Metapolis

VOL.2_ N°2 JUL-DEC 2021
FREE DISTRIBUTION
www.metapolis.net

A NEW POLITICAL IMAGINATION: CREATING REALISTIC UTOPIAS (PART II)

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ISSN: 2695-902X

Design: **El Fantasma de Heredia** 2021

Metapolis
Vol.2_ N°2 2021

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«**metapolis** is a pluralist space: it is a place to propose ideas that supersede the traditional borders of knowledge, mobilizing them to confront global challenges. **metapolis** is a territory of hyper-connection, liberated from past nostalgia, critical of the present and committed to a sustainable and just future. It does not wait for reform that maintains the status quo, nor does it aspire to do so, either. In fact, in **metapolis** everyone suspects that this future may never come, but still are not convinced to give it up for good. The latest political, economic, technological, environmental, sociological and health emergencies just reinforce the need for us to work harder.»

metapolis is an initiative by common action forum. A collective effort of caf's team, members, collaborators and participants. Our goal is to develop and support a progressive agenda as alternative to the current model that has led us to a world of increasing inequalities, environmental devastation and unaccomplished freedom for most of the global citizenry.

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SUMMARY

p08.

00. **A NEW POLITICAL IMAGINATION: CREATING REALISTIC UTOPIAS (PART II)**

Patricio Cabello | Andrés Lomeña

p14.

01. **COMMONING AND CHANGEMAKING**

David Bollier

p24.

02. **CULTURAL MEDIATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN PANDEMIC TIMES**

Sofía Coca

p32.

03. **IMAGINATION AND ACTION: MOVEMENTS BETWEEN IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE**

Romualdo Dias

p42.

04. **NEW POETICS FOR THE DIGITAL AGE**

Antonio Penedo Picos

p52.

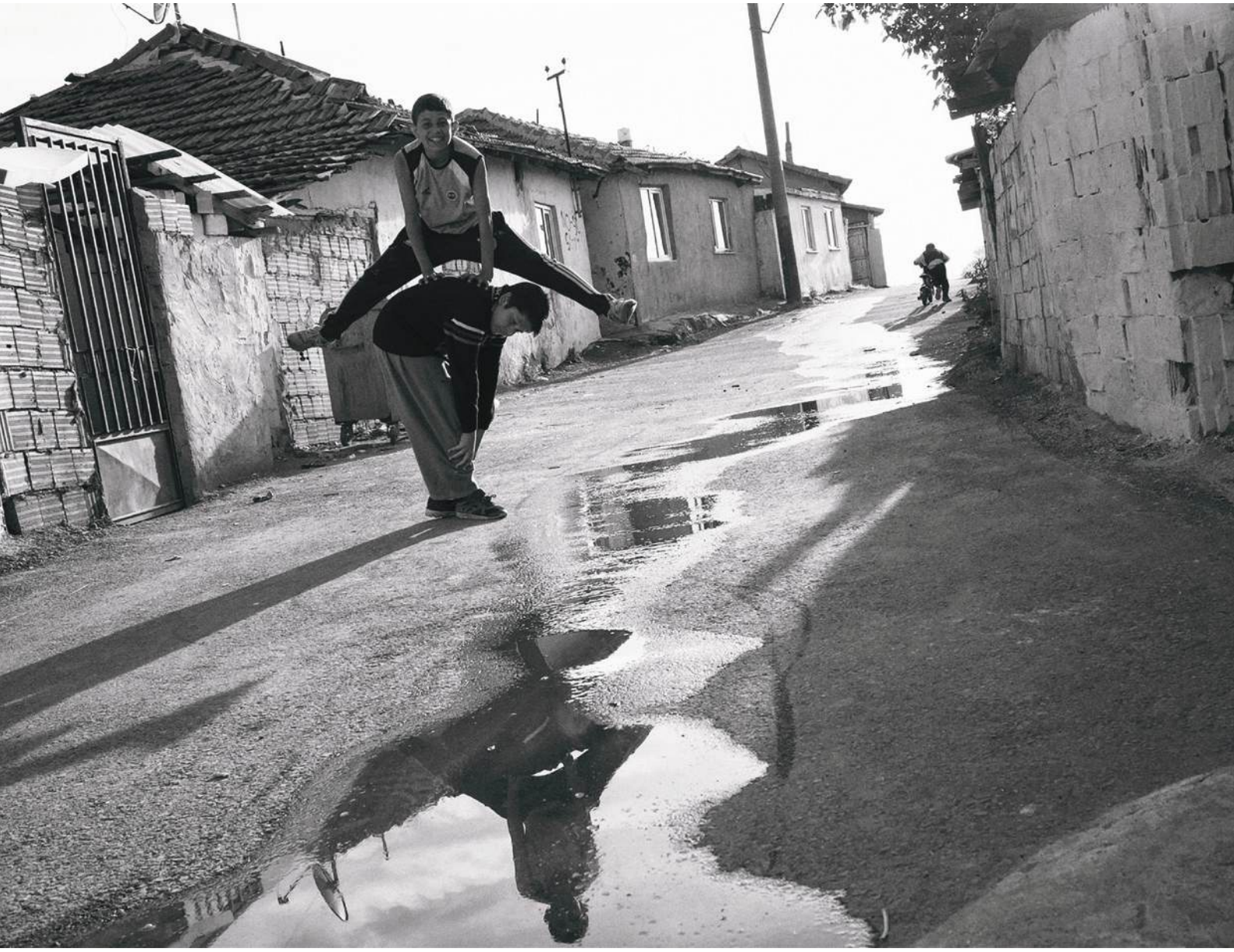
05. **MEDIEVAL IMAGINARY AND BLACK DEATH: PANDEMIC, MEDICINE AND RELIGION**

Mariano Gómez Aranda

p60.

06. **THE POWER OF DISSIDENT SOLIDARITY IN THE RISE OF ULTRALIBERAL AUTHORITARIANISM**

Jean Wyllys | Judith Butler



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00. A NEW POLITICAL IMAGINATION: CREATING REALISTIC UTOPIAS (PART II)

Patricio Cabello | Andrés Lomeña

Dec, 2021

Every day new challenges arise and grow in severity against the backdrop of a globalised world: war, inflation and supply chain crises are new flare-ups in a system that has failed at its core. If anything ties all these events together it is the complex relationship between the kind of energy needed to survive and the kind of energy that threatens to destroy the planet. For political economics professor Helen Thompson, the root of our precarious and conflict-ridden reality is oil, the one energy source clearly involved in the rising tensions between national, geopolitical and economic interests. Energy security and dependence constitute a very old global balancing act that is now being exposed for all its flaws. According to Thompson, phenomena such as *Ostpolitik* are best explained not from a political perspective, but rather through new resources discovered by the USSR. Human history with all its imbalances of power has been recounted innumerable times without explaining humankind's relationship to the resources that have actually shaped every decisive step taken by the world's nations, from alliances to failures. The time has finally come.

Oil will not be the only major player in the coming decades, especially if the calculations made by climatologists regarding global warming become a reality. The issue of environmental emigrants will be just another news story among reports of wars over access to clean water or extreme heat waves, which, as predicted by science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson, will continue to evolve, becoming much more lethal and persistent. The "global north" seemed to know very little about this until recently. The warm and gentle breeze, "the wind that shakes the barley", that graced the green fields of the "old country" now blows over dry and barren pasture lands. Ulrich Beck's theory of the "boomerang effect" has come to fruition more than twenty years after its inception.

At this juncture, we cannot give in to discouragement, but instead must look at the world in all its complexity, including the non-human factors of the equation (something that we clearly should have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic). Likewise, we should no longer incorporate already well-known historical contexts into our understanding of current violent conflicts, but rather a historical perspective contextualised over an extended period of time. This is the famous *longue durée*, which cannot just be a rhetorical tactic, but must be a fundamental piece of the puzzle to explain the world, as stated by Jo Guldi. In this way we will understand that the struggles for land (peasant revolutions, grievances around private property and housing) are not so separate from the imminent climate catastrophe, a new struggle for *all* land—for the entire planet.

How, then, do we face these times without giving in to despair? To take in and process conflicts that occur over long periods of time we need infrastructure, specifically infrastructure to organise information. For this, science, media and politics must act as complementary elements of a new approach to the engineering of information. Let us consider, for example, the announcement made by DeepMind,

Politics necessitates new vehicles of communication, a new approach to education and a reformulation of the public sphere that does not reduce public deliberation to ashes through polarised confrontation and fanaticism.

Google's artificial intelligence subsidiary, on the open access (if it really does end up being open, and free of charge) that it will grant to researchers so that they can analyse recently discovered 3D structures of almost every protein in the universe. This research milestone is a significant, constructive tool with enormous potential. Similarly, other sectors of society also require information-based infrastructure that is thorough and freely accessible. The media, despite having adapted to survive in the digital realm, has created new enclosures without adequately addressing their own lack of credibility and loss of trustworthiness in the eyes of the public (unfortunately, post-truth and fake news continue to be passed off as news). Finally, politics necessitates new vehicles of communication, a new approach to education and a reformulation of the public sphere that does not reduce public deliberation to ashes through polarised confrontation and fanaticism.

All of these tensions feed into each other, and the shortcomings of one part of the system impact its other components. When systemic failure is almost complete, people come to deeply reactionary conclusions which have been popularised by authors like Jason Brennan and his defence of an "epistocracy" (the power of those who know). We know that bad solutions are nothing new: Brennan's epistocracy ressembles a stylised and contemporary version of Plato's antidemocratic values. Insinuating the possibility of a qualitative vote, weighted according to one's knowledge, is akin to opening the door to moral and epistemic corruption, not to mention fascism disguised as a childish, pragmatic elitism. What recently happened in Chile with the referendum to approve or reject the new constitution, drafted by 155 popularly elected individuals, is very close to that nightmare. The constitutional proposal calls for the definition of a host of rights, hitherto denied and surrendered to the expansion of privatised healthcare, education and pension funds. Therefore, it is not only the usual defenders of market "freedom", but also intellectuals with ties to supposedly progressive sectors, who have arisen from their tombs to create—with intricate arguments and the support of the mainstream media—an apocalyptic image of social change in which all of the middle class' nightmares come true: the abolition of private property, environmental dictatorship and widespread scarcity.

Of course, regenerating democracy is an uphill battle. If democracy wants to survive the meddling and attacks (via lawfare or more traditional methods) of populist movements, it must return to its most basic principles and embrace other allies, such as cosmopolitanism, a concept as mistreated as pacifism. We must save our vocabulary (democracy, equality, liberty) from its enemies who impoverish, simplify, betray and vilify the meanings contained therein, turning these fundamental pillars of thought into mere ideological artefacts.

This issue of **metapolis** ties these issues together and presents a sort of choral telling of the times in which we live, seeking to discover new narratives, casting predictions and imagining paths for social transformation and the construction of a new democracy.

David Bollier opens this issue with a discussion of the commons, one of those terms that, as previously mentioned, has been warped and co-opted for the benefit of the elite. New worlds are possible through the commons and what Bollier calls the pluriverse of social movements that seek out alternatives. These initiatives return autonomy and independence to communities: alternatively managed food-production (permaculture, agro-ecology), the creation of public spaces and even alternative currencies (though not cryptocurrencies). There are so many possibilities and they all benefit from the wealth of care, as care is the backbone of our society. In line with what Italian economist Mariana Mazzucato has discussed, Bollier reconsiders the value of things, keeping in mind that certain elements of society have been stripped of their value simply because they do not yield a high enough economic benefit. The author reminds us of the tragedy of the commons and how economist Elinor Ostrom was able to redefine the problem to avoid giving it any exclusively Hobbesian connotations. Finally, Bollier discusses living systems and the gift economy in his notion of governance, where it is necessary to cultivate a culture

of commons. This culture must also be supported, cared for and shared, as is our intention with this publication.

In this next article, **Sofia Coca** calls for stronger cultural mediation. The platforms she uses to encourage such encounters seeks to recodify social relationships, something that is not incompatible with finding a common language. Mediation is an exercise of translation, and translation is necessary as long as we refuse to let ourselves be led astray by the evil of automation and algorithms, which sell themselves as super-effective substitutes for supposedly superfluous and passé professions. This cultural mediation has social objectives and because of it we have been able to understand the most important changes happening in the digital sphere. The old mantra "You can make free culture with proprietary software" has shown itself to ultimately be false. This resonates, once again, with the words of Audre Lorde: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." The idea of cultural mediation functions as an open forum of participation and its greatest advantage is that it means knowledge and learning cease to be unidirectional. Moreover, cultural mediation also requires constant care.

Appealing to sincere happiness, again, may seem naïve, but hope is a mandatory principle for imagining utopias, and utopias are part of the most mundane reality.

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Romualdo Dias sheds new light on the potential of utopian imagination to expand our political horizons. Only insofar as we dream—or only when we practice a certain metaphysical leap towards an imagination separate from factual realism—does change become possible. This change can be cultural (as in 1968) technological (with all the implications that come with technology) or socio-political. In any case, there is an emancipatory force born of transcendence, in the margins, and only with this force can we proceed to materialise experiences and proceed towards immanence. Of course, those who believe in serendipity or the preeminence of the material will have reservations regarding this concept, but cognitive systems (as well as systems of thought, ideals and even ideologies) indicate a clear direction and define an agenda that loses relevance when people turn their backs on the idea of utopia, thinking that it is too naïve or unviable. Utopian hope is hope that is essentially impossible but that becomes reality. The concept of utopia is, therefore, an example of political alchemy that teaches us what we often believe to be unlearnable. For this reason, Romualdo connects the idea of utopia with education, crucial in the process of awakening the conscience to a greater immanence, or in other words, a realism that is expanding towards what is possible but as of yet realised.

Antonio Penedo undertakes a fascinating journey through the cyberspace of yesteryear to present digital poetics that account for all the economic, social and political transformations that have occurred in recent decades. Such a task is not easy, especially when the author attempts to integrate Darwinist arguments and scale the dizzying heights of transhumanism. It remains to be seen what paths science, technology, genetics and human development will follow, but red flags have been raised in relation to obligatory digital literacy, an expression that does not allude to learning a specific program, but rather the development of active digital practices of comprehension, synthesis, transmission and creation of ideas. The software that we need involves systems of symbols, a new grammar, as forms of communication continue to be of vital importance, though we believe that we have progressed beyond McLuhan's global village and his central idea that the medium is the message. Progressives' use of semiotics must begin with a deep understanding of the technologies that modify what we understand as knowledge, communication, democracy and life. We do not need to commune with Donna Harraway's cyborgs in order to catch sight of the maelstrom we are caught in as the direct consequence of many different technological innovations.

In the following article, **Mariano Gómez Aranda** daringly describes how the pandemic could change the political imaginary of the future. To face the future, first we must approach the past, and with this in mind Gómez Aranda looks back on the Black Plague in an attempt to draw conclusions from a historical perspective. The text conducts an in-depth analysis of the ideas of thinkers from that era, such as Ibn al-Jatib, whose medical and scientific knowledge was influenced by theology. In the 21st century, we may very well think that our secular societies are not capable of errors such as those recorded in the 14th century, but vaccine denial today is still related to certain religious beliefs that do not fit with the observations and warnings of epidemiologists. Ultimately, we must learn that societies, including those who consider themselves secular or advanced, have not entirely freed themselves from certain obtuse points of view that contradict science. Given the philosophical ideas presented in this article, we can say that perhaps the coronavirus is, in the end, a problem of dogma for which many try, difficult as it may seem, to find a harmonious compromise somewhere between cutting-edge scientific developments and religious faith rooted in pre-scientific times. Given this situation, the unexpected return of dogmatism portends the return of other problems that had ,seemingly, died out.

Judith Butler and **Jean Wyllys** conclude this issue with an article on dissident solidarity. This particular type of dissidence directly connects with Butler's most recent work, in which she has focused on the power of non-violence. The authors concretely address the ultraliberal authoritarianism that has gained force in different countries, as well as the reactionary far right that sees the LGBTQIA+ movement as a threat to the idea of family and nationalism. Special attention is

given to recent events in Brazil, but also to the actions of individuals who could be labelled as anarcho-reactionaries, such as Elon Musk, ready to assist coups d'état in dependent countries in order to lay fertile ground for his own business interests. The political elite are trying to abolish certain laws in order to restore the status quo. Thus, political and sexual dissidence is persecuted with force, and the closet is becoming a place of imprisonment and shame once again. The inclusive feminism being promoted here deals with sex of course, but also race and national borders. Feminism, after all, aims to defend those who are most vulnerable. The ontology of an exclusive ontology (trans-exclusionary feminism, for example) breaks with the principles of this egalitarian and comprehensive feminism. Unity is the only possible political agenda. Marxists, progressives, feminists, queers—all of these forces are steering the same boat. There is no other option because otherwise they will capsize. This feminist call to action does not simply consitute a dissident voice with which to talk about a set core of, often exagerated, key topics, but rather to address the need to focus on fundamental issues that concern the most marginalised: housing, healthcare, employment and food security.

