5), making explicit a political pattern that enabled a moral choice; going against basic human rights by prioritising young, healthy and wealthy citizens over the elderly and people with pre-existing health conditions and no financial means to stay at home or seek proper medical treatment.

In spite of these approaches and their implications potentially being symptoms of unprecedented times, they involve the risk of being enforced every time this happens or as a precautionary tale (Honig, 2009). While both of them have been trying to promote survival, either through saving lives or the economy, they encompass the threat of eliminating individual rights, and employing generalisations and uniform prescriptions against COVID-19 and similar future crises. Interestingly, states put forward these decisions as politically neutral, although they represent facets of neoliberalism, either through dismantled public health systems, incapable of handling a pandemic (Benoist, 2020) or negating the pandemic's significance for economic reasons. What their conviction of being depoliticised implies is them unavoidably following the objective regime of the globalised market. The falsehood of this condition is stressed by McMahon (2015, p. 139), who argued that the market 'formulates its own truth and functions as norm, standard and criterion for governmental practice' making it 'a depoliticised site of truth and veridiction for the individual and the state'. In other words, neoliberal economies are entangled with the objective truth of the market by reinforcing it with policies and practices, deepening its influence on social terrains.

Following this, another danger for the day after is solely evaluating the aftermath of COVID-19 in terms of financial recovery based on current economic models. This tactic would exclude exploring how they contributed to the outbreak of the pandemic in the first place, and the positive side-effects of slowing mass production and mobility. Regarding the former, a message that has been minimally conveyed during this period by state

representatives of both approaches is evidence-based information on the actual causes of COVID-19. Since the beginning of the pandemic, independent bodies like the United Nations Environment Programme (Kumar, 2020), and researchers (Hitchens & Johnson, 2020; Di Marco et al., 2020), have been disseminating information on COVID-19 being attributed to ‘human interferences such as deforestation, encroachment on animal habitats and biodiversity loss’ (Kumar, 2020). Yet, the connection between economic growth and the spill-over of animal viruses to humans is yet to be addressed by government officials. While focus has been placed on the virus, its infecting patterns and symptoms, little attention has been given to its causes. The virus has been predominately communicated as an infection coming from animals, and not from humans enabling the spill-over by diminishing wildlife’s natural habitat and causing climatic change (Hitchens & Johnson, 2020; Di Marco et al., 2020). This strategy has made possible recovery plans in agreement with the neoliberal agenda of economic recovery, meaning that ‘the industry leaders are tasked with growing businesses in this smaller, divergent economy’ (PWC, 2020), and not with preventing the reoccurrence of similarly triggered pandemics.

Who Is to Blame for the Day After?

The previous section non-exhaustively highlighted the social implications brought by institutional decision-making related to COVID-19 and identified the imposition of a fake neutrality as a vehicle to activate steps for (economic) recovery. Governments have been reluctant to communicate the clear connection between COVID-19 and environmental degradation to their audiences so as to evade taking responsibility for their role in causing the latter. On the contrary, they have been pretty vocal regarding individual accountability by emphasising the importance of individual behavioural change as a way to contest the virus. Health authorities all over the world have stressed individuals’ responsibility to protect themselves, care for the collective and make personal sacrifices like self-isolating and social distancing. Compliance has been boosted through various behavioural strategies such as prioritising community over individual well-being, promoting a sense of belonging to a city, country or humanity and nudging, a behavioural method to subtly reinforce desired behaviours (Mills, 2020). This expectation entails individualising responsibility by transferring accountability from institutions to individuals (Maniates, 2002). COVID-19’s call for action makes an excellent case for people’s behaviour being crucial to stop the virus from spreading by being responsible and following the rules. Especially in countries where minimal or late measures were implemented, community transmission has been entirely up to people’s willingness to protect themselves and others from getting sick. In both cases ‘if they fall ill, it is because they were not resolute or industrious enough in following a health regime’, a quote used by Bauman (2002, p. xvi) to describe not the COVID-19 circumstances, but the normalisation of individualisation by neoliberalism as a constant effort for self-sufficiency (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Rose, 1999; Wynne, 1996). Against this backdrop, the pandemic has been imposed on individuals as their problem, circumstantially connected to institutional structures and society. *We are all in this together* stands for reciprocal individualisation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), if one considers how physical distancing keeps the individual from getting infected while simultaneously preventing community transmission.