To conclude this issue's selection of articles, we uphold the idea that we cannot allow the climate of generalised pessimism to be a paralysing force, nor should it enshroud the moments of joy that are entailed in the process of real transformation towards a better world. Appealing to sincere happiness, again, may seem naïve, but hope is a mandatory principle for imagining utopias, and utopias are part of the most mundane reality. These six **metapolis** articles aim to transport us to that horizon of possibility, demonstrating that despite the inertia of the forces that seek to stop us, we can still succeed in creating a new political imagination.

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01. COMMONING AND CHANGEMAKING

David Bollier

Jul, 2022

It is now abundantly clear that the world we have inherited is no longer working. This point hardly needs elaboration because the evidence pervades everyday life. We see it in the failures of the state's credibly to address climate change, species extinctions, and countless other versions of ecological collapse. It is seen in the failure to reduce wealth and income inequality, and to meet basic human needs and assure baseline civil rights and liberties. Billionaires proliferate and profit from a global pandemic while billions of people suffer from precarity, poverty, and despair. Politicians and systems of power, to judge from their public actions, are strangely calm.

And yet there are many hopeful signs of people imagining and building a different type of future. Countless experimental projects and social movements are showing that "another world is not only possible," as Arundhati Roy has memorably said. "She is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing." This is more than inspirational rhetoric. A new kind of post-left agglomeration of movements is confirming that new social practices are not only possible, but compelling. They meet needs outside of the conventional market/state system and in the process, begin to remake basic configurations of state and market power. I believe these projects could transform the very character of politics and culture.

Many seeds of the new order are being tended by movements focused on degrowth, cooperatives, the solidarity economy, and commons, and by novel initiatives of community-wealth building, relocalization of food systems, and transition towns. There are serious efforts to expand agroecology, permaculture, and Indigenous stewardship of land, thereby increasing food sovereignty and community stability. In digital spaces, there are robust rounds of socially minded innovation in peer production, digital finance, and networked communities of ethical purpose. I recently showcased dozens of such commons-based innovations in my book *The Commoner's Catalog for Changemaking*, inspired by the format and sensibility of *The Whole Earth* Catalog of the late 1960s. [1]

There are in fact countless bottom-up social initiatives addressing important needs ignored by the market economy and state power. Consider them a grand bypass of conventional politics, state institutions, and large-scale markets, which are correctly seen as incapable of solving many urgent problems. However necessary they may be for meeting needs in the short term, they have become far too centralized, remote, market-centric, bureaucratic, and self-serving to solve many urgent, everyday problems. There may be people of goodwill working in government and businesses, but the structural affordances of global markets, capital investment, Western jurisprudence, bureaucratic procedure, and electoral politics are often too limited to deliver what is needed: localized, fair-minded, ecologically mindful, socially convivial, and care-driven solutions.

There may be people of goodwill working in government and businesses, but the structural affordances of global markets, capital investment, Western jurisprudence, bureaucratic procedure, and electoral politics are often too limited to deliver what is needed: localized, fair-minded, ecologically mindful, socially convivial, and care-driven solutions.

And so people are stepping up to protect themselves. They increasingly seek to provision their needs directly, outside of the market/state system. They aim to mutualize the benefits of shared wealth-generation—in land, urban spaces, software code, design, knowledge, culture—by stewarding it through collectives, rather than aspiring to act as private owners or proto-capitalists. This approach may be a third-tier choice, a regrettable necessity, but it is also a shrewd strategy for building something hardier and more resilient for the long term. By opting out of a concentrated, largely class-based system designed to fuel capital accumulation, a growing swarm of commoners, cooperators, open-source programmers, and localist farmers, among others, seek independence from predatory and extractive markets. They strive to show affirmative concern for places or people.

Instead of looking to state authorities as guarantors of their interests, a growing pluriverse of movements is exercising more direct control and use-rights. They seek to steward their own commons of local food systems and eldercare, WiFi systems and public spaces, alternative currencies and land trusts. As collectives answerable to fellow-commoners—not to bureaucrats, investors, or banks—they are building their own regimes for agriculture, water, information, software code, infrastructure, and credit and money.

Living systems as generative

The approach taken by these many movements points to a deep shift of mindset, especially in thinking about value. Their innovations in collective stewardship is not just about better "resource management" through tweaks in markets and public policy. It is about treating "resources" instead as *care-wealth*, that is, something embedded in their culture, social practices, and identity; something that must be protected and preserved for future generations. Commoners take shared responsibility for their collective needs, show creative commitment to each other, and mutualize the entitlements that flow from their cooperation.

This approach shifts the very definition of "value" from the worldview defined by money and property rights, expressed through price, to new forms of *living value*, that is, value generated by living systems: "the economy" as a social organism, not as a massive global machine and automaton. In this new calculus, value is qualitative, social and ecological in character. It is intrinsic to quality of life. It is not a commodity to be bought and sold.

We have become so habituated as a culture to collapsing diverse forms of value into price that we rarely see the reductionist violence that it entails. Market price distorts and limits our very perceptions of value, making it a scarce good or service that only some people can afford. Indeed, this matrix for recognizing value indirectly mandates that many things be considered *valueless*. The price system treats the atmosphere, biodiversity, clean water, resilient and regenerative ecosystems as without value. This is an inexorable part of the price system's tendency to objectify living phenomena that are in fact dynamic, social, and relational. Thanks to the price system, people with money—"market forces"—are given privileges to monetize life-forms such as bacteria and cloned mammals, artificial nano-matter, short snippets of copyrighted sound, and even smells and colors. Nearly anything that can be legally recognized as property can be fed into the capitalist Moloch.

Under the capitalist mindset, value is created when independent, rational individuals, acting as agents in the marketplace, negotiate prices for transactions. But in reality, *there are other important circuits of value-creation—existentially important circuits—that are not adequately described by the epistemology of economics and finance*. Value flows from the symbiotic, generative relationships of living systems. These circuits of wealth-creation are generative precisely because, in their natural state, they are alive, dynamic, and free from the direct control of the market/state system.

The natural generativity of living systems can be seen in *local communities, ecosystems, networks of social cooperation, and intergenerational lineages of people*. It is also evident in the *care economy*, a realm that draws upon the love, devotion and commitment of people as they meet the needs of family, colleagues, and friends in the course of work, education, household upkeep, socialization, and eldercare.

Gift *economies* are another source of noncapitalist value-creation, a realm that generates enormous cultural meaning, social bonding, and collective provisioning. Anthropologists have shown that complex circuits of gift exchange are used to generate value in Indigenous societies, academic communities, artistic networks, and online communities. [2] Lewis Hyde explains how the circulation of gifts generates increases of value: "Capital earns profit and the sale of a commodity turns a profit, but gifts that remain gifts do not *earn* profit, they *give* increase. The distinction lies in what we might call the vector of the increase: in gift exchange, the increase stays in motion and follows the object, while in commodity exchange it stays behind as profit." So treating the value generated by gift economies objectifies the surplus as money, removes it from circulation for private control, and in effect renders it dead (except as a future source for capital). [3]

Natural ecosystems of plants, animals, microorganisms, land, and other biophysical elements are also hugely generative as complex, mutually supportive webs of life. Through the "interbeing" of mutual cooperation (and competition), the species of an ecosystem create a natural usufruct—renewable "resources"—upon which so many markets rely (but whose needs as living beings are not usually respected). Traditional and Indigenous communities understand ecological and cosmic realities, however, and have developed their cultures accordingly. Community forests in India, for example, flourish through the *affective labor* of villagers and their cosmo-visions of life. Their commons work because people who love and care for their forests tend to respect the forest's natural limits even as they take from the forest for their own household needs.

In more modern-day contexts, *permaculture* and *agroecology* carefully integrate many variables into a symbiotic balance, helping to sustain generative webs of indirect reciprocity among living organisms. This minimizes the work needed to grow food while maximizing natural generativity in sustainable ways—all without the interventions of markets or state power. [4]

In our time, the power of *social cooperation in digital networks*, often known as open source or peer production, has become another potent circuitry of living value-generation. Self-organized communities of creators—hackers, users, hobbyists, amateurs, outlier technologists, etc.—provide the energy, ingenuity, and governance for a vast constellation of digital commons. These include open source software, wikis, open access publishing, citizen-science, and cosmolocal production (global design sharing combined with local manufacturing), among many other genres. [5]

The pluriverse of social movements expanding today are powerful precisely because they are asserting a different species of value than that of markets and capital. In this capacity, the pluriverse helps us rethink the present economic, political, and cultural order. It shows how an individualist ontology focused on market transactions—amplified by institutions that promote material gain based on individual "rationality"—profoundly limited, if not destructive. In their own fitful, incomplete ways, insurgent social movements are building a different type of world, one that honors living, dynamic relationships, cooperation, sharing, and more life-affirming forms of value.

We have become so habituated as a culture to collapsing diverse forms of value into price that we rarely see the reductionist violence that it entails. Market price distorts and limits our very perceptions of value, making it a scarce good or service that only some people can afford. Indeed, this matrix for recognizing value indirectly mandates that many things be considered valueless.

Understanding the commons

The paradigm and discourse of *the commons* has a special history and conceptual power in this quest. It helps us name and understand a richer notion of value

and new types of socially constructive institutions. The commons discourse is entirely compatible and synergistic with other new-economy discourses, such as cooperativism, degrowth, and peer production, but it adds something more. It both critiques the problems of standard economics while offering a distinct framework for creating value in its own right.

The term commons has long been associated with an essay by biologist Garrett Hardin called "The Tragedy of the Commons", which appeared in the journal *Science* in 1968. [6] Hardin presented a hypothetical story about an open pasture on which no farmer has an incentive to limit his cattle-grazing. Each farmer therefore takes as much as he wants of the common resource, inevitably causing the overuse and ruin of the shared wealth—the so-called "tragedy of the commons." The only serious way to save the commons, Hardin argued, is to rely on a system of private property or state action.

However, Hardin was not describing the commons. He was describing a type of selfish, irrational, and lawless anarchy. In a commons, there is a defined community that governs the community and its access and use of the shared resource. Each commons depends on its own self-devised social processes, systems for sharing knowledge, rules, and punishments for violating rules. Users negotiate their responsibilities and entitlements, and set up monitoring systems to identify and penalize free riders. [7]

None of these social dynamics are present in Hardin's account of the commons, which presumes an individualist ontology [8] and an inability of people to communicate, negotiate and agree upon collective solutions with others. It assumes that it's "rational" for individuals to over-exploit a shared piece of land for private gain. In truth, the "tragedy of the commons" more accurately describes laissez-faire markets in which there is no conceptualization of shared interests or cooperation to be mobilized to serve the common good and non-market needs.

Defying the prevailing norms of economics and development studies, political scientist Elinor Ostrom conducted pioneering research and creative theorizing from the 1970s until her death in 2012. Much of her research addressed the question: How can a group of individuals in an interdependent situation organize and govern themselves to obtain continuing joint benefits when they all face temptations to free ride, shirk group responsibilities, or otherwise engage in opportunistic behavior? Her 1990 book *Governing the Commons* identified key design principles by which people can organize and govern themselves to successfully manage shared resources as commons. Ostrom's larger body of work has been fundamental to a reconceptualization of economic analysis and showing how cooperation can be feasible and economically consequential. Ostrom won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009 for her pioneering work.

While Ostrom mostly focused on smaller-scale commons, avoiding larger polemics about state power and market capitalism, others (including myself) have situated commons within the larger "market/state system" and proposed a relational ontology for understanding the commons. [9] In these accounts, the commons is best understood as a dynamic life-form—a living process—wherein groups of people work together to create new ways of meeting needs and peer-governing themselves.

This framing of the commons rejects the mindset of neoclassical economics and liberalism, which generally separates production (the economy) and governance (the state), and which focuses on individual agency without regard to the common good (presumed to be actualized via the Invisible Hand). The paradigm of commons *blends* the economy and governance into a whole integrating into one system the social practices of provisioning, governance, rules enforcement, culture, and personal interests and responsibility.

Seen from this perspective, the commons is not just about small-scale projects for improving everyday life on the peripheries of the market/state system, with its forbearance. The commons, rather, emerge as a germinal vision for reinventing the fundamental social premises of economics, governance, politics, organizations, infrastructure, and state power.

To talk about the commons, then, is to enter into a post-capitalist narrative that invites us to enact a "new" ethics and politics of well-being. Making this shift can be difficult, however. It requires us to see the "commons" less as a noun (unowned or shared resources) and more as a verb. It requires us to see the social practices of *commoning*—bottom-up acts of participation, mutual support, conflict, negotiation, communication and experimentation—in a more holistic sense, and not simply as a scrum of competing, rational individuals. In seeking direct sovereignty and control over spheres of life that matter to them, commoners not only create new types of social organisms; they in effect create new forms of political power. As commoners enact new social and civic identities (water protector; forest steward, code hacker; care-giver), they open up intriguing new cultural spaces for a different type of politics. They reconstitute "civil society" into a new public that is more interested in, and capable of, addressing the corrupt, ineffectual market/state system and its theory of value (as market price).

The commons discourse is valuable because it makes these struggles more culturally legible. What is otherwise regarded as disaggregated and invisible can be seen in its larger, collective dimensions. The hundreds of commons documented by Ostrom-inspired scholars—and countless other commons that have yet to be studied—reveal the scope and diversity of an already-functioning post-capitalist order.

While this may seem a surprising assertion, one must recall that commoning has laid at the core of human development and community throughout history. Anthropologists, sociologists, evolutionary biologists and neurologists have documented how the human species has prevailed against so many obstacles thanks to instinctive, commons-like principles of co-creation, relationality, cooperation, and creative adaptation. Our evolutionary success over millennia has been based on our ability to communicate and work together to overcome collective problems, negotiate differences, and devise innovative solutions. We are a cooperative species, as economist and complexity scientist Samuel Bowles has put it. [10] The neoclassical model of human beings, *homo economicus*, is the real aberration in human history. Humans are not primarily rational, self-interested, individualistic and utility-driven beings, as the reductionist logic of standard economics claims (even though we do of course have such traits). The conceit that we are 'self-made' individuals is a delusion. There is no such thing as an Isolated-I. As the history of human evolution confirms, we humans are inescapably Nested-I's: Our development and well-being depend on our embedded relationships, and our very identities are created through committed relationships. [11]

The commons discourse is entirely compatible and synergistic with other new-economy discourses, such as cooperativism, degrowth, and peer production, but it adds something more. It both critiques the problems of standard economics while offering a distinct framework for creating value in its own right.

The triad of commoning

To help us better understand commons as *social systems*, Silke Helfrich and I wrote the book *Free, Fair and Alive*. A key element of that book is the "Triad of Commoning", a tool for understanding the rich social and inner dynamics of commoning. The Triad shifts the focus from "resource-management" as the primary purpose of a commons (the favored lens of economics and social sciences), to looking at the commons primarily as a living social system (which instead construes "resources" as socially embedded value, i.e., "care-wealth").

This shift of perspective helps reveal that commoning is a cross-sectoral social phenomena that is not strictly dictated by the character of resources per se or their market valuation. Commons must be seen as a consensual social arrangement that have deep similarities across multiple resource domains.

Seen from this perspective, the commons is not just about small-scale projects for improving everyday life on the peripheries of the market/state system, with its forbearance. The commons, rather, emerge as a germinal vision for reinventing the fundamental social premises of economics, governance, politics, organizations, infrastructure, and state power.

Commoning consists of at least three distinct spheres of activity—Social Life, Peer Governance and Provisioning, or what we call the "Triad of Commoning." The Triad describes three symbiotic, interconnected spheres of commoning: the social, institutional and economic. Each consists of many "patterns of commoning" that embody social attitudes and behaviors that are seen in most commons.

Social life. Since the first imperative of any commons is to establish a relational, living system in which everything is co-created, the social life of participants matters a great deal. A commons is naturally focused on creating and maintaining constructive social and ecologically regenerative relationships, including with the nonhuman world. The *relationships* among people and other living beings are more fundamental than the beings themselves.