Individual accountability for changing an impossible situation is a pattern also detected in fighting against climate change, especially in Western societies. Relying on individual

capacity to contain the virus, sounds similar to the intentions of the Attitude Behaviour Choice (ABC) framework developed for policy-making purposes by Stern (2000), in order to instigate behavioural change against unsustainability. Its objective is to alter unsustainable behaviours by shifting individual attitudes (A), responsible for people choosing (C) to behave (B) in a certain way (Shove, 2010). Although the ABC framework has been implicated in policy making mostly in the UK, its effectiveness has been questioned due to issues of knowledge gaps, moral challenges and situations that simply cannot be changed by individuals, like energy sourcing (Scavenius, 2018). Still, the collective adoption of behaviours in compliance with the COVID-19 measures might be interpreted as a success of individualisation, an example to learn from or a strong indication that the ABC framework might actually work. Having said that, what has most likely led people (C) to follow directives (B) against the virus-beyond staying alive, is the belief (A) that this condition will end shortly and things will go back to the way they were. A case in point, growing community transmission numbers in summer destinations demonstrate that isolation burn-out has reinstated patterns of normalcy like going on a vacation and using transportation means, despite the virus still being present and highly infectious (Roache, 2020).

A commonality between COVID-19 and climate change responses, if interpreted through individualisation, is that they both situate people in a position of false sufficiency and independence, minimising the interdependence between ecological, social, political and economic systems (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In this regard, practice theory contests the idea that individuals have the agency and option to change things on their own. Hence, it promotes an understanding of their actions, as a reflection of everyday practices that are shaped by whatever constitutes normalcy (Shove, 2010). Normal derives from choices limited to the outcomes of political and institutional decisions that are responsible for the design of unsustainable practices such as energy, transportation and urban sprawl. In view of this, practice theory calls for changing institutional structures that dictate everyday practices in order to enact change and consequently a new normal.

This approach was critiqued as not recognising individual agency and difference according to people's values, backgrounds and experiences (Räthzel & Uzzell, 2019). The downside for both the ABC framework and practice theory is them calling attention to one or the other, the individuals and the conditions they reproduce, respectively. The question that arises from the above is how individuals could go beyond feeling responsible or practicing life according to institutional choices so as to achieve change within capitalist and neoliberal circumstances (Sayer, 2013). And most importantly, is it feasible to establish a new normal without redefining the economy and humanity's expectations from it (Massey, 2013)? To entertain the possibility of radical change necessitates confronting individual behaviour as either conformable or irrational and in need of psychological conditioning as prescribed by governmentality (Foucault, 2010).

Contesting Normalcy

Presently, normalcy begins with acceptable behaviours and practices defined by discourses of capitalism, which have become the dominant medium to equip individuals with the language and meanings for understanding the self and society. For instance, the way the word economy is perceived and used normalises an understanding of a concept/practice driven by capital growth and measured by the gross domestic product (GDP). In the same manner, investment is translated as a means to profit-making, and expenditure as a cost brought by

states funding wages, education and public health (Massey, 2013). As a result, economy becomes detached from its social character and attached to the market, which subsequently turns into the driving force defining and forming practices of self-interest and individualisation. To change what constitutes the foundation of survival, the connotations attributed to concepts such as economy have to be rethought and reconfigured. The same goes for resilience, usually interpreted with an emphasis on economic recovery and the resilient individual, steering clear from addressing the systemic causes of vulnerability (Gillard, 2016). Both interpretations exclude the political and social shift that need to take place in order to bring attention to structural inequality and hence, current and upcoming disasters. The predominant understanding of resilience through discourses of capitalism limits expectations to either self-reliance or market recovery, which are irrelevant to planetary recovery, social sustainability and well-being.