For example, social life in a commons requires the patterns known as *Cultivation of shared purpose and values*. Without this practice, a commons loses its coherence and vitality. But commons seldom begin with shared values and purpose; they take shape through shared experiences and collective reflection, tradition, celebration and participation. A big part of this is another pattern, *Ritualization of togetherness*, which occurs by meeting, sharing and celebrating things as a group.

The social life of a commons also requires that people *contribute freely*—that they give without the expectation that they will get the same value back, at least not directly or immediately. Contributions are made voluntarily or through collective consent, and are not in response to external pressures or sanctions. There is also a need for *Gentle reciprocity*, social exchange that does not necessarily provide absolutely equal shares or equivalent money-value exchange among people, but rather a loose, informal sense of fairness. In a commons, this occurs through *indirect* reciprocity, not direct and calculative equality of exchange.

Peer governance. Peer governance, another central sphere of commoning, is about seeing others as peers with equal rights and duties in the collective process of making decisions, setting boundaries, and enforcing rules. Participants tend to contribute in nonhierarchical ways; there is an aversion to centralized systems of power.

Peer governance requires, among other things, *Honoring transparency in a sphere of trust*. Transparency cannot just be mandated; it can flourish only if people trust each other. Thus, to honor real transparency in a commons, people must come to trust each other deeply so that difficult, uncomfortable information can be shared. A related pattern of commoning is *Sharing knowledge generously*. This is a crucial instrument for generating collective wisdom. Knowledge grows exponentially when it is shared, but this requires that information be accessible and freely circulating. *Assured consent in decision making* is another pattern that helps assure that governance decisions are seen as legitimate and trustworthy. When commoners co-create the rules by which they are governed, they are more likely to be observed and upheld. This process requires the consent of commoners, which is the absence of reasonable objection.

There is not enough space to name other patterns of peer governance, but they include such practices as *Relying on heterarchy* (instead of hierarchy); *Keeping commons and commerce* distinct so that money and market transactions will not disrupt cooperation within a commons; and *Relationalize property*, which is about treating shared property in ways that honor our relationships to each other, livelihoods, and future generations.

Provisioning. Finally, commons rely on its members provisioning themselves. The economy of a commons does not separate production and consumption into different roles; it blends and blurs the two in the process of producing, allocating, and distributing wealth. A basic goal of provisioning is to reintegrate economic behaviors with the rest of one's life, including social well-being, ecological relationships and ethical concerns. The goal of provisioning through commons is

not maximum efficiency, profit or higher GDP. It aims simply to meet needs and provide a stable, fair, satisfying and ecologically minded way of life.

Provisioning is a sphere that contains the practices of such practices as *Make & use together*, in which anyone who wants to be involved, can participate, and everyone contributes according to their own capacities and needs. Co-producing is the core process, or what might be called DIT—"Do It Together."

Work in a commons is not labor as a marketized unit of human toil, however. It is an activity that draws upon people's deep passions and values – their whole selves. The care work that goes on in families is a conspicuous example of work that functions at a more human, relational level than conventional labor markets. So an important pattern is *Support care & decommodified work*. Another is *Share the risks of provisioning*: commoners share risks among themselves in order to make their commons possible, but they also share in the resulting benefits. *Contribute & share* is a pattern that describes the sharing of the fruits of collective contributions. *Use convivial tools* describes relying on tools and technologies that enhance individual freedom, collective relationships, and innovation, as opposed to closed, proprietary tools.

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Commoning as a path forward

When John Maynard Keynes struggled to reinvent economics in the 1930s, he wrote that "the difficulty lies not in the new ideas but in escaping from the old ones, which ramify for those brought up as most of us have been, into every corner of our minds." The power of a dominant worldview invisibly organizes phenomena into a mental frame that supplants other, potentially important ways to see the world. [12]

So it is today, as we try to escape the pervasive categories of economic thought that obscure the lived realities of commoning. Sometimes new realities are not easily recognized because there is simply no vocabulary and logic to make them legible to the culture. This is the case with the commons. The concept challenges the presuppositions of the dominant systems of economic and political thought, but there are not necessarily the concepts, words, and logics to properly understand this paradigm. That is what Helfrich and I attempted to provide in our book *Free, Fair and Alive*. In particular, we must cultivate what we have come to call an *OntoShift*, or ontological shift, the idea that relationality among living beings is the fundamental reality of life. Or as cultural historian Thomas Berry once put it, "The universe is primarily a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects."

In terms of the commons, this means that people must take seriously the idea that their collaborations can be free, fair, and alive. Rather than clinging to ideology or mechanical blueprints for what supposedly must be done, people must come to recognize that centralized systems of power and organization, and "rationality" and efficiency, are not adequate approaches. As commoners, we must look to collective participation and wisdom to develop stable, sustainable solutions. A culture of commoning holds great promise.

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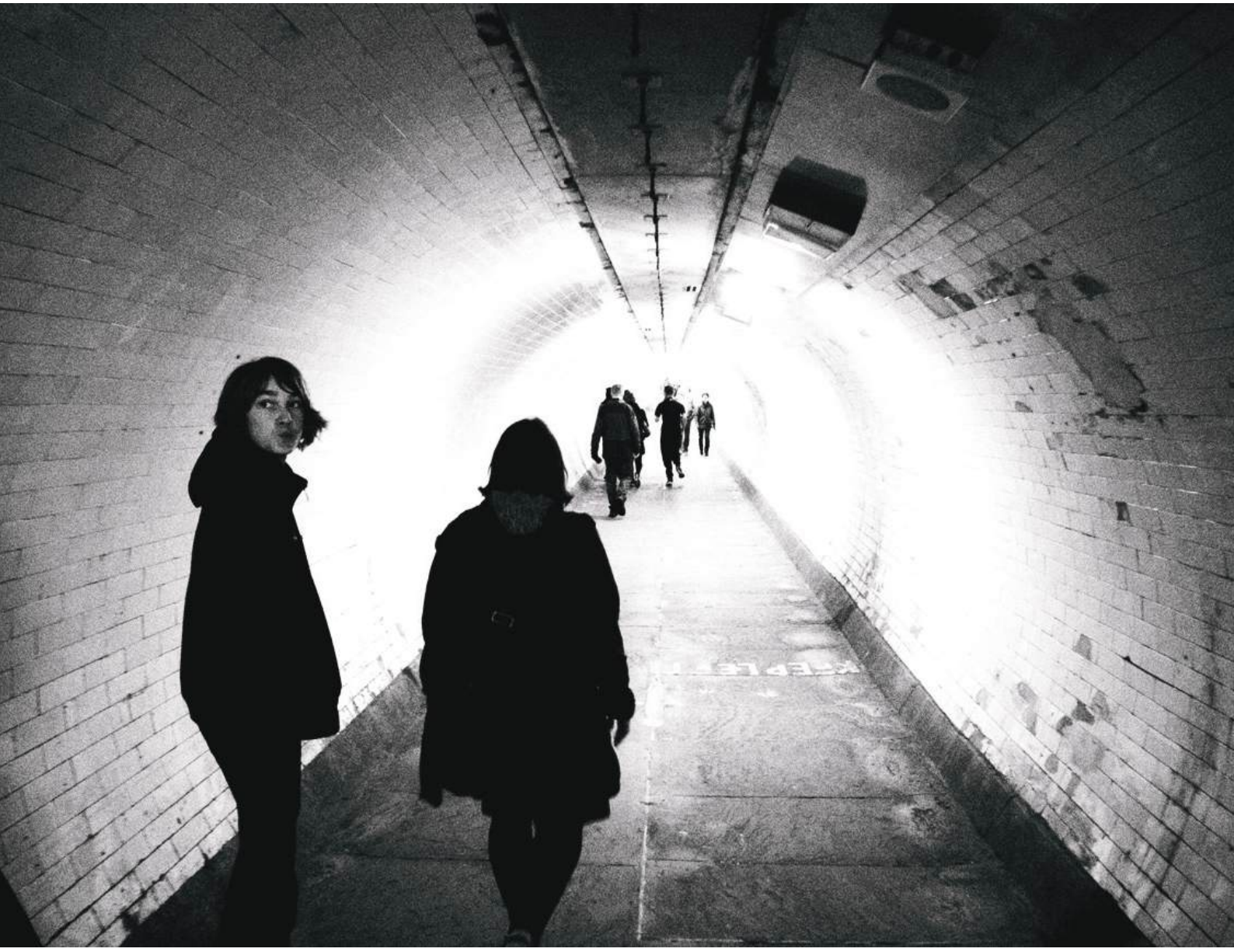

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02. CULTURAL MEDIATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN PANDEMIC TIMES

Sofía Coca

Aug, 2022

> "Navigating a communal geography differs from reading a text, purchasing a commodity, or from the self-consciousness of social media. You navigate a material place in the time of your body, rather than emitting dispatches into a dematerialized zone of no context. You are public, but not displayed, surveilled, and archived. You relate to others spontaneously, without any obligation to perform or expose yourself. Your self can stretch to its full social mobility, rather than indexing itself into the narrow confines of text. Ideology, politics, taste, and social media—these fixities can be a Procrustean bed that crams your whole self into a shrunken modality of positions and transactional messages, but most interesting interactions we have in life are not when we are 'on'. Life happens when you are not making declarations. Life happens when you are with other people."
>
> *As radical, as mother, as salad, as shelter: What should art institutions do now?* - Ken Chen (Paper Monument, 2018)

One of the great achievements of cultural mediation is facilitating gatherings of people who have never met before. But beyond the creation of "networking spaces" and projects based on cooperation, one of the keys of cultural mediation is the building of many new friendships.

When we talk about "care" and build "spaces of co-creation" using methodologies that confront and recognise power dynamics but, at the same time, try to encourage imaginative ways of working together, everything seems to be shrouded in mystery. Often it's all too easy for such a loving and safe setting to obscure the heavy lifting—the planning and structuring—needed to actually get results.

Obviously nobody can predict whether or not two strangers will be able to connect. There are times when even the most on-point facilitations or most fine-tuned algorithms cannot create a connection between two individuals. Sometimes, even among those who seem to be like-minded, it's not so easy to attain the kind of coveted connection that, in turn, creates new social spaces itself. There are ways to try, though. This attempt at "cultural mediation" is what ZEMOS98, a sevillina cooperative of cultural production and social research, has been working on for more than twenty years.

Sometimes it means a 3-day meeting where 40 people gather together (any more detracts from the intimacy) and get to work with post-its, poster boards and markers. Other times it involves long conversations with moments of connection that last for weeks but aim at getting people from different professions to work together. And other times it's about negotiating between peers who form a community of shared practices or interests but who have not been able to identify a shared path.

This is not a methodology that can be applied universally in just any context, nor is it detached from the wishes, possibilities and capabilities of all of the agents in any given ecosystem. For example, you can't mediate against the institution, or at least I don't think it's recommendable as an attempt to build a model to move forward with. I do think, though, that at those points of tension, it's important that agents in very secure positions in society, such as in academia or cultural institutions, understand that they exist within a certain context.

Cultural mediation is an amalgam of practices, tools and methodologies that involve facilitation, support and recoding, but mediation is also the search for a common language, a language that may be new and invented and that seeks to inspire. A language that sometimes attempts to revive lost words or rituals. A language that sometimes resembles a patchwork quilt.

The following is an attempt to hash out six questions that explore ways to address the challenges of cultural mediation we have just defined in a post-pandemic context.

Mediation as translation

The word "mediation" has traditionally been used in contexts associated with cultural institutions and museums. Some years ago, the adjective "cultural" was added to refer to a series of community intervention practices that are used outside of institutions and the public sector. This is what we mean when we talk about mediation for social transformation. Beyond the conceptual ideas of academia, we believe that thinking about and broadening the concept is an interesting exercise, not so much to hone in on a definitive definition, but more to facilitate and make accessible the work that can sometimes be difficult to summarise in few words. In addition to being a process—and to some degree, an experimental one—we must also add that it is characterised by other difficulties, such as the lack of support and institutional recognition that cultural mediation practices receive, or the scarcity of regulated training associated with this line of work. Little by little, streams of public funding and educational spaces are developing, but in the meanwhile we have to keep working with the term "cultural mediation" by posing questions that result in more than just incomplete definitions.

Jose Luis de Vicente is certain that the key word is *intermediation* and understands mediation as a sort of intercommunicative tool: "For me, the term cultural mediation clearly refers back to the educational mediation of cultural institutions. However, we can expand this idea to think of it as a form of intermediation, as a mechanism of translation, like an intercom that enables communication among agents from different communities with different knowledge, practices and areas of specialisation. Social movements are one example. Others could be public institutions, academia, communities around artistic practices, the general public and so on"

In the end, this translation work depends on the privilege of understanding different languages. Can we live in a world without translators? There is a definite, growing trend towards automating all processes of translation, but we know very well that algorithms have their limits when it comes to translating. Not so much literally, but in terms of all the issues that are implicit in the act of communication. Therefore, it's worth asking, is there a future for mediation understood as an exercise in translation? Jose Luis de Vicente believes there is:

"I see two points of tension in terms of the future of these kinds of processes—we can call them translation or processes of transmission. As far as I'm concerned, these processes absolutely have a future. In fact, every one of these agents exists in airtight compartments, and when you're able to create pathways that lead one to the others, very powerful things begin to happen. Of course, this is not a methodology that can be applied universally in just any context, nor is it detached from the wishes, possibilities and capabilities of all of the agents in any given ecosystem. For example, you can't mediate against the institution, or at least I don't think it's recommendable as an attempt to build a model to move forward with. I do think, though, that at those points of tension, it's important that agents in very secure positions in society, such as in academia or cultural institutions, understand that they exist within a certain context."

Parallel to this idea of translation processes, there is another metaphor that Adam Horowitz uses to broaden the notion of mediation by exploring the idea of digging

tunnels and applying concepts from distributed pedagogy: "The metaphor of bridge building has become a little stale. As if 'maintaining bridges' could just explain what the work is all about. I'm a bit sceptical about this definition. But at the same time, when I look back, a large part of the work that I've been doing could actually be explained in a similar way with another metaphor: digging tunnels, because a big part of the work that we do is neither visible nor involves the redistribution of resources or the kind of collaborations that are really not intended to be visible because they are more subversive. When I think back to my experiences in the US Department of Arts and Culture—whose provocative name ironically pointed out the fact that in the United States, there is no such governmental institution—most of what worked for us had to do with the idea of distributed pedagogy: working with a bunch of colleagues, developing tools and resources that would be as equally available to a 10-year-old child as they would be to a big cultural institution. And most of that only rarely had anything to do with producing big events, but rather growing a certain level of cultural legitimacy with a bunch of organisations that were looking to do things in a more participatory way, organisations that wanted to be part of something that was more than the sum of its parts and be part of the collective action. I think that in doing that, we did manage to successfully build bridges between social and artistic movements, because we were connected to a growing network of artists that engaged with social issues but that were not necessarily playing a leadership role in those issues or organising social movements." It's not always easy to achieve effective participation. Sometimes, particularly within administrations, methods are created that encourage participation in an awkward way with no lasting effect, usually because the resources to do anything more just aren't available. This translates into legitimate distrust on the part of those who see this more as a simulation of participation rather than something real and effective.

The projects that effect the most change are those that create intermediary passageways, little corridors where different people can cross over from one structure to another. In terms of those involved, I like this idea of double agents or triple agents, who are often mediators.

According to this critique, the methodology can sometimes be very superficial—an enthusiastic story or getting participants to use post-its, but it just doesn't get to the root of the matter. Transformative participation can only be reached with enough material resources to sustain it over time.

When these spaces of co-creation and participation—whether they use post-its or have 10-hour-long meetings—maintain long-term mediation work with a clear aim linked to social justice, they generate shared knowledge that is applied in truly transformative ways, not just cool photos of short-lived participatory processes. What seems to be true is that there are processes that are getting society involved more than ever. As Jose Luis de Vicente noted: "More and more, I see that these types of processes (mediation) are popping up naturally in our society's culture. Perhaps the more natural they feel within a society, the more we should really be rethinking those kinds of processes."

Mediation for social change in a privatised digital context

It's no secret that the pandemic has sped up a process that has been happening for years: the continuous privatisation of spaces and tools that early pioneers once thought of as a common digital space.

During the early 2000s, a common attempt at thwarting any radical approach to the debate was: "Free culture can be made with private software." Now, however, it's undeniable that RSS (the spirit of shared knowledge on blogs or wikis), P2P networks and the idea of the internet as an open and decentralised space have given way to an internet where paid subscriptions have become the norm, as have personal or collective brand advertisement and algorithms that reward loyalty but often end up being toxic and harmful to the user.

Likewise, the tools that we use to communicate with each other or store our knowledge generally belong to mega-corporations that, little by little, have been sinking their claws into the education sector, offering "´ solutions" for managing

Neutral facilitation is not something to be strived for. Neutrality in a political process is normally a deceitful fallacy that, more often than not, ends up being an impossible role to carry out. At the same time, we do have to recognise that facilitation should tend towards the creation of equity and not the other way around. That position and that double role of listening to the group and trying to make things equal is something that can require a lot of energy.

knowledge generated in these contexts. The solutions, however, only complete a process that Noam Chomsky already warned us about in 1998 when he said that if we do nothing, internet and cable will be monopolised within ten or fifteen years by entrepreneurial mega-corporations—that people don't recognise that they have in their hands the possibility of owning these technological instruments instead of just leaving them to huge companies and that for them to realise this, we need coordination between groups that oppose this monopolisation, using technology with creativity, intelligence and initiative to promote, for example, education.

During the course of the pandemic, we have had to reinvent how we communicate digitally a million times, and in many cases it has involved needing to pay for *pro* versions of tools that we used to use for free. Video conference systems, shared digital whiteboards, content storage, etc. These tools have suddenly become an absolute necessity, and much of the time they are storing very valuable content in private spaces owned by corporations whose values have nothing to do with the common good.

Tere Badía, a mexican-catalan cultural mediator, reflects on this issue as follows: "One of the things that I think about and that I believe could turn into something big in terms of political action—and even if it is an uphill battle, it could still be very liberating—is how we define public space in the digital sphere. If culture happens in meeting places, and meeting places are common space, how do we create this space? How do we create public space within the digital realm when everything digital is in completely privatised hands? If we depend on big corporations—Apple, Google, Facebook, etc.—and they are the ones who decide what can and cannot be done, we're just giving up our public space."

Obviously, this is an issue full of nuances that could easily lead to very complex debates. We already know that the problem is not the technology itself; technology has actually allowed us to do things like generate more active participation. For example, digital events over the past year have enabled us to involve people who, due to borders or because of physical inaccessibility, would have had much more difficulty participating in in-person activities.

Tere Badía adds another advantage—questioning the dictatorship of the office as a space of shared work: "Screen presence also has its advantages, because it has a very positive aspect that, depending on how you approach it, also allows you to escape the omnipresence or dictatorial dynamics of an office. This is a very good thing, but the problem is, how do you substitute the office with a meeting place that is not digital?"

The pandemic has generated a lot of pain and has ruined the lives of thousands of people. On the other hand, it has managed to temporarily stop the global capitalist machine, which has clearly been operating beyond its means. What we have to do now is try to hold onto the positive aspects of digital living and slowly revive in-person activities and behaviours. What will continue to be a priority—and it certainly won't be easy—is the question of whether or not we will be able to recover our digital public spaces.

Thought processes between academia and activism

One of the legitimate fears that comes up around experimental knowledge production, whether in social spheres or the cultural sector, is the creation of empty imaginaries. These often take the form of clusters of hollow buzzwords—in non English-speaking cultures they are almost always heavily Anglicised—that don't yield truly transformative practices for their setting or the communities that live there. This is also a prejudice associated all too often with social and cultural agents who are not frontline activists but who are still creating ways of experimenting with the codes we use to relate to each other.

For Marta Malo, a transfeminist researcher and cultural worker, one possible response to this problem is to encourage situated thinking. She does this by telling a very personal life story around the question: How to resist the extractivist tendencies of those with cultural capital and participate in a grassroots movement?

"I was brought up in a family with cultural capital, surrounded by books. I saw myself in social movements, but I had the chance to get into the cultural sector and I saw that opportunity as something that could bring me into extractivist dynamics. I saw that by sharing spaces with other activists, I had the chance to capitalise on the discourse, a chance that others would never have. That made me feel really uncomfortable, and I decided to try and hold a very specific position and hold a glamour-free job, because I also don't know how to sell myself. I'm shy, it makes me uncomfortable. So I became a translator, and I always defended that line of work. But later I learned other things, and at a certain moment, I began to see that that privilege could be implemented in another way to create spaces for generating discourse and transformations, and I went about doing that, but starting within the movements where I had been active. That made for a rather round-about path towards what I do that can only really be explained by my life story. When I became a mother, I worked with the school. When I worked with undocumented people, I worked at the borders, and I was always trying to encourage situated thought. Words not caught up in abstract academic logic, and not marred by militant or artistic rigidity either. The key for me is to create spaces where people can be equal and feel seen."

Marta points out a clear split in how privilege can be dealt with. On the one hand, those who know how to carry out mediation processes can often do so because they are in a position of privilege—at least the privilege of being heard as an active citizen. If someone gets to work in a position of intermediation between different social agents and gets paid for it, it indicates a certain level of privilege. But not all positions of privilege are used to oppress—they can also be used to redistribute roles, knowledge and resources. On the other hand, if mediation is conscious of its own position of privilege, the key questions are: Who benefits from the process? Who gains new roles, resources and knowledge? Without being an exact science, if the answer points towards these things being accumulated by a few, then you're looking at an extractivist practice. If the answer points towards those who did not have these things before the process started, then the process could end up being transformative.

New roles at the margins of institutional logic

We know that institutions are like big waterfalls. They are stuck in old ways that are very hard to change. We also know that, unfortunately, they very often create binary relationships—you're either in the institution or outside of it, and on the inside, apparently, there is a series of control mechanisms and technical rituals that only let those who are certified remain there. Anyone else is automatically a "visitor".

This is especially painful when it involves public institutions which, in theory, should be designed under the principle of universality and equity. But we also know that there are many people trying to resist these old ways, trying to open up new spaces where people can operate in permanent roles, not just as visitors. Mediation can play a role in this change, but can we really manage to overpower these institutional ways? Fran MM Cabeza de Vaca, a professor, artist and head of education at the Museo Reina Sofía, reflects on these questions:

"One of the topics that worries me is homogeneity in different spaces. Schools are homogeneous spaces. The artistic world is homogenous, institutions are homogeneous spaces, and I feel that the projects that effect the most change are those that create intermediary passageways, little corridors where different people can cross over from one structure to another. In terms of those involved, I like

this idea of double agents or triple agents, who are often mediators. Now, I'm also starting to realise that the realm of mediation is also homogeneous. It's necessary to have this kind of figure, who has a foot in each world. If we rely too much on these homogeneous spaces and leave the institution or school to its own devices, it becomes very difficult to make things happen, because we live in such a polarised political landscape where everyone goes to one extreme or the other. So, I do feel that this is very good work, that it's putting you in a place that is not polarised, that is heterogeneous. I don't want to use the word 'diverse' because it's a word that many people already manipulate, but yes, diverse in that sense."

If we stick to a conventional idea of what mediation is, the first thing that comes to mind is conflict management between parties. Mediation in conflict resolution usually involves calling on a third party to solve a misunderstanding between two other parties. Different analogies could certainly be drawn, but continuing with the metaphor that Fran MM Cabeza de Vaca proposed, double (or triple) agents don't always come from outside. Sometimes mediation between social spaces is initiated by agents who formally belong to one of these spaces, but who also belong to other spaces and know other languages and methods. This is the case of faculty in educational spaces:

"Educational privilege is a very powerful tool for creating safe spaces, spaces for questioning power […], for including the question of school insiders versus outsiders in all of these processes. I mean, being clear about the fact that the school is not a physically defined place, there are actual fences to jump, especially in the case of high schools. But what's really helping me a lot is always questioning what is inside and what is outside, because the narratives are designed to make us believe that there actually is an inside and an outside and that the boundaries between them are clear. The educational administration does it with how it distributes centres of learning, in how it divides up the student body, and I feel that this is a question that can help us to find another way of thinking," Cabeza de Vaca states.

It also has to do with identities, roles and how we name things. Often the labels that are automatically ascribed to the roles that we conform to in specific social spaces carry with them a set of prejudices and pre-established notions: professor, activist, artist, researcher. For Fran MM Cabeza de Vaca, the key is dedicating yourself to the margins of identity and letting that be what reinvents the institution and its clichés:

"I'm reluctant to let go of what the word *queer* really means when confronted with this kind of identitarianism, even though sometimes the word is used to just substitute one mainstream for another. Its real meaning is having a clear commitment to the margins of identity and culture, a commitment to everything in flux, and to me that's a very transformative commitment. The queerest identity doesn't really have anything to do with gender. It's concerned with all genders of all things, all categories, allowing things to grow in the margins and become strong there because normally we try to just push everything into the centre."

Conditions of care production and mediation

One of the most complicated aspects of working in the kind of mediation that does not aim for neutrality—but at the same time seeks to encourage distributed participation and facilitate a plural conversation—is the energy that must be invested in order to present yourself as both a listening ear and a solid guide at the same time. A listening ear that is able to read different energy levels and tend to issues that are mired in the habits of the groups involved. A solid guide that provides stability, safety, comfort, good humour and attitudes that inspire the group to keep pushing forward.

As paradoxical as it may seem, neutral facilitation is not something to be strived for. Neutrality in a political process is normally a deceitful fallacy that, more often than not, ends up being an impossible role to carry out. At the same time, we do have to

recognise that facilitation should tend towards the creation of equity and not the other way around. That position and that double role of listening to the group and trying to make things equal is something that can require a lot of energy. Furthermore, the person who is mediating a process doesn't enter into that process in a vacuum. There is always something external conditioning that person's level of energy.

A lot of organisations focussed on cultural mediation exist in a state of precarity. The work is done by a few people doing many things on a salary that provides just enough to live on, and even this can only be achieved by simplifying and reducing on a lot of fronts. This text is to a degree informed by the material conditions under which work is produced and what needs to be done from one mediation process to another, from one activity to another. In the end, what often seems to emerge is the desire to stop. But is it possible to stop? Jaz Choi, cultural mediator and researcher, shares some intuitive thoughts on the matter:

"It's hard to stop. It also seems very dramatic. In Korean, we have an expression 'nolda', which means to play, and there's also an expression that refers to a key; 'A key is playing,' which basically means that it's there, but it's not pushing hard enough to fit into the keyhole. In Japanese, it's similar, there's a word 'yutori', which means to increase in amplitude, like a garment that is slightly oversized. This involves creating a bit of space for comfort and flexibility, and this can be applied to education. I suppose that when applied to an organisation in 'survival mode', that's in a jam, it can really help you reflect, and the idea is, how do we create those little spaces that give you some breathing room and let you reflect on things? Because in reality, reflective thought can happen in brief moments, small spaces. And those moments or spaces can be playful, basically."

The truth is that being able to stop is a privilege that not everyone can allow themselves, and perhaps the metaphor raised by Jaz could be very thought provoking and translated into practice in different ways—almost *ad hoc*, depending on the organisation in question. Even so, it's tempting to try and nail down a specific experience in terms of how we can get past inertia in order to try to generate spaces suitable for reflecting on experiences and to collectively digest all these non-verbalised lessons.

Adam Horowitz shares his years-long experience working socially and politically with nuns in the United States on a project known as Nuns & Nones, a collective that is very different from anything we have in Spain or elsewhere in Europe. Their initiative and agency is similar to a social movement and subscribes to progressive, and even transformative, politics: "We worked in cycles of six weeks. And every six weeks we would have a banquet, especially during the pandemic, and the organisation funded these events, which became part of our regular routine. And all of us involved knew that that was the day when we would divvy up tasks and deadlines for having important conversations and for creating this sensation of growth. In the middle of those six weeks, we used that day to try and come up with a set of challenges to complete, and we experienced this as a process of realignment in order to find sustainable rhythms."

Being conscious of the fact that not all processes and tools work the same way for every person, we are certain that it is necessary to talk about the need to understand that every person needs spaces for self-care and that every organisation needs some "physical therapy" every now and then, which in this case involved creating routines that allow for joint reflection and are not caught up in the day-to-day. Honest mediation needs spaces for self-care as well, in any shape or form, and even under these conditions there are still many issues to resolve. How do you maintain friendships at a distance? How are conflicts solved when you can't look the other person in the eyes? How can empathy be exercised through a computer screen? How do we make room for silence in digital spaces without it equating to a lack of participation?

We hope to find the answers to these questions as we always have—by learning from other people by collaborating, cooperating and working collectively.

Sofía Coca

Sofía Coca graduated in Journalism from the University of Seville and, since 2005, has been a partner and member of the coordination team for ZEMOS98, a cooperative with more than 20 years experience in cultural production and research. The cooperative is currently focused on developing mediation methods that spark relationships between activists, artists, academics, foundations and public institutions, highlighting political and cultural processes for social change. At ZEMOS98, Sofía is responsible for managing the exchange of knowledge, community relations and the working team. She is also involved in various other projects, both on a national and international level, including serving as the coordinator of PLANEA in Andalusia, a network promoting art in schools.

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03. IMAGINATION AND ACTION: MOVEMENTS BETWEEN IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE

Romualdo Dias

Sep, 2022

Dreaming of the impossible to achieve what is possible. Embodying the connections between actions and dreams as different instances overlap with each other. Taking action and dreaming are both needed to forge our way through the world and take our place in history. In the dynamics of dreamspace, meaning is produced by our power to navigate different areas of reality, as well as our ability to stand up to the obstacles presented by reality. When we become involved in transformative political agendas, we gain clarity around our various projects, dreams being both the basis of these projects as well as the compasses and maps we use to guide and orient them. In our stubborn determination to come up with different forms of resistance, our dreams are what nourish and strengthen us.

Paulo Freire, who would have recently celebrated his 100th birthday, maintained that:

> "…it is impossible to exist without a dream. The question that is posed, first, is whether the dream is historically viable. Second, if the dream's viability requires a bit of time and space to walk. Third, if it requires an even longer space to walk and to become viable, it is the case of learning how to walk, and, in walking, to also learn to make the dream come true, that is, to seek the paths of the dream." [1]

In the internal realm of imagination, where we cultivate our dreams, a dynamic is in place, made up of intense energies that come from the diversity of confrontations the subject experiences with their reality. It is in this intermediary space, a space located between the subject and reality, in the search for solutions to problems, where we find the level at which movement can begin to stir, strengthening our need for ingenuity. If someone has the capacity to conceive of a new idea in their efforts to transform the world, the force behind this idea depends a great deal on the quality of the connection established between the subject and this space of interaction. Therefore, this "intermediary" space should be carefully safeguarded and protected.

This is the path we follow through the realms of action and imagination, giving due attention to the various dynamics that shape history. With our feet on the ground, we commit to many different ways of overcoming obstacles, to the most unlikely of movements, as we break through borders. Thus, if we experience different pathways through the domains of immanence with a certain degree of calm, we open up the possibility of honing in on innumerable practices of transcendence. The plane of immanence is, for us, the time and place for action, the time for experiences, the moment to respond to the challenges the world sends our way.

If our imagination is where we experience transcendence, then it is in our experiences that immanence is affirmed. It is there that everything happens, and for this very reason, individual and group actions develop in the realm of history. We are present in the world, we affirm this presence with our actions, and we are shaped by a history. At the same time, we are motivated by a desire to overcome adversity.

This place of "belief" is where the need for a "new" political imagination is born, an imagination materially formed by the infatigable movement between understanding and doing.

In this way, action and imagination shape each other when we are involved in transformative agendas. This slowly leads us to the issue of belonging. What makes subjects abandon passivity, a place of relative comfort, and throw themselves into the most intense adventures of creation? What makes someone join a cause that is committed to social transformation?

The plane of immanence is made up of the materiality of time, both in terms of individual life and collective organisations. There is an experience of time that is formed by the experiences that we live through at every single moment wherever we are. However, the experience of another temporality is created when we imagine something that has never happened. With this in mind, we invite everyone to reflect on the differences between times of action and times of imagination. We put our faith in this because, while experiencing different temporalities, something emerges that helps us to get at the core of political action.

What puts these subjects in motion when they move away from the immanent and strive towards horizons far beyond normal boundaries, in the realm of transcendence? What actions are sparked in our lives when we put our imaginations up against what we actually do? Multiple temporalities enter into a dialogue in which individual time meets collective time. In the same way, a tension is created between lived and desired experiences. Moreover, we should also consider what else enters the picture when we get to the core of political action. In this core, time has a material quality that we seek to understand. It is a materiality with a force strong enough to shape us. Forces that originate in history shape us, but they do not hold us prisoner. In fact, this is where we learn to combine the tension between the different continuums that form up to the point of being able to embrace the contingencies that derive from the flow of a lifetime of intensities. From these contingencies, energies are born that push us into the practice of surpassing boundaries. Transcendency also results from a combination with the immanent.