The overextension of psychology to regulate people's self and world perception is another mechanism that enables the establishment of normalcy. By employing the practice of psychologisation, behaviours that step outside the neoliberal rationalisation of life become medicalised (Illich, 1976; Vos, 2012). In its context, psychological conditioning (over)corrects everyday practices according to globalised political, scientific, cultural and technological trends (Vos, 2012). A popular method of psychological conditioning is behavioural economics, which has been adopted by states to support individuals' incapability of processing the wealth of information they are exposed to, in order to make a rational decision. Regarding its usage and significance, McMahon (2015, p. 138) identified it as

a political economic apparatus of neoliberal governmentality that has the objective of using the state to manage and regulate individuals, interests and populations – by attempting to correct their deviations from rational, self-interested, utility-maximizing cognition and behavior – such that they more effectively and efficiently conform to market logics and processes.

To escape the inevitable dead-end designed by the aforementioned conditions, the day after COVID-19 begs for uprooting the current foundations of normalcy in order to enact change. As a starting point, this article acknowledges the role of psychology in facilitating the imposition of normalcy, grounded in a Western mindset. Misra (1996, p. 498), making a case for the invisibility of indigenous psychologies, pointed out the 'fabricated, projected, and institutionalised through representation technologies and scientific rituals nature' of Western psychology and its prevalence in non-Western settings via power structures of economic control. In juxtaposition with the positivist, dualist and colonial methods and theories established by the discipline of psychology, psychologies (plural), are rooted in the uniqueness defined by temporality and locality and are unrelated to political formations of nation and country, epistemological paradigms and universalising the human psyche and mind (Marsella, 2013). They exist outside the Western disciplinary definitions and identity constructs and make imminent the necessity for evaluating behaviours according to individual and cultural difference, social and self-reflexivity (Teo, 2011), so as to constantly revise and critique the thinking and practices associated with the human-society-nature interactions. Watkins and Schulman (2008) envisioned psychologies as liberating forces that could help generate new understandings and meanings of society, collaboration, economy and ecology. In this sense, local histories and sociocultural settings influencing behaviour should be taken under consideration along with individual intentionality so as to rethink/redo/undo the relations of power that generate conditioned behaviours. In addition to widening the accepted behavioural spectrum by embodying diverse and overlooked psychologies, it is also important to consider how existing designs might generate new psychologies, via exemplifying

alternative practices of everyday life. Thus, what follows is a brief overview of climate economics, risk and transition approaches as well as bottom-up governance, as models of currently pursuing a new normal.

Climate Economics

Many of the economic truths that the contemporary understanding of well-being and resilience are built on have collapsed under the burden of environmental degradation and deepening inequality between social groups, as pointed out by prominent economists (Raworth, 2017a; Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2019; Banerjee & Duflo, 2019). Raworth in her effort to show the socially and environmentally destructive character of contemporary economic strategies based on wealth accumulation, put forward the Doughnut, ‘a conceptual framework of social and planetary boundaries’. The idea behind it is to measure and depict the deficits and overextensions that negatively impact people and the environment around the world, so as to evaluate the actual conditions of well-being (Raworth, 2017b). Despite sounding utopian, Raworth’s proposal aims to redirect enterprises into assessing their profit based on social and environmental standards and not growth (Raworth, 2017a). An illustration of how new economic models could transform common practices and perceptions is the scaled down version of the Doughnut, employed by the city of Amsterdam as a means to address the economic and social aftermath of COVID-19. One of the issues that the model has shed light on is the need for more housing but without increasing the city’s carbon footprint, by investing in sustainable materials and building practices, while diverting global investment from real estate so as to lower home prices (Boffey, 2020).

Besides the ecological destruction caused by perpetuating growth, the new economic proposals are additionally emphasising the untruthiness of equal opportunities championed by neoliberal economies, by showing how they have widened the gap between working and middle class, solidifying an array of social inequalities. Piketty (2020) highlighted the necessity for economy to be restructured by bridging the wage gap between blue- and white-collar workers and reform taxation so as to regulate wealth concentration by corporations and individuals. An iteration of this proposal was also promoted by Stiglitz (2019), who illustrated his point by using the myth of the ‘hard-working American’, the individual that can achieve it all, only by persevering. This construct goes against a reality demonstrated by the impossibility of young adults from lower-socioeconomic demographics in America to go to college, let alone secure long-time employment. Along with individual accountability for self-prosperity, neoliberal discourses praise rugged individualism, which Stiglitz (2019) confronted as contrasting to the constant push from employers for collaboration and team-work, as a requirement for success. The oxymoron of endorsing individualism while requiring team work as a catalyst for achievement shows how the latter, while downplayed for competition purposes, still remains a strong component within societal practices.