Therefore, we wonder, why does this movement between temporalities drive us to the core of the political? Why does time end up being the strongest political materiality of our existence? Firstly, because only in our real temporality, only as long as we are alive, can we take action in the world and collaborate in order to transform it. The dead do not intervene in history, they do not participate in social life or effect the changes that are required by lived time. Therefore, we can state that the dead do not start revolutions. What they can offer us, however, is inspiration from the stories of their lives, from the examples set by the memory of their struggles.

Far beyond this observation, in a very primitive space, we know that our temporality forces us to face our own finiteness. Time imposes limits on us and robs us of any illusion of control. We do not choose when we are born, and we normally do not have any power over when we depart from this world either. In this world we develop our abilities in order to care for the vulnerable condition of our existence. Every individual is completely alone in how they manage the fate-determining forces of life. After all, life's polar extremes consist of events of immense solitude: we are born and die alone. Our arrival and departure may be our own, but we cannot choose when or where these events take place.

Furthermore, time belongs to each one of us and, in all the moments we experience, time also belongs to a collective. Thus, three challenges arise. The first is knowing how to combine individual time with collective time when distributing tasks in creative practices or when responding to challenges in the world. The second consists in creating the tension between the time to act and the time to imagine, as times of action and times of imagination are inherently different. The third challenge, and perhaps the most difficult, consists in coming to one's own individual understanding of a dimension of reality imposed by the limit of one's own lifetime. Perhaps when the moment arrives in which much of what we dream becomes reality, we will no longer have a role to play in the story. Others, unlike ourselves, will be able to reap the benefits of this transformative deed. Reaching a certain

degree of understanding, regarding this limit, entails a level of wisdom. After all, the processes that change reality occur within a separate temporality to that which is given to individual lives.

The subject in the world

We will now discuss some aspects of the subject's actions on their journey through the world. As the subject moves through different spaces, they reveal expressions of belonging and recognition that result from their interactions with other subjects and places. Their movements trace a vertical line that intersects with a horizontal line extending from action to imagination. The vertical line connects the one end, belonging, with the other end, recognition. The horizontal line connects the pole of action with its opposite pole of imagination. Where the two lines cross, we find experiences, an intersection from which something very inventive emerges.

The description of these dimensions and how they relate to different ways of belonging and recognition enable us to create a didactic framework for analysing our experiences. This didactic framework is formed around the verbs understand, do and believe. Each of these verbs expresses a dimension closely related to our needs. In the very process of forming our way of being human, we feel the need to understand, we fulfil our desires by doing and we let ourselves be led and supported by a system of belief. Understanding, doing and believing are brought together in a dynamic of mutual involvement.

Every subject experiences the various dimensions of their needs based on the condition of being present in the world. In one dimension, the subject must commit to first trying to understand the world and, while doing so, understand their interactions with it. We call this dimension the sphere of comprehension – the moment when the subject formulates explanations about the world as an occurrence. When we arrive at a certain location, we try to understand what happens there, the reality that the place offers. We also try to understand the possible ties that can be made with other subjects, with all those who are participating with us in the same situation.

In this environment, the subject thinks and interprets in a gradual effort to understand lived reality. At each step along the way, knowledge is gained; a subject does not just conform to what they already know. Simply making an effort to gain knowledge yields the desire to know even more. In response to every challenge that the world presents, more effort is made to come up with solutions, guided by the explanations that the world provides. This is the dimension of epistemology, a philosophical term which we use as a way to express the effort made to understand. This is a general outline of the dimension of understanding, one of the poles making up this epistemology.

We come now to a discussion of the dimension of doing, and again we turn to the field of philosophy for the right term: ontology. By doing, and by applying our knowledge, we advance towards the realisation of our experiences. We jump to action and invent solutions to the problems that arise in our given situation. Immersed in this dynamic of doing, we transform the world, we explore the tensions between the realm of the possible and that of the impossible. At the very moment of action, faced with opportunities to experience different places and people, we feel the desire for more growing within. We become certain that these places of tension awaken the imagination. Once more we observe how action and imagination lead a symbiotic relationship. Thus, we delineate the dimension of doing, this ontological pole, when we experience some mode of existence. In this way, our practices extend beyond our understanding, later returning back to it and forming new ways of thinking that differ from what was previously possible.

In our experiences with social movements we have slowly developed a perception of the intense movement between the realm of understanding and that of doing. Understanding and doing are interrelated and synergistic. The more we develop our knowledge, the more we improve our actions. This is why we feel the need to

understand more. This movement takes place throughout our lifetime, allowing no time to rest. Surrounded by all this movement, we have no chance for respite. Breaking with illusions of calm, with the desire to arrive at a place of supposed harmony and peace, frees up energies within us and allocates the dreamworld back to its proper place. Dreaming, in imaginative practices, becomes powerful, always in confrontation with action.

Using our perception of this mutual involvement between understanding and doing, we can identify the element responsible for maintaining this movement. We have seen how the present, usually in some invisible form, exists between understanding and doing. This implies some form of belief because we believe in the possibility of another world and then we throw ourselves into the intense movements that experience presents us. Belief inspires our actions and pushes us into experiences of connection with other subjects caught up in the same movements, all of us seeking a better world.
Thus, this point of the discussion brings us to a space where we must believe, to the field of "belief". Again, philosophy provides the right term for this dimension: "axiology". This is the ideal environment for the imagination to develop because it exists at a level where we believe our dreams are created. This place of "belief" is where the need for a "new" political imagination is born, an imagination materially formed by the infatigable movement between understanding and doing.

In one of Gilles Deleuze's observations we find confirmation of our belief by coming to our own understanding of what the field of axiology means. Deleuze puts it this way:

> "Believing in the world is what we need most; we have completely lost the world, we have been dispossessed of it. Above all, believing in the world is about creating events—even small ones, that are beyond our control—or engendering new convergences of time and space, even over a small area." [2]

With Deleuze's words we can confirm the extent to which belief in the world and our efforts to instigate events participate in the materiality of our actions.

Modal categories of existence

The didactic framework created with the spheres of knowing, doing and believing offers us an adequate interpretive point of reference to use in the "intermediate" field between action and imagination. This convergence of references will help us in our efforts to care for and cultivate the many planes involved in our struggles for social transformation.

Remaining within this framework, we will direct our attention to the field of action, defining the realm of "ontology" in more detail. We seek this space to realise our existence by affirming our connection with types of exploration that differ from the exploration that happens via mediation. We must insist on giving special attention to the space of "intermediaries", and we strive to take special care of this terrain and ensure its fertility because the effectiveness of our actions and the vitality of our imagination depend on it.

In this way of exploring what constitutes our existence, we can develop our own understanding of the modal categories of existence: 1) need, 2) reality, 3) possibility. These categories make up ontology. While we exist in the world, while we live through history, we become subjects according to how we relate to these modalities.

Why do we strive so hard to improve our relationship with the modal categories of existence? We do so because they create connections that can support us in our efforts to transform society, improve the world and write history. We wish to call attention to our dedication to cultivating connections. What types of connections constitute each modal category of existence?

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Attitudes, which form within us from birth, easily reinforce connections of guardianship and dependence when they are allowed to take shape spontaneously, within a family, for example. The conquest of attitudes around autonomy requires an educational effort and agenda, and this is one task that must be assumed by organised groups within social movements.

In the category of need, we understand how the connection between every subject and their body is created. This involves a certain materiality of life that requires care. We are present in the world because of our bodies. As we are neither angels nor machines, caring for our bodies is a necessity for preserving our health. We can only dedicate ourselves properly to the tasks of social struggle if we are healthy. The more we take care of our health, the less often we are ill.

We need our health to bear the weight of all the tasks involved in being dedicated to social transformation. In the sphere of need, we focus on this dimension of survival. Living, in this sense, is the material condition of survival. The materiality of this plane of necessity encompasses a wide range of types of care: food, rest, leisure, pleasure, tastes, protection from inclement weather, clothing, and so on. This realm includes maintaining our physical health, not just tackling the problems that arise when we are ill. If we organise our attention rationally, for example focussing on prevention, we will have better conditions for maintaining our health. Moreover, the pleasure we experience by living well also factors as an important determinant of our holistic health.

In this modal category of existence, we can identify various aspects related to educational processes. These processes include themes related to our own education, namely challenges that teach us which tasks are necessary for maintaining a healthy body. What aspects of education are relevant here? In the educational realm of necessity we must develop abilities that expand our independence. Every subject needs to develop the self-care skills they need to survive.

The educational aspect of need can be better understood through the following examples. Let's begin with food. Nutrition is a basic requirement for staying healthy, yet preparing meals involves a set of skills and knowledge. This knowledge can be taught by those experienced at cooking. The same can be said of our clothing. The skills related to making clothes can be transmitted by those who know how to sew. We also need shelter, and the knowledge related to the construction of houses can also be transmitted by builders, and so on. What we wish to point out here is the fact that the development of various abilities will broaden the subject's independence when the time comes to take responsibility for their own survival.

These ways of understanding the relationships between the subject and their own body teach us a lesson about the care involved in connecting to yourself. Connections the subject establishes with their own body support them in their condition as an active subject. These connections increase in quality and consistency when the subject develops abilities to complete survival-related tasks. This can all be organised by social movements via transformative programmes. Here lies the all important confluence between individual care, carried out by everyone for themselves, and collectively organised care.

Taking a step further in the formulation of our didactic framework, we approach the next modal category of existence called "reality". This is within the sphere of action, understood as an exercise of the political, the place where groups find solutions to problems that come along with the challenges of any social context. In the category of reality, we understand how each subject forms ties with their peers. The power of our involvement in action, in movements of social transformation, very much depends on the quality of this type of connection. This is where we find the "intermediary" space, which has the special quality of being the necessary condition for sustaining the action of collective tasks. The quality of our bonds with others, with those who share our mode of action, allows us to broaden our ability to exercise power. If we wish to increase our power when looking for solutions to the problems around us, we should cultivate these bonds built on otherness. After all, it is by interacting with others that we create something new with every action.

In this modal category of existence, at the level of reality, we identify different aspects related to educational processes. Here we face the challenge of the prerequisite tasks that are needed to care for the health of our connections to the

other. What core issue of this category pushes us to further develop educational processes within social movements using organisational processes in struggles for change? This is the space in which attitudes are formed.

What do we understand about the formation of attitudes? Forming an attitude entails making an effort to overcome devices of control, supervision or authoritarian practices. Attitudes in this context refer to the fact that every subject can count on themself and can count on the other without getting trapped in modes of dependence. One's attitude has to do with their political position, with the way they are present in the world and in history. Our attitudes, if we wish to develop autonomy, do not emerge naturally out of thin air and cannot be assumed to be inherent to the subject for the sheer fact of being alive. Attitudes must be formed by different forces, and this leads us to educational processes. Attitudes, which form within us from birth, easily reinforce connections of guardianship and dependence when they are allowed to take shape spontaneously, within a family, for example. The conquest of attitudes around autonomy requires an educational effort and agenda, and this is one task that must be assumed by organised groups within social movements.

Now let us take the formulation of our didactic framework yet another step further by addressing the modal category of existence called "possibility". This is the realm of the imagination. In it we exercise our capacity to dream of all the ways a new world could be achieved through cooperation. The first steps towards living life in all its diversity consist in using our dreams to imagine possible ways to break with our reality. In our dreams we deal with the complete spectrum of possibility for fulfilling our desires, both individually and collectively. On this level we cultivate hope as an exercise of responsibility. The practice of hope, however, does not consist in surrendering oneself to passive expectation, as if the world will just magically change on its own. Instead, it entails bringing the future into the present by involving every subject in programmes of collective action.

In this modal category of existence, the plane of possibility, we identify different aspects related to educational processes, and we accept the challenge of including them as necessary conditions for the good health of our connections with the world. We also identify the educational tasks that should be undertaken by organised groups within social movements. These tasks refer to the field of values, the material elements responsible for the composition of our beliefs. Different ways of believing can also be tended to by the education of individuals and groups at the same time.

There are, therefore, two different approaches to the precarity of life. The first is ontological and we can have a certain understanding of it. The second is historical, and for that we utilise various scopes of knowledge as resources to work out the best solutions.

Between action and imagination: ethics, aesthetics and politics

Through our educational experiences with organised social movement groups in Brazil and in other Latin American countries we have been able to shape these frameworks of interpretation into didactic resources. Using these frameworks, we can evaluate the results of our programmes of action. In the context of these formulations, we have sought out the most decisive core concept in mobilising and acquiring new participants. We have based our search on the work of Paul Freire. Here we will limit ourselves to presenting other methods of interpretation inspired by one of this master's key readings.

This key reading is derived from our interpretation of the dedication found at the beginning of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which Paulo Freire writes:

> "To the oppressed, and to those who see themselves in the oppressed and, thus, discover themselves, suffer along with them, but, above all, fight alongside them." [3]

In this dedication, Freire uses three verbs: discover, suffer and fight. Let us explore the meanings of these verbs, applying the didactic framework discussed above.

We associate the verb "discover" with the field of understanding. In terms of

Freire's philosophy of education, it refers to a reading of the world developed through reading words. It is worth highlighting the emphasis that Freire puts on the relationship with the other. There is a definition that states that the act of discovery is carried out together with the other, marked by a discovery of oneself in the other. We understand that the importance given to this stage of the development of knowledge points out its political dimension. The more the subject broadens their range of knowledge through experiences in the world, the greater the subject's power to act. This power dynamic, present in practices of reading, makes this the ideal place for the practice of politics.

This idea further unfolds as we look at the second verb: suffering (with the oppressed). The verb "to suffer" allows us to identify the point at which the subject relates to their own condition of vulnerability, i.e. the ethical dimension. When the subject recognises their fragility, they discover within the other the conditions for the exercise of their complementarity. This presents a paradox that deserves attention, because it is in the condition of our fragility that we recognise our strength. Therefore, we move towards the other from this place of fragility, not because we obey some rationality that comes from the level of understanding, but rather because we recognise that we can only complete ourselves by encountering and engaging with the other.

However, we do not stop there; we find ourselves caught up in the enjoyment of suffering, and we begin to fight. In collectively organised movements we develop actions to transform the world wherever there is suffering. Together we create solutions to overcome different forms of suffering. This is called the aesthetic dimension because it is the place where a work of art is composed for the world, in the world, together with the actions of others.

Using this combination of three verbs, we can better understand that the ethical dimension is a point of adhesion, where the strength of mobilisation resides. Through this powerful attribution to the moment of contact with suffering we distinguish an ontological condition of precarity for which there is no solution. We are born as vulnerable human beings and deal with so many different limitations in our lives. Our understanding reaches new levels when, beyond our perception of an ontological dimension of suffering, we identify the hallmarks of another vulnerability, one produced in our histories, for which we can find solutions. There are, therefore, two different approaches to the precarity of life. The first is ontological and we can have a certain understanding of it. The second is historical, and for that we utilise various scopes of knowledge as resources to work out the best solutions.

Times of patience and times of urgency

We close the text by returning to the differences between times of action and times of imagination. Our intuition originated in the understanding of the confrontation between "historical patience" and "historical urgency", beginning with arguments already formulated by Célio Turino, the mentor of "Puntos de Cultura" (Cultural Points) in Latin America.

In times when life seems destined to present us with moments of uncertainty, in times when the extreme vulnerability of a pandemic is ever present, the rhythm of life does not coincide with the rhythm at which transformations occur. Thrown into the greatest of fragilities, our individual lives take priority. Looking beyond our individual survival, from the moment we see brutality start to emerge in social relationships, notions of patience come up against the urgency of history. Times of patience do not resemble times of urgency. Not letting people die of hunger or urban violence is quintessentially a political act. This treatment of temporalities, observing the specifics of patience with the need for urgency, can seep into creative and productive processes with the temporal aspect of care in both our actions and imagination.

Where everything begin...

After creating a referential framework in order to help evaluate our actions within social movements, we now turn to emphasise how action becomes deed via experiences. Anyone participating in organised groups, anyone committed to movements of social transformation, can only experience an intervention of the exercise of politics by starting with the practices of movement between spheres and involving oneself in experiences. The development of rationality becomes more consistent when it is truly linked to a practice and occurs at understood levels of effectiveness.

We end our journey with a question: Where does everything begin? We can pinpoint the starting point of social movements within the figure of the militant subject, as this figure is able to take on the role of educator. This ability includes the capacity to gather experiences and teachings that offer ways to react to reality with practices of social transformation and to transmit acquired knowledge so as to permanently establish widespread exchange of knowledge in organisational processes within social movements. Therefore, we assert that the changes in a society are never the work of angelic beings or programmed machines. Every subject, assuming the responsibility of cultivating within themself a broad sense of humanity, appropriates history and reworks it through complementary interactions with the other.

Having underlined the role of the militant, we would also like to highlight grassroots work as part of that triggering nucleus, that point identified as the place where everything begins. Experiences and subjects develop and are transformed via intense movements of reinvention and resistance.

We close our text with Paulo Freire's concluding words in his introduction to Pedagogy of the Oppressed:

> "From these pages I hope at least the following will endure: my trust in the people, and my faith in men and women, and in the creation of a world in which it will be easier to love." [4]

Managing the different temporalities of subjects, in their movement between action and imagination is closely tied to community trust. This trust is reinforced by movements that reinvent both subjects and entire worlds. In these combinations, love is elevated as a source of life and guiding principle.

In conclusion, it is a long journey towards the viability of dreams, one that is guided by dreams themselves and reinforced by experiences. The immanence of action intersects with the transcendence of imagination. In this way, we can become the other, and, at the same time, invent worlds where life can flourish with intense joy.

Romualdo Dias

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04. NEW POETICS FOR THE DIGITAL AGE

Antonio Penedo Picos

Oct, 2021

1. From steady continuity to leaps and bounds: an introduction to the digital subject

Nowadays, it is barely worth mentioning that digital language is causing an irrevocable shift towards a new society. However, assumptions that this change will consist of simply substituting oral/written communication for audio/visual are nothing more than a false, yet to be established dichotomy. If anything will herald the dawn of a new digital age, it will be the definitive, ingrained preeminence of linguistics as an essential skill in managing the technologised subjects of the already-present future in which we find ourselves.

Let us consider, for a moment, how we can numerically quantify our evolution as a species: millions of years spent in a hominid state; mere hundreds of thousands to become *homo sapiens*, and finally the culmination of as little as tens of thousands to reach our phylogenetic zenith as *homo sapiens sapiens*, speeding through the revolutionary palaeolithic and neolithic eras. What caused such a shift from slow, gradual change to these subsequent leaps and bounds? We are faced with a case of what Stephen Jay Gould would call "punctuated equilibrium", since between the very long Phase A (millions) and the disproportionately shorter C, D, E and F (each faster than the last), there is little or no sign of continuity. The first phase deals with the transition, very gradually over millions and millions of years, from amphibians or reptiles to mammals, and then, as if in a flash (in evolutionary time) we became human beings. What could account for this? We outgrew our audiovisual abilities and developed new, verbal ones, along oral and proto-orthographic lines. It is the emergence of language, the creation of morphology and syntax and the ability to assemble these pieces into lengthy paragraphs, which heralded and enabled the birth of human society. It was, in a nutshell, the brain's capacity for symbolic thought which supercharged our physical forms and drove us to appropriate the natural world for our own ends. What made us human was not the ability to see or hear our environment, but rather to articulate it in words. It was this transition, from an audiovisual protoculture to an oral/written one, with the icons and symbols this makes possible, that brought us to where we are today. There is nothing more nonsensical than to say that "a picture is worth a thousand words". If such a thought exists, it is only because a thousand words have been used to explain the picture's proper significance, and because, in any case, our evolution has always been guided by feedback loops linking images with symbols and vice versa.

Digital language can only serve an emancipatory function in the modern world if it is used by minds whose synapses have been trained in decoding signs and symbols, minds which can reprocess each intellectual and perceptual action through a hermeneutic process. Steven Rose reminds us that our neurons work not digitally but analogically, and that humans understand things primarily through associated meaning, as opposed to direct contact with the phenomena we face.

The global cyberspace which technology opens up does not function as optimally as it does because digital technology itself is fast, but rather because we make fast decisions when using it: we click through web pages at dizzying speeds because our neurotransmitters know how to interpret symbolic language, language which cannot exist without the support of a system of symbolic signifiers. As a consequence, the seemingly boundless communicative possibilities offered by new technology are not the result of being freed from the "burden" of traditional language, but rather they are enabled by this language itself, which has facilitated a new evolutionary leap and created space for the (re)activation of long-lost audiovisual perception as a direct result of the oral/written abilities developed by humans over recent millennia. If we can match each other's audiovisual capabilities on a global level, it is only because of the thousands, if not millions, of words that will allow us to do so.

Let us consider then, that the last unit of measurement is not "tens of thousands of years", but "decades" (and not many of them) in which the subjects of the new digital era are being decided. We find ourselves, no doubt, facing a new phase of human evolution whose possibilities we can barely guess at. However, the subjects of this era do not yet exist; all us are still semio-hybrid beings. New technology, and the new norms of communication it entails, are meaningless if detached from what came before them, and with regard to this point it is worth dismantling (or cancelling) the false, two-dimensional debate between classical and audiovisual modes. In order for one of these to advance, it is because it draws on the other, and because the person who seeks to advance it has been educated in previously codified norms: there is no opposition or substitution, only transitive cross-pollination and integration. School and university models, and their associated social and group dynamics, continue to be governed according to non-digital parameters, the persistence of which is paving the way for the digitalisation of society. The future, as designed by certain people, is nothing without the presence of everything they (falsely) believe must be abandoned. The more steps made toward the digital epiphany, the more the (not yet) past will seep into online spaces.

Things will become even more complicated when we reach the next evolutionary stage made possible by new technology. This will be when the prominence of the entity known as "paragraph" will decide who is and is not tuned into the new reality. This will be when verbal modes will be unravelled into the transfuture (perhaps better described as the omni-present). In this time we will finally come to understand that without the ability to interpret phenomena through symbols we cannot and will not have community. In short, digital community cannot exist without grammar. We have evolved as humans because our brains computed the world via symbols, and as we enhanced this ability by learning to fire on all synapses, we accelerated our own genetic progress through space and time. Without language we are not human, and there will be no transhuman world that is not based on signs and symbols. The acceleration triggered by technology will not sweep grammar aside, it will radicalise it. A digital subject cannot exist without grammar.

2. Analogue prevalence in two historical parentheses

Decades, as we have seen, constitute the final unit of the evolutionary process. Even until the Second World War there were substantial pockets of illiteracy scattered throughout Europe, and many sections of society still only had access to an audiovisual understanding of the world. The post-war era was put to an end by mass education, the creation of the welfare state and the democratisation of symbols. These conditions were the analogue precursors to our digital era. It bears repeating: the great biological leaps made by the human species with respect to its previous hominid phases were made possible by the incorporation of language into our minds and bodies; the last great digital leap, which we have barely even begun, is the result of the universal democratisation of this process and its consolidation into graphemes. Without command of grammar there can be no audiovisual progress. New technological demands are the product of new demographics, and can be

parenthetically categorised into two eras, with an incision cut between them.

The first period in question begins in 1945 and ends in 1989, and can be summed up as follows: the experimentation and expiration of contemporary capitalist parliamentary representation. During these decades, people were testing out the principles of collective access to power, control of this power via elections, and secular faith in the communion between representatives and the represented. With the fall of the Berlin Wall came the demise of this model, but at the same time the wall's demolition marked the end of any possibility that the opposing bloc's ideology could ever present a threat to political or economic praxis in the West. So, what then happened was that, when one of the two elements of the era-defining opposition (capitalism vs communism) collapsed, the other ceased to be a partial option and was rebranded under a new name: common sense. From 1989 the criteria for (and control of) governability in Europe, along with the associated socioeconomic norms and directives, came to be perceived less as cultural constructions, and more as reality itself. This defined the 1990s, whose rallying cries of market "deregulation" and "self-management" were championed by the business and banking industries, and were encouraged (even publicly cheered on) by governments.

The second period begins in May 1968 and ends in September 2001, and can be defined in even simpler terms than the last: the limits of postmodernity. After the system was rebooted in the early 1950s and put to the test in the 1960s, it became apparent—before the decade was even over—that new generations did not see themselves represented in this model and wanted little to do with it. This is the epitome of postmodernity: reflection on a phenomenon and radical suspicion of any trust placed in, or mediated by, culture. This overarching meta-principle ended abruptly with the symbolic (and physical) wound left by the 9/11 attacks, when globalisation blew up in our faces and forced us to reckon with the fact that the ethnocentrism revealed by postmodernity no longer governed the fate of the world. A new chapter was opened which is still yet to be named.

Then there is the incision between the two parenthetical eras (capitalism and postmodernity) marked by a third, much more recent date: 1995. This year was when the internet reached its democratic potential, and we will use this date to (re)set the tone of the previously mentioned periods via the following hypothesis: 1989 and 2001 were the end of the line for their respective models of growth and development; they brought us to where we are now, but are no longer relevant. The disrepute into which our parliamentary systems have fallen and the growing disconnect between citizen and politician is plain to see, and it has also become clear that we cannot continue to doubt our suspicions of what may or may not be real. The ending of these two parenthetical eras marks the double culmination of two phases, a culmination which may have led to the demise of Western nations, had they not been the birthplace and epicentre of the Internet, and therefore of the expansion of digital society and culture. Electronic means were what saved (if we wish to think in such terms) us from potential societal collapse following the end of these twin projects after the Second World War. Were it not for the birth of web pages, blogs, social media, chats, emails, and were it not for the mass communication facilitated via digital channels, it is difficult to see how we could have moved past the fatigue, lack of dialogue and distrust in traditional media to circulate ideas and actions. What we seek to make clear is that cyberspace has taken on the role of regulating, managing and intervening in socio-civic interaction, roles previously played by assorted parliamentary, municipal, or governmental actors. What we also seek to make clear is that the characteristically postmodern suspicion of reality, never intended to drive us towards nihilism, has been energised by digital language and has led suspicion to become a form of subscription. Mistrust and wariness have become the poster children for the de-hierarchisation of digital libertarianism.

1995 is the year that reversed the declining trend of the parenthetical periods which marked the end of mid to late twentieth century experimentalism. It is just as well that the virtual world came to our rescue to make reality more navigable. So, what

It was not only the 90s-era market deregulation and self-management that caused such explosive, imbalanced global growth and introduced poverty to swathes of the planet that claimed to have it under control, but also that it has led to a reality which is, for all of us, irreconcilable with conceptions of what is human and what is real.

This is the key to the new poetics of the digital age: if life expectancy is going to reach 100 years; if parliamentary models are failing to properly manage our societies; if hitherto unquestionable ideas are being questioned; if, in spite of everything, comfort has taken precedence; if, on top of everything else, the ability to access and be shaped by information is what will define our freedom, are we analogically prepared for the digital world?

we have been trying to show from the beginning is that, if a lucky escape from both periods was possible, it was only because the analogue realities forged in them made their own transmutation possible when the time was right. It is here that we must once again consider the false, flawed dichotomy of a digital cultural model which believes it can do away with an analogue cultural model. If generations and patterns are able to be replaced, it is because there was first a satisfactory resolution and assimilation of what came before. If, in spite of all the objections we may raise to the respective processes set in motion in 1945 and 1968, we fail to recognise what we got out of these periods, then we fail to properly assess our own evolution. What took place in the second half of the last century was nothing more and nothing less than the (relatively) equal distribution of linguistic signs and signifiers among all strata of society. The second half of the twentieth century is the consolidation of what Juri Lotman would come to call the semiosphere, i.e. the insertion of the human being into a sphere of cultural signs and codes which safeguard it and increase its chances of survival. We can thus return to the initial thesis: digital culture and language will not do away with analogue culture and verbal language, but rather they—having borne us out of humanity's initial audiovisual state—will now, once again, guide us towards the new, post-2001 millennial horizon.

3. Human evolution and automated kindness

The second half of the twentieth century saw the historically unprecedented expansion of "livability" in terms of existence which, just when it was beginning to decline (its self-interest having destabilised the "economy-first" approach, while the economic regulation feeding frenzy left it above any criticism), came to be rescued by a new subject which emerged from within it.

Anthropological sequences can be divided up as follows: the signo-biological thread, the technological thread and the cyber-cultural thread, which make up an informational society (to place Manuel Castells' analytical stamp on it), played out in an new-old environment which is nothing other than the brain itself. To all the dates mentioned thus far we can add the final (and most dramatic) one, which confirms our thesis. The date is October 2008, when a stock market crash not seen since 1929 made something transcendentally clear: the new digital era cannot work under the socioeconomic parameters that created it. There is no longer the mere ethical consideration of how wealth ought to be distributed, but also the fact that we have created a system in which no one is truly safe, not even those at the very top of the pile who benefit the most from it. It must be emphasised that it was not only the 90s-era market deregulation and self-management that caused such explosive, imbalanced global growth and introduced poverty to swathes of the planet that claimed to have it under control, but also that it has led to a reality which is, for all of us, irreconcilable with conceptions of what is human and what is real.

As paradoxical as it may seem, we can argue that the growth and development model of the 1990s paved the way for a new kind of experience, that of "automated kindness", which cannot be sustained by the means which created it. By looking once more at our evolutionary development, we see that what defined humans was the ability to make tools, and this ability was accelerated by the creation of that most instrumental of tools: the verbal sign. Humanity's goal from then onwards (for the next thirty to forty thousand years) would be to overcome the harsh savagery of the natural world. Natural selection took care of the most elemental aspects of bodily subsistence: surviving harsh environments, outlasting plagues and epidemics and devouring without being devoured. We know that Charles Darwin based his theory of the evolution of species on these premises, and it is understandable that he focussed his attention on somatic subsistence and its changing forms; cerebral capacity had to be used in the service of physical survival and so the symbolic had to be used in the service of the somatic. However, in the digital age this line of reasoning must be turned on its head. We have reached a point of such comfort, of such "automated kindness" and physical wellbeing that it is now the body which

enables (or rather demands) a new mindset which was hitherto inconceivable. It may appear (by now to the point of certainty) that the growth of digital language has taken place in order to facilitate commercial transactions, governmental legislation, and, in general, the ordering and maintenance of our social fabric. It is precisely because we have reached such a point that digital language is what will take us beyond our current state. The domestication of our environments makes clear the precarity of our most important environment, that which rules our every moment, but which has yet to be carefully considered: I am referring to the cerebral environment. Evolution accelerated because when humans truly started to develop, they began to understand how to kick-start the hundreds of billions of synapses to which they have access. It was not arms and legs which carried us so far, but rather the thinking of what we could or could not do with our arms and legs. Now, there is little progress left to be made with our bodies because the entire planet has been placed in service to them. It is the mind which will implode in the digital age, and it will be able to survive doing so because it knows how to process analogically. It has not yet dawned on us that we will not know what to do with the millions of people whose life expectancy could reach as much as 100 years. We are faced with a physical longevity which has no precedent, no instruction manual. One could consider the possibility of a 40/60 cycle, whereby at the age of forty a person is not considered to be past any sort of peak, but that this age marks the beginning of a new sixty year macrocycle. The fullness of life is not reached until the age of fifty, and "adult-lescence" lasts until the end of one's thirties. There is no established roadmap for such unprecedented biological circumstances which can help us to make sense of our lives at this point. As Hans Blumenberg said, people want to live longer, but they do not think about why. Automated kindness will not dictate what gives meaning to our lives, but perhaps by making the most of automated kindness our lives will find their own meaning.

New technology and the hyper-domesticated environment in which millions of human beings live will allow them to indulge in their thoughts and feelings like never before. The question is, will they know how? When they resort to digital language, will they know what they want to say and how to encode and decode it? This is the key to the new poetics of the digital age: if life expectancy is going to reach 100 years; if parliamentary models are failing to properly manage our societies; if hitherto unquestionable ideas are being questioned; if, in spite of everything, comfort has taken precedence; if, on top of everything else, the ability to access and be shaped by information is what will define our freedom, are we analogically prepared for the digital world? Are we verbally equipped for digital citizenry? The distance we must travel, from what we are currently capable of to what this task requires will not be measured, as many believe, from the end of the journey, but from the beginning. It is so clear that the transformation of reality will be produced by any and all means that it apparently has not dawned on us that such a task will require a subject attuned to such methods. The path being cleared by digital technology will not be paved by the correct use of different formats, interfaces or channels, but by the ability to recodify ourselves via the messages we send through them. It will be a semiotic issue, not a computer issue. We are experiencing a genetic mutation in our brains, because they carry the responsibility of having enough neural pathways prepared to accommodate any new information.