Finally, Banerjee and Duflo (2019) questioned the impossibility of imagining an alternative economic paradigm and the necessity of economic growth assured by neoliberal discourses, by nominating economics that prioritise equality and protection from exposure to climatic disasters. To accomplish this, their model emphasised a ‘combination of taxes and regulations to curb emissions in rich countries and pay for a clean transition in poor countries’ (Banerjee & Duflo, 2019, p. 225), making imminent the need for a holistic evaluation and action, not limited to Western contexts. Their suggestion is in tune with the necessity

to redirect the economy and its activities toward responding to climate change so as to avoid the recurrence of pandemics. Acknowledging the COVID-19 crisis as the new normal should dictate all new economic decisions as pointed out by Andersen, the executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UN NEWS, 2020). Andersen's directive was reiterated by Hepburn et al. (2020), who expressed the same conviction that recent emission reductions enabled by COVID-19 restrictions will be short-lived, without a redirection of growth-driven, economic recovery strategies. Their recommendations, stemming from interviewing G20 officials involved in economic policies, ask for:

clean physical infrastructure investment; building efficiency retrofits; investment in education and training to address immediate unemployment from COVID-19 and structural unemployment from decarbonisation; natural capital investment for ecosystem resilience and regeneration; and clean R&D investment (Hepburn et al., 2020, pp. 374-5).

These emerging theories make evident the potential of new economies, aligned with the ecological and social requirements highlighted by COVID-19, by replacing short-term market fixes with systemic approaches addressing global interconnection and local implications. The activation of the aforementioned economic shifts depends on decoding institutional misinformation and reshaping popular perceptions of risk and danger, in order to enable transition discourses, decoupled from vertical growth and development.

Risk and Transition Approaches

Concerning perceptions of risk, COVID-19 has been addressed by governments and mass media as a real and present danger due to the loss of over two million people around the world (JHU CSSE, 2021), but greenhouse gas emissions are still not prioritised as an imminent threat to life. Nonetheless, as a result of producing less greenhouse gas emissions during the COVID-19 outbreak, Burke (2020) calculated that '2 months of 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ reductions in PM_{2.5}' saved 1.400 lives under the age of five and 51.700 lives of people over 70. Based on his estimations, the strategies implemented to restrain the virus in China prevented the loss of human lives not just from COVID-19 but also from premature death caused by air-pollution. Both conditions lead to death but only the former is emphasised accordingly, because of its obvious and immediate ramifications. The difference between the two is semantic; the first has moved from the sphere of risk to the sphere of a disaster, whereas the latter remains a risk, despite evidence indicating otherwise. When not connected to a representation via state press releases, the news or images of sensationalism, risks are most likely invisible. Predicated on Beck's (2006) division of individual reaction to risk, the range is limited. There is denial deriving from anthropocentrism and normalising nature's exploitation, apathy as a deconstructive understanding of the world where everything goes and nothing can be fixed, and transformation, which is linked to a risk society that identifies the urgency to change so as prevent risk, as much as possible. The latter could be enacted if risk origins and ramifications are confronted as de-localised, impossible to measure and in many cases to undo. But by whom? Beck (2006) envisioned as a risk society, a receptive to risk institutional framework going against the risk-averse establishment, while Douglas and Wildavsky (1983) identified marginal voices as the risk culture that contests neoliberal discourses and practices regarding world problems like climate change, social injustice and inequality. Risk society relies heavily on objective

epistemologies in contrast to risk culture employing subjective epistemologies. Nonetheless, they are not mutually exclusive. They complement each other if seen through the lens of different understandings of risk. Combined they could elucidate new ways of responding to risk: through a risk society enabling an objective reflexivity brought by expert knowledge constantly evaluating omnipresent risk to prevent the worst, and a risk culture rooted in a subjective perception of life informed by lived experience, past and present, so as to illustrate it via a communal sensibility (Lash, 2000).