We already know that it is debatable whether evolution is headed for better or worse states, but what should be clear is that it will bring about complex, novel developments. So, it would appear that those subjects who have the purchasing power to acquire whatever technology they want and are equipped to use it will be the new vanguard, the harbingers of change. However, this is not necessarily true, as the birth of new forms of wealth will engender new forms of poverty. The poverty which is now emerging is what we could call "semiotic poverty", which can be understood as being suffered by those who are incapable of understanding the events occurring in their own bodily environments. Such an inability will not necessarily depend on income levels, bank balances or asset portfolios, but on the ability to distinguish which messages need to be processed or not, how to fit oneself into

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higher levels of comprehension and, most importantly, what proactive actions must be undertaken in order to achieve this.

4. A more than digital divide

The digital era will require, as never before, articulate, coherent and assembled linguistic subjects structured in ordered, rather than simply juxtaposed, units which are capable of oral and written comprehension and the ability to circulate them online. New digital languages will further differentiate those who only have a basic level of sign-based subsistence from those capable of revelling in sign-based creativity. The closing of the aforementioned eras (the ending of both an economic and political model and a sociocultural value system) was galvanised by the advent of the Internet in 1995 and the globalisation of the semiosphere that it entailed. Digital

language will be (and in fact already is) the stuff from which interconnected societal paradigms more resistant to hierarchical control will be built. However, in order for such a scenario to endure, we need highly literate, actively grammatical subjects, with the ability to comprehend and synthesise information, as well as transmit and generate alternatives, and education will play a significant part in this. It is right here that we are presented with the true divide between the worlds of today and tomorrow: there is so much attention being paid to breaching the digital divide that the analogue rift caused by the online world is going completely unnoticed. What we argue is that primary and secondary education, as well as higher education, are basing their programmes on media resources and lining up knowledge with the job market, when they should in fact be prioritising the relationship between teaching patterns and civic participation. Currently, their top priority is the training and specialisation of individuals to meet the labour needs of a society focused on research and development, but they fail to realise that, while workers can be specialised, the citizens of the future will be anything but sectoral.

The divide which is becoming entrenched centres on separating the working subject from the real human like never before. The former is asked (though really they are forced) to attain a deep knowledge of only that subject matter which is deemed to be productive, while the latter seems to be asked for (or advised of, as it were) nothing. We regularly hear the World Health Organisation's statistics on the rise of mental illness, not only in the Western world but also across the globe. Can we believe that economic thresholds are the sole deciding factor in these percentages? What if we started to consider that the opposite were true? It is at this juncture that digital language and nascent cyberculture once more take centre stage. What will take place in the coming decades is that such an expansion of messages and forums will submit our limbic systems to such overload that only those who are capable of signic self-regulation will be able to flourish in the new world. Human evolution accelerated due to our mental development, and human evolution may now enter into recession due to a lack of mental ability. In this new incarnation of Darwinism, survival will not depend on muscular and skeletal prowess, but rather on the ability to tightly control cerebral processes at all times. This will not be an environment of predatory animals or famine and disease, but of a dazzling array of media vying for our attention from the moment we wake up to the moment we go to bed. Analogue training and discipline is the only solution to this so-called digital divide.

All of the above is applicable to inhabitants of high and upper-middle income countries, and lower-middle and low income nations will need to adjust their educational programmes according to the means of production and the information available to them. However, we also know that lower income economies lag further behind than ever, not only because they cannot "catch up" with other societies, but also because they are being effectively cast aside by, or trampled under, the sheer momentum of what we think of as progress. Here, we can add the missing, crucial piece to the puzzle of any reflection on digital language: the new bioethics of the third millennium. Without discourse and ensuing specific action which includes and embeds digital subjects in top-level, global organisation from a position of participative solidarity, no kind of future can be envisioned, not in the immediate, let alone the near future. We can thank the year 1995 once more for unlocking what could not be imagined in the periods of 1945-1989 or 1968-2001, when it became apparent that group or parliamentary forums as they were understood at the time did not possess the will, ability or knowledge to account for or challenge global inequalities. If one thing defined the final decades of the twentieth century it is the groundswell of associative and alternative grassroots organising never before seen in the history of humanity, and it goes without saying that, were it not for the existence of digital technology and digital language, these movements could never have been coordinated with such speed and efficiency. Who would have thought that the cyberworld would be what ended up moulding our physical world? We therefore now find ourselves faced with a novel alliance between technology and ethics which, up to now (for example during the two industrial revolutions of the nineteenth century), has hinged on principles of domination and capital, as opposed to those of

solidarity and equitable distribution, and so it bears repeating: if the new world of technology can function as it does, it is only because the swift transmission of signs and ideas which has been trained by centuries of subjects versed in the language of signs can now, at last, be disseminated online ad *infinitum*.

5. New poetics for the digital era in times of crisis

With Voltaire's licence, though at the risk of being naïve, we can take a page from Leibniz and try to imagine the best possible outcome for the world: millions upon millions of humans whose life expectancy is growing from one generation to the next, and a warming climate creating deserts across a planet which has been plundered of its natural resources. We will have to contend with ever-present tensions between the need for self-regeneration and the demand for expansion, between the comforts of automated domestic life and the bewildering question of the meaning of life itself. Perhaps, when all is said and done, we have not yet committed the sin of naïvely dodging the imminent apocalypse. What we have here is the final key element, which must be assembled in the new digital semiosphere through digital methods: participation via information. Living as we do in a world of endless options, we cannot forget that one option that is not clickable, and which the system does not account for: "not doing", "not knowing". What we can no longer expect from parliamentary systems, and what we can no longer ascribe to in religion will come to be replaced by computer systems optimised for biophilia and cooperation. The new poetics of the digital age will transform the innocuous virtual realm into the transcendental reality. This will be the definitive step from a solid to a liquid society, rather than the current resolution as defined by Zygmunt Bauman. This is not to discredit his ideas, but assessing the partiality with which the lone individual weaves his ideas moves us no closer to providing imaginative solutions for the new communities of the digital era. Characterising liquid modernity as fickle and insubstantial in contrast to the stoic dependability of the solid is to forget that the latter can also be immovable and authoritarian, while the former can be malleable, adaptive, liberating, changeable, flexible, and empathetic. Bauman would be right, if dismantling societal welfare were only to end in dismembered relativism with no criteria or reason. The lucidity with which he analyses many of the ills of our present is not matched by an ability to envision any future, nor by an even minimal analytical attempt to foresee future kindness after systemic collapse. We therefore find ourselves presented with a catch-22: we need to both reconcile climate change and rebuild our economic system. This is neither good nor bad news—there are no angels and devils whispering in our ears—as the result depends firmly on what kind of backbone we will create for the skeletal structure of the new homo sapiens sapiens digitalis: the imminence of environmental change dovetails with the imminence of semiospheric change. Both will have to be synchronised and this heroic deed, if we want to tell this story in epic language and emotions, can only be carried out via techno-codified means.

We are living through a crisis, undoubtedly the greatest experienced by humans in recent centuries, and also at the dawn of the greatest revolution ever seen since prehistoric times. However, we cannot forget that crisis is a noun derived from the Greek verb "krínein", which in fact means to judge, evaluate and decide. What decisions must be taken, and what part does digital language have to play? We have to decide how we will move from a solid, dogmatic society to a liquid society rooted in contracts, from a coercion-based society to an agreement-based society. How can such a feat be accomplished? Through an analogue formula, universally distributed via digital terminals.

New technology can play as important a role as it wants in the coordination of future secular societies. The spirituality of each individual (if it exists) will have to be made compatible with the founding of a non-theological community whose citizens, as a whole, will never be subjugated to any creed. It remains to be seen how we will move from old anthropomorphic theogonies to the new cosmogonies of modern science. What we previously called *pneumus* or *spiritus* will be reborn as bytes upon bytes stored in our devices. The eternally veiled face of the divine will be hooked up to our interfaces and screens, and its Holy Name will grace the very code of our software.

Taking 2001 to be the endpoint of postmodernity does not mean it has been vanquished. Quite the opposite. In the coming years, the period leading up to 2001 will come to be reappraised as a time of much needed rebuttal of the old and unfettered dissemination of anthropological experimentalism. However, we are no longer in the postmodern period. What is now left to figure out, following the interregnum period from 2001 to 2009, is what a society will look like in which the market, despite its best efforts, cannot and does not dictate our existential consciousness. The crisis at the end of 2009 brought two things to light: deregulation does not lead to infinite wealth, and the markets are incapable of self-management. We therefore find ourselves in a new cycle which has caught many but not all of us off guard. We have known for a long time where wealth will be found in the third millennium: in the possession and exchange of information, in the attainment and assimilation of signs and symbols. We have also realised (thanks especially to computers, communicative media, and new technology) what truly remains to be developed: the brain and how it can work in service of its innate abilities. The new frontier will be psychic. It dwells within us already and will be what catalyses and provokes tangible, physical changes across our society and our planet.

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05.

MEDIEVAL IMAGINARY AND BLACK DEATH: PANDEMIC, MEDICINE AND RELIGION

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Nov, 2022

The current pandemic will have a direct effect on how we view and think about politics for years to come. It seems difficult to predict exactly how, but if we look back at the medieval Black Death, one of the largest pandemic humanity has experienced to date, it may impart some points of comparison and help us to reflect on how exactly our collective trauma from this experience may unfold.

Throughout history, humanity has experienced many pandemics like coronavirus. The mid-14th Century witnessed what was perhaps one of the most terrifying epidemics in history: the Black Death, which lasted about seven years, from approximately 1346 to 1353. The disease spread very quickly with high mortality rates; it is believed that between 25% and 50% of the European population died as a result.

From a scientific point of view, many doctors wrote medical treatises attempting to explain the possible causes and consequences of the disease, as well as trying to offer remedies. In medieval times, when religiosity permeated all facets of life, religion remained closely intertwined with science. Christian, Jewish and Muslim doctors wrote treatises on the Black Death in which scientific explanations are entangled with religious ideas. In some cases, the texts are conditioned by the religion of their authors.

The objective of this article is to analyze some of these treatises written during the Black Death, by doctors of all three religions, to demonstrate the constant dialogue between science and religion in medieval thought. It is also evident that, although there are clearly many differences between the 14th Century Black Death and today's coronavirus pandemic, there are also some remarkable and astonishing similarities between both diseases.

At what resulted in a pivotal moment in the middle of the 14th century, the Black Death also resulted in a rise in 'fake news' and xenophobia, which led to the expulsion, massacre and scapegoating of many Jewish communities. At the same time, it also marked a turning point in terms of the collective religious imaginary of the era. Rationalist interpretations of religious texts were introduced and provided a theological basis for the calls emerging from the medical community demanding sanitary measures in order to prevent contagion.

In the Christian sphere, among the numerous treatises on the plague, three of them are highlighted here. [1] The first, entitled *Pestilence Preservation Regime* [*Regiment de preservació de pestilència*], was written in Catalan in 1348 by a doctor from Lleida named Jacme D'Agramont, who died of the plague shortly after finishing it. The second, also penned in 1348, was entitled *A Compendium of the Epidemic*, and prepared by a group of physicians from the Paris Faculty of Medicine at the request of King Charles IV of France. This group of doctors could be understood as the equivalent of what today would constitute a committee of health experts advising governments. The third, entitled, *Treatise on the Epidemic* (*Tractatus de epidemia*), was

The typical fake news linked to prejudice that we are so accustomed to today also existed in medieval times. At those times, these accusations unleashed a wave of Jewish persecution throughout Europe by angry, uncontrolled mobs, in which many Jews were killed, massacred, tortured or forced to leave their land and homes.

written in 1348 by an anonymous doctor from Montpellier, the location of one of the most important medical schools in the Middle Ages.

In the Jewish ambit, medical treatises are not as abundant, and they are not well known since many have not been even published. They are usually translations from Latin or Arabic to Hebrew, or written directly in Arabic. One of the most important is the treatise *A Well for Life* by Isaac ben Todrós, who lived in Avignon in the second half of the 14 Century. [2]

In medieval Muslim World, there are also many treatises regarding the Black Death, and two stand out. The first, *The Attainment of the Goal of the Seeker for Information concerning the Epidemic*, was written in 1349 by Ibn Khatima, a Muslim doctor from Almería. The second is the work of the famous Ibn al-Khatib (d. 1375), a Muslim doctor who served as vizier to the Sultan of Granada, and is entitled *A Useful Book for those Inquiring about the Appalling Illness*. [3]

What information do these treatises provide us about the Black Death? How did they view the pandemic? Above all, how did their respective religions influence their considerations about this disease?

Explanations about the causes and effects of the disease correspond to the hypotheses of medieval medicine, which are based on the scientific theories of Greek authors such as Galen and Hippocrates, as well as on medieval authors including Avicenna.

The descriptions in these medieval treatises offer observations that the Black Death produced a high fever, cough, dry throat and general tiredness, symptoms that are very familiar to us today in the case of the coronavirus. However, the most important characteristic of the disease was the appearance of the well-known buboes—hence the name bubonic plague—which were abscesses of pus that could occur in the armpits, groins and other parts of the body. Jacme d'Agramont warned that there were cases in which plague patients had barely any symptoms, or were asymptomatic: they demonstrated little to no fever, there was no alteration in their pulse—which in the Middle Ages was a symptom of illness—and still, the patient would suddenly die.

A recent article observes that Ibn Khatima's description of the causes of death in the case of medieval disease are very similar to those of death from COVID-19. Ibn Khatima explains that the plague causes a lack of pulmonar cooling of the innate heat generated in the heart (fever) and carried by blood (equivalent to the oxygen transport system). This process generates toxic residues (or free radicals), leading to an irreversible multiple organ failure, which causes death. [4]

It should be noted that, from all these authors, the only one that refers to the origin of the 14th Century pandemic is Ibn al-Khatib, identifying China as the point origin. Many centuries later, Wu Lien-Teh (1879-1960), a Chinese epidemiologist famous for promoting the mask use during the 1910 Manchurian Plague, defended the theory that the Black Death began in China in 1346. Other scientists, however, contest this opinion and defend that it originated in the Crimean area.

All medical treatises on the Black Death claim that the disease was caused by corruption or putrefaction of air, and transmitted through air in the surrounding environment. Parisian physicians used to declare that, "bad air is more harmful than food and drink, because it quickly, maleficently reaches the heart and lungs." The authors differ, however, with respect to the hypotheses about what causes this corruption. Jacme d'Agramont argued that the putrefaction of air could have been caused by bad vapors that mixed with air. He pointed out, like other authors, that putrefaction of air occurred after battles, when unburied corpses of soldiers rotted and polluted air. Putrefied waters could also produce pestilence when their vapors arose by the action of heat. Water humidity is transferred to air and mixes with it, causing its pollution. As is well known, humidity produces putrefaction. The Paris physicians argued that it was a simple natural change in the very substance of air.

To avoid air pollution, some preventative measures were recommended, like keeping rooms and houses well ventilated, and cities free of garbage (especially that of manure and animal entrails). It was also recommended to eliminate bad odors by burning aromatic herbs or fumigating with vinegar to purify air. Avoiding crowds was recommended to prevent transmission. Christian physicians often offered the famous advice to "go far away early, and come back as late as you can," which was repeated ad nauseam.

However, in addition to the cause of corrupted air, medieval scientists, both Christian, Muslim and Jewish, agreed that God was the ultimate cause of everything. As for explanations as to why the Most High had brought about that plague, the authors differed.

According to Christians and Jews, the plague was God's punishment for sins committed by human beings. Jacme D'Agramont defended this argument by citing various biblical verses. In Deuteronomy 28, God makes it very clear to the people of Israel that if they do not fulfill His laws, they will receive punishment. He

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expressly refers to "the boils of Egypt, ulcers, scurvy and itch, madness, blindness and confusion of mind" (Deut 28:27-28). Agramont also cites 2 Sam 24, which recounts how the people of Israel were punished with a plague because of David's sin. Similar arguments appear in the Jewish treatises. The premise of these observations was that if something had happened in the past, it could very well occur again in the present.

Agramont affirms that if the plague is caused by our sins, medicine is of little use. In these cases, the only recourse for human beings is to recognize their faults and plead to God, as Solomon recommended in his speech consecrating the Temple (1 Re 8). He explicitly mentioned that, when there is famine, pestilence or any kind of plague in a land, God would listen to his people's plea if they repented (1 Re 8:37-40).

In the case of Muslim authors, God was also cited as the ultimate cause of the plague and of pandemics in general. However, while they also proposed a hypothesis of divine punishment, they do not insist on this concept, but rather on the idea that illness is God's will, and no human can avoid it. The underlying thought of these observations is that God is omnipotent, and therefore He is the cause of each and every thing that happens in this world.