So far, there are not any examples available portraying a combination of a risk society and a risk culture. Contemporary approaches are divided between alternative governance models and grassroots blueprints for change. They both recognise ongoing risks and impending disasters but adopt different strategies to prepare for or contest them. In tune with the risk society is the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk reduction 2015–2030, created by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR). The framework stressed the State's responsibility to understand and identify risks in order to prevent or prepare for disasters while it also underlined the international connection that is required for risks to be minimised, and the support countries with less means need to protect themselves. It prioritised understanding disaster risk 'in all its dimensions of vulnerability, capacity, exposure of persons and assets, hazard characteristics and the environment' and targeting the reduction of global disaster mortality (UNISDR, 2015, p. 14). Going back to Beck's (2006) argument, individual and social transformation as a response to institutional change prescribed by a risk society could be instigated by frameworks such as the aforementioned one, if they become part of mainstream governance. The COVID-19 crisis revealed the unpreparedness of states and their ability to semi-effectively and in many cases ineffectively respond, only when risk reached the level of a disaster. In addition to the urgency for governance to be reflective, preventative and prepared, there should be a bottom-up input in tune with risk cultures, related to how vulnerability is experienced and ways to address risk. From this perspective, grassroots frameworks such as the case of the Extinction Rebellion movement, try to voice how risk is perceived and felt by people via a shared philosophy and call for action, enacted globally by local groups. In contrast to the SEDAI framework the movement requests governments to acknowledge the role of citizens in making decisions about what constitutes risk and danger and to enact a critical shift toward active policies against climate change and ecological degradation with citizen participation (Extinction Rebellion, 2020).

Hence, how risk is defined informs transition strategies, which have been promoted by public and private organisations, and academia, as the way to move forward and design a new normal. In the same spirit as the risk society and risk culture, there are two directions linked to transition approaches. The first, often called sustainability transitions, promotes 'long-term, multi-dimensional, and fundamental transformation processes through which established socio-technical systems shift to more sustainable modes of production and consumption' (Markard et al., 2012, p. 956). As with risk society, it is connected to the idea of a reflexive society by focusing on the shift of socio-technical systems, which connote the interrelation between technology, governance and everyday practices and relying on governance to achieve its objectives. Transitions are based on the concept of destabilising existing socio-technical regimes that define production and consumption in order to make way for new patterns, informed and driven by innovations generated by niches that exist outside the pressure to comply with the present regime. Niches and regimes shape the socio-political and environmental landscape they exist in and vice-versa, triggering a multi-faceted change, as seen in the past with societal transformations brought by the car, the airplane and digital telecommunications (Smith et al., 2010). This direction heavily

relies on either policies, like the congestion charging scheme¹ (Shove & Walker, 2010) or empirical research conducted to inform policy such as the Urban Living Labs (ULL) ‘that allow stakeholders to design, test and learn from socio-technical innovations in real time’ (Wirth et al., 2019, p. 230). Shove and Walker (2010), from a practice theory point of view, challenged the linear connection between the pillars of sustainability transitions, what constitutes a sustainable practice and the effects of this choice. Their assessment indicated that the notion of innovation as the outcome of niches disregards the role of everyday practices in embodying, reshaping or rejecting it. Despite the push for participatory design from initiatives such as the Urban Living Labs, Shove and Walker (2010) argued that the processes are usually hierarchical, guided by a predetermination of expectations from the participants and an effort to avoid disagreement and further complexity. The critique does not entail stepping away from the reflexive society model altogether but invites a messier approach by opening up to different systemic designs and a further exploration of the transformative agency of transitions, regarding what is left behind and what is put forward.

The second approach considers transitions where civic movements and innovations come to the fore as the means to change by focusing on embedded knowledge and experience. Degrowth, as one of the leading examples of transition frameworks deriving from activism, grassroots movements and the commons, ‘challenges the hegemony of growth and calls for a democratically led redistributive downscaling of production and consumption in industrialised countries as a means to achieve environmental sustainability, social justice and well-being’ (Demaria et al., 2013, p. 209). In opposition to the transition approaches related to a risk society, degrowth does not promote an institutionally driven strategy based on structured and often hierarchical relationships between collaborators, but rather brings together individuals and collectives, draws its practices from the ground up and incorporates experimental outcomes from different societal actors. As a result, it is driven by organic configurations of praxis, deriving from activism, debates, communal actions and a shared dissent against development and market-driven formations of everyday life. Degrowth extends the debate outside of initiatives such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals by ontologically and epistemologically challenging present and future forms of living and promoting a separation from the One World principles (coloniality, modernity, anthropocentrism, growth) to a multiversal perception of life (Escobar, 2015). This involves questioning not only cultural uniformity but also technology as energy-intensive and resources-demanding, the idea of growth, development and top-down governance. Cases that exemplify an application of degrowth formations include Cargonomia, a commons-operated and supported degrowth enterprise that brings together existing businesses (carbon-free transportation and delivery, and organic farming) led by environmentally and socially sustainable principles. As a grassroots initiative, it depends on people’s ideas and participation, promotes communal building based on sharing and exchanging time and goods and enables a shift in practices in Budapest (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2020).

Despite none of the transition approaches discussed here being ideal, they put forward the potential of behavioural and practical transformation by making decisions for people or bringing them together so as to reconfigure an understanding and practice of everyday activities, in conditions of current and upcoming pandemics and climatic emergencies. A reflexive framework, combining risk understandings and transition approaches coming from both institutional and citizen perspectives, is still needed, but experiments connected

¹ The scheme was introduced by the mayor of London in 2003 in order to minimise traffic and emissions by charging drivers a fee, if they drove into a designated central London area between peak hours.

to the latter could provide a blueprint for de-normalising ecological destruction, social inequality and precariousness.

Bottom-Up Governance and Conviviality

As mentioned before, degrowth is a transition approach rooted in grassroots and movements' initiatives while as an idea derives from the concept of conviviality envisioned by Illich (1973). For degrowth, conviviality 'represents faith in the possibility of space for relationships, recognition, pleasure and generally living well, and thereby, reduces the dependence on an industrial and consumerist system' (Deriu et al., 2014, p. 82). A lot of examples revolving around degrowth and conviviality share the same standpoints in terms of reclaiming practical knowledge and interdependence so as to contest destructive and unjust development. Self-governed schemes such as maker spaces, sharing and gift economies as well as cooperatives, become embodiments of micro-scale transition practices in action that in most cases exist within contemporary urban contexts. Schlosberg and Coles (2016) found three common aims connecting these initiatives: a collective reconstitution of systems of production and consumption and expectations from them, a deconstruction of governmentality as an imposition of behaviours and practices and a reconnection with nature.

The responsive character of conviviality has brought to the fore the human side of the COVID-19 crisis, with citizen-led initiatives providing support to disadvantaged demographics that have been ignored by their respective governments. Actions such as financial aid provided to people who lost their jobs, food distribution to migrants, spaces and services for homeless people and lifelines for domestic abuse have been enabled by established and impromptu grassroots movements. In Brazil, a citizens' council organised house visits so as to properly inform people about COVID-19, provide food and soaps and monitor infection patterns. In Europe, self-organised neighbourhood groups enabled neighbourly assistance, involving a friendly chat or running everyday errands for those who were unable to (Pleyers, 2020). These mostly impromptu initiatives have been exemplars of effective action and solidarity, revealing the opportunity for creating a new normal.

Blueprints to establish peer-to-peer and commons frameworks so as to constitute a bottom-up input to local and state governance have become more visible with the COVID-19 crisis. Peer-to-peer stands for frameworks and networks, human and digital, enabling free exchange, collaboration and production of knowledge among people, without restrictions coming from economy, policy and industry (Bauwens et al., 2019). The commons as a term designates 'shared, material or immaterial property that is stewarded, protected or produced by a community – in an urban context often by citizens' collectives – and managed according to the rules and standards of that community' (Bauwens & Onzia, 2017, p. 6). Despite being independent from state and market intervention, it acknowledges an inevitable interconnection and the necessity of collaboration. In 2013, Ecuador was the first state to contract an independent body (P2P Foundation) to create a transition plan grounded in an active collaboration with the civil society and the principles of Buen Vivir² (living well) so as to involve the commons in state decisions concerning education, social innovation, agriculture and collective life (Troncoso & Utratel, 2015). The city of Gent

² Good Life or collective wellbeing according to culturally appropriate conceptions (Escobar, 2015, p. 455).

followed in 2017 by engaging members of the P2P Foundation in order to replace the prevailing top-down approach with a more interactive, commons-driven model, predicated on an active participation of citizen groups regarding city projects and governance (Bauwens & Onzia, 2017).

The aforementioned representations of bottom-up governance epitomise expressions of transformation, relevant to contemporary problems and perspective crises. Not having a predominant presence in the world scene yet, they are considered experimental reactions against the status quo. Still, they hold the potential to redirect a system that appears to be without an alternative. The haunting problem attached to transformation is how to mobilise and organise large scale change. Schlosberg and Coles (2016) solution is stating the obvious: the current system does not work; therefore, it needs to be altered by people introducing community-governed modes of meeting their everyday needs. This calls for a disruption caused not by individual action but by a collective reaction against the ongoing disengagement of people from decision-making relevant to their livelihoods and futures.

With this in mind, the formations of bottom-up governance and anticipated conviviality should be explored in relation to localities, psychologies and socio-cultural difference and seen as evolving and challenged by shared preconceptions of everyday practice. Failed cases of sharing economies call attention to the need for a critical evaluation and constant reconsideration of commoning so as to establish a continuous transformation, relevant to ecological and social emergencies. Lessons to draw from a failed food swap circuit in Northeastern America include the necessity of replacing negations of contemporary cultural practices with new imaginations, relaunching principles and organisational rules, and identifying a common value and exchange system (Fitzmaurice & Schor, 2019).

Conclusion

The alternatives discussed in this article show that there are different ways to comprehend risk and change, ones that can be positive and address current injustices posed by contemporary economic and governing systems. Most importantly they stress that while there are state concerns and measures put in place for financial recovery after COVID-19, the pandemic has accentuated the catastrophic impact of ignoring what is being lost while pursuing economic development and growth. The exploration of the socio-political implications brought by COVID-19 and the institutional inability to take responsibility for treating ecological disasters as externalities has demonstrated the need for individuals and communities to realise the imposition of contemporary life designs and understandings that are not coordinated with ecological and social well-being. To shift them toward behaviours and practices that will enable modes of production and consumption based on a pragmatic identification of needs, interdependence and cultural difference requires a more active civic participation, and contesting discourses of capitalism and impositions of fake stability and prosperity.

Within the existing framework, behaviour is diminished in right and wrong; the expectation is for all people at given circumstances to think, feel and act the same, notwithstanding their personal differences and their exposure to different levels of social status, race, gender, culture, sexual and other-related experiences. Behavioural generalisation has consequently impacted the design of everyday practices leading to their disconnection from local, physical, material and social cultures. COVID-19 has made evident that it is a matter of life and death to acknowledge individual differences by demonstrating how age, race,

gender and socio-economic circumstances can define survival chances. On those grounds, behavioural and practical shifts as a response to climate change and consequent pandemics should be rethought through the prism of psychologies, by identifying notions and practices that have been left out in the process of creating the universal, homogenous self or subject (Danziger, 1994).

Bookchin (1977) envisioned a bottom-up governance of the commons, where communities would be culturally and psychologically shaped according to their locality and their respectful exchange with their natural ecosystem, without excluding the use of technology. He pointed out the urgency for identifying nature as an active agent, one to be assisted not controlled by technology. More than four decades after Bookchin's proposal, the need for wider audiences to be exposed to a paradigm of communities with a pragmatic perception of risk and assessment of environmental degradation is greater than ever. Examples of creating spaces, making objects, growing food and living together, driven by human skills, conviviality and need have to be further explored and enabled. The challenge is to remove them from a context of fragmented efforts, gesturalism and hippie or ascitic lifestyle choices and reinforce the possibility of individual benefit and growth and show how people could get less vulnerable not just to pandemics and climatic disasters but also to conditions such as anxiety, depression, obesity and debt by being actively exposed to the agency of social and self-reflection, collaboration and a life of less things.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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