Ibn Khatima, however, opposed the idea that the plague was a divine punishment. He interpreted the concept of "punishment" not in its literal meaning, but in a figurative sense similar to "suffering" or "disease" that God caused his believers in order to test them. Ibn Khatima referred to prophet Mohammed's testimony, who described the plague as an agony that God sends to any person he wants, and whoever resigns to the plague and dies is considered as a martyr who will ultimately receive divine mercy.

In Christian and Jewish treatises, the influence of the stars was cited as causing the disease, specifically the conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn. According to medieval astrology, the conjunction of these two planets announced profound historical changes for humanity. It was said that the origin of the three monotheistic religions was announced by conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn, which had occurred previously in key moments related to these religions.

In the case of the Black Death, the physicians of Paris informed on a Jupiter and Saturn conjunction with Mars on March 20, 1345 at 1:00 in the afternoon, citing it as the origin of the disease. They even point to the source in which this assumption was based: *On the Properties of the Elements* [*De causis proprietatum elementorum*], attributed to Aristotle and commented by no other than Albert the Great, who was considered a completely reliable source of knowledge. The physicians in Paris provided a "scientific" argument for this influence: when they are in conjunction, these planets, due to their intrinsic characteristics, cause pestiferous, putrid and poisonous vapors to enter air. In consequence, disease is spread by these vapors.

In the Middle Ages, the idea that stars influence terrestrial events put into question the belief in the absolute power of God, since it could be interpreted that stars exert their own power, which is different from that of the Most High. Aware of this theological issue, the Jewish doctor Isaac ben Todrós explained that the heavenly bodies which produced the Black Death did not act alone, but with the power bestowed on them by God. He defines stars as "an ax in the hands of the craftsman," and argues that their ability to determine the good or evil in humanity depends exclusively on God. We find similar explanations from other authors.

Ibn al-Khatib mentioned astrologers' interpretations that the conjunction of planets caused the plague, but he himself did not follow this opinion. Ibn Khatima, on the contrary, thought that there may be an astral influence on the air's corruption.

Ibn Khaldun, author of the famous "Muqaddimma" or "Introduction to history," was the best proponent of rejecting the stars' influence on events in the terrestrial world. He was one of the direct witnesses of the 14 Century plague. Ibn Khaldun rejected

astrology due to the sole reason that God is the cause of everything that happens in the universe, and there can be no other cause apart from Him. Moreover, he cited two statements of the prophet. The first is: "The sun and the moon do not eclipse to announce death or life." The second is: "Among my faithful there are those who believe in me and those who do not. Those who say, 'The rain has fallen by the grace and mercy of God' believe in me; those who say 'The rain has fallen because of an astral conjunction' do not believe in me, but in stars." Ibn Khaldun concluded that astrology is a useless activity from the point of view of both religion and science. [5]

In the plague of 14th century, Jews were generally accused of having caused the disease. The typical fake news linked to prejudice that we are so accustomed to today also existed in medieval times. At those times, these accusations unleashed a wave of Jewish persecution throughout Europe by angry, uncontrolled mobs, in which many Jews were killed, massacred, tortured or forced to leave their land and homes. Even the ecclesiastical authorities had to try and intervene to stop the attacks, and Pope Clement VI issued several papal bulls throughout 1348 in which he exonerated the Jews of having caused the disease.

Christian physicians admitted without problems that the Black Death spread from person to person via simple contact. They also pointed out that a healthy person should have a natural predisposition to develop the disease after having contracted it. Not all those who were in contact with patients developed the disease, and it was believed that this depended on the natural constitution of the body, the equivalent of an individual's immune system as we understand it today. The Catalan doctor Agramont pointed out that the individuals who ate and drank excessively were more likely to develop the disease. Today, it is argued that the obese are more predisposed to COVID-19.

The anonymous doctor from Montpelier insists on contagion via breath but also through visual contact. The latter idea was associated with the evil eye, a very widespread and popular superstition in the Middle Ages. Even medical treatises at the time tried to provide scientific arguments to support this superstition. Enrique de Villena, in the first half of the 14th century, wrote a *Treatise on fascination or the evil eye*, in which he informs of people who can cause diseases with their eyes, arguing that the transmission of negative influence outside of the body can change its internal composition. In his work completed in 1437, *The five figurative paradoxes* [*Las çinco figuratas paradoxas*], Alfonso Fernández de Madrigal, known by the nickname "El Tostado," discussed plague contagion. He described it as a process transmitted through vapors from the breath of a patient to a healthy one. He also added that the eyes of the sick can also transmit some subtle substances imperceptible to the eye, which corrupt healthy individuals having a certain predisposition for sickness. [6]

However, the idea of contagion posed a major theological problem for Muslim physicians who wrote about the Black Death. In the Muslim tradition, Prophet Mohammed denied the existence of contagion. In a citation by Ibn Khatima, the prophet affirmed, "There is no contagion, no bad omen, no worms, no owl." Traditionally, it was interpreted that what Mohammed meant was a rejection of superstitions associated with those concepts, because believing in them would imply doubting divine omnipotence. Those interpreting these traditions deduced that Mohammed's denial of contagion demonstrated opposition to belief in astrologers, sorcerers, fortune-tellers and necromancers.

Contagion as a controversial concept in the Islamic World is manifested in how Muslim physician Ibn Lubb (d. 1381), teacher of Ibn al-Khatib, denied that the plague was a contagious disease based on moral reasons: if contagion existed, it would be detrimental for the sick people, because they would be consequently abandoned and left to die.

Muslim doctors Ibn Khatima and Ibn al-Khatib were well aware that the epidemic was contagious, and defended this argument from a rational point of view.

At the same time, Ibn al-Khatib also used an exegetical argument: if a prophetic tradition contradicted sensory perception and appearance, it necessarily had to be interpreted and reinterpreted. This is a rationalist principle widely employed in Biblical and Quranic exegesis by interpreters of the three religions.

Ibn al-Khatib affirmed that the existence of contagion could be demonstrated by experience, deduction, sensation, observation, and many testimonies, i.e., the basic knowledge sources in Islam. Ibn al-Khatib alerted that contagion occured in homes when other people from outside came to visit the sick. He cited cases of people who chose to stay isolated, and thus avoided the disease. The example of Ibn Abu Maydan was presented, an individual who was aware that the disease was contagious and decided to lock himself in his house, boarding up the door and remaining isolated, after having hoarded an array of provisions. [7]

The doctor from Almeria, Ibn Khatima, said that the disease was transmitted by breath, through vapors generated by the body, when the patient's clothes come into contact with the skin, or when people breath near these clothes. He provided examples of people who bought used clothes in the Almeria market, and died or became ill, after having come into contact with those clothes. However, Muslim doctors understood that in order to defend the idea of contagion, they had to offer theological and exegetical arguments to explain why the prophetic tradition denied its existence.

Ibn al-Khatib warned against the danger of not accepting the idea of contagion, given that it jeopardized the lives of many, and ultimately put the entire Muslim community at risk. In other words, he used an argument with deep Islamic roots: in the case of Black Death, the welfare of the community, which is the goal that every Muslim should seek, depended on the correct interpretation of the concept of contagion. If the concept was rejected, the central purpose of seeking the welfare of the Muslim community was also rejected.

At the same time, Ibn al-Khatib also used an exegetical argument: if a prophetic tradition contradicted sensory perception and appearance, it necessarily had to be interpreted and reinterpreted. This is a rationalist principle widely employed in Biblical and Quranic exegesis by interpreters of the three religions. In addition, Ibn al-Khatib cited other sayings of the Prophet defending the existence of contagion, such as when Mohammed said that the owner of healthy animals should not approach the owner of sick animals, indicating the potential approval of the contagion concept. Ibn al-Khatib finally argued that contagion is not a legal or religious question, but rather a medical issue.

Ibn Khatima dedicated chapters seven to ten of his treatise—some 40 pages in Arvide Cambra's translation—to the question of contagion in the prophetic tradition. According to him, what Mohammed rejected was the idea that some things influence others by their very nature, because there is no action other than that which comes from God. According to Ibn Khatima, in the prophetic tradition Mohammed did not use contagion in a medical sense, but rather as a synonym for superstition. It is a rationalist explanation that attempts to reconcile science and religion.

Following the analysis of medieval scientific texts dealing with the Black Death, we can conclude that religion significantly influenced explanations about the disease's ultimate cause: for Christians and Jews, it was divine punishment for sins committed by humans, while for Muslims it was a manifestation of God's will to test believers. For some medieval scientists, the idea that a conjunction of planets was the cause of the disease did not entail any religious conflict; however, others felt the need to justify that planets do not act by their own volition, but rather instruments in God's hands. Whereas the Christians did not see any religious obstacle to admit that the Black Death spread by contagion among individuals, Muslim doctors, although accepting this scientific hypothesis, were compelled to justify rationally the existence of a prophetic tradition which could be interpreted as calling into question the existence of contagion. Science and religion in the case of the Black Death remained closely interrelated, influencing each other in a constant and fluid dialogue.

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06.

THE POWER OF DISSIDENT SOLIDARITY

IN THE RISE OF ULTRALIBERAL AUTHORITARIANISM

Jean Wyllys | Judith Butler

Dec, 2022

Over the last decade we have witnessed a global resurgence of authoritarianism and the far right. The rise of Trumpism in the United States, Bolsonarism in Brazil, as well as Orbanism in Hungary and the consolidation of Putin's power in Russia all show that the period of liberal politics following the fall of the Berlin Wall is drawing to a close. This period has brought with it two significant cultural transformations. On the one hand, there has been a growing and inclusive process of recognising and defending civil rights and marginalised groups, expanding beyond the traditional lines of social class to include race and gender. On the other hand, technology has been thoroughly incorporated into daily life, paving the way for globalisation and shaping ambivalent socio-technological environments—in terms of control and emancipation—which have widened the gap between the worry-free wealthy and the marginalised poor.

From a critical perspective, the warnings voiced in the 70s and 80s that the wellbeing of wealthy countries was being financed outside their borders through the exploitation of poor nations were insufficient, or ignored, nor was there any truth to arguments in the 90s which defended the need for "another" globalisation. Even the warnings of the 21st century went unheeded, when people started to point out the dangerous levels of speculation in the global financial system and the technocratisation of politics, which brought about a long period of public austerity coupled with record-breaking profits for banks and corporations. This all brings us to a present moment in which, now that history's lessons have been ignored, we are seeing the emergence of a worldwide, reactionary and nostalgic far right movement which aims to restore an impossible, irrecoverable sense of global identity.

The inconvenient questions of migration and sexual diversity

A cursory analysis of various current far-right movements reveals that one of their common denominators is anti-feminist discourse and a defense of the heteronormative monopoly on morality. There is an underlying fear that acceptance of LGBTQ+ movements will mean the destruction of the nation, the nuclear family, and even humanity itself, collectively perceived as bowing down to the patriarchal figure of the man. Identifying a group of social movements as demonic and destructive demonstrates the very essence of fascism, as these groups must be wiped out, destroyed or driven outside the borders of the nation.

There is a similar rhetoric surrounding migration, according to which Western civilisation is under threat from the invasion of barbaric peoples. This fear, along with the desire to protect the spiritual heart of the nation, is used as a justification for closing borders, as well as expelling and subjugating migrant people through indefinite detention in internment centres. The objective is the same: preventing what is seen as an impure and destructive force from entering the political core of the

nation. These practices of indefinite detention and an ideology rooted in superiority, which are aimed primarily at Arab and Muslim identities, are grimly reminiscent of the dehumanisation suffered by Jewish people in the mid-20th century. These groups of people, along with many others, are considered corrosive elements which must be annihilated, hidden or detained indefinitely. The resulting message is clear: the nation must be purified.

All of this is occurring against a backdrop of neoliberal consolidation, from which not even fights against injustice can completely escape. The more anarcho-reactionary personalities such as Elon Musk are willing and able to finance *coups d'etats* and anti-democratic governments in countries of strategic business interest, the more socially complex the struggles against their domination become. Neoliberal logic, founded as it is on triumphant individualism, constantly attempts to appropriate the world's transformative forces. Its cunning lies specifically in disrupting the organisation of social processes, absorbing and thus neutralising any struggle which seeks to enact widespread change. This constant threat also generates a dangerous feedback loop between emancipatory and reactionary dynamics.

There are clear faults in how basic needs such as housing, healthcare, employment and food security are managed on a social level. We are witnessing the literal, physical destruction of the world we live in, which in turn injects our society with feelings of confusion and frustration. Instead of explicitly identifying and naming the root of this terror and imminient destruction, the far right singles out racial and sexual minorities, gender dissidents and progressive forces as the perpetrators of an attack, and in doing so, they distract attention from climate collapse. That is, when they do not openly deny its effects outright.

In places like Brazil we have seen how the dismantling of social services through neoliberal government and the rise of a virulently homophobic, transphobic and antifeminist far right have been accompanied by the advance of the conservative evangelist movement, which has gradually displaced liberation theology and other forms of Christianity. The nuclear family is vaunted as the only space in which social structures are stable and solid, with masculinity and patriarchy seated at the head of the table. This model comes into conflict with new family structures which have become increasingly common over the last few decades. This includes gay and lesbian families, queer childraising practices, genderfluid identities among younger people, and so on. There are feminists raising their children out of wedlock, or refusing to raise children at all. There are more and more people choosing to end their marriages, or who are choosing new forms of connection which can be more complex, or less complex, involving a greater, or smaller, number of people. All these new forms of family are perceived as a threat to traditional family structures. Obviously this is not the case, but they certainly call into question the supposed universality and preeminence of patriarchal power, which asserts structural and financial dominance over the nuclear family through heteronormativity.

Digital platforms and the exploitation of base instincts

The rise of fascism in Europe during the 1930s was made possible by the advent of mass communications technology, and our current political cycle is closely tied to developments in the very same field. Our relationship to the internet is completely mediated by social networks and the conglomerate corporations that control them. These platforms determine the relationships that we have in these contexts by playing to our most base instincts and urges: anger, fear, insecurity, anxiety, and so on. This strategy is rooted in the total exploitation of neurochemical processes which lead us to seek out more and more stimulus, and to spend more and more time on social media looking for that next "rush" of endorphins.

The more time we spend online, the more susceptible we become to the advertising slotted in between the pieces of digital content we consume. Digital advertising

is the driving force behind these large platforms and keeps them in business. In a markedly neoliberal context, the business model of these platforms is guided by profits which are extracted from the exploitation of our base instincts, and not from the political and social consequences of this extraction. They are, after all, private companies first and foremost. Shoshana Zuboff refers to this as "surveillance capitalism" because, in addition to exploiting our emotions and passions, it puts us in a permanent state of being connected, and of being surveilled by corporate agents who aim to commercialise our personal information and saturate our digital lives with commercial stimuli.

This environment has enabled the ascent of populists to positions of power, as they base their rhetoric on exacerbating these same instincts and urges. In his last book, *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud poses the question of whether democracies can be intermittent: why are there no permanent, perennial democratic systems? Why are there more autocracies, theocracies and authoritarian regimes in the world than there are democracies? Freud looks for answers in the individual, and finds them in processes of identification. We cannot forget that Bolsonaro, like Trump and Orban, were all democratically elected. There is something in far-right rhetoric that calls into question certain aspects of subjectivity and the human psyche, making the masses adopt and adhere to their ideas. The advance of authoritarianism is closely connected to the use of nationalist rhetoric, as well as the growth of the most fundamentalist strains of major monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Via subjective processes of identification, people relinquish or transfer their individual responsibility to a Father, a God, a political leader, a patriarch: always to the myth of a higher authority.

If what we want is to prevent authoritarianism from advancing further, as democratic and antifascist forces, we should not limit ourselves to merely questioning the mechanisms of these large platforms, nor should we wallow in nostalgia for a pre-digital world. Our task is much more difficult: we need to promote critical reflection, push people out of their intellectual vacuum and take on responsibility as political entities in our own right. This work must be based on two strategic foundations: identifying the underlying causes of precarity and creating alliances rooted in solidarity and radical hope. We must build a transnational network, following principles which provide an alternative to neoliberalism.

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Solidarity and dissidence

Capitalist accumulation of wealth and financial speculation destroy lives, creating debt for people who are chronically unable to pay, and who therefore live in a permanent state of subjugation. As a result of the growth in precarity and temporary work becoming the norm, employment has ceased to guarantee a decent wage or any form of social security. Social protections against hunger, illness and homlessness in supposedly "developed" countries have been weakened by the extraction of social wealth, carried out by an elite who only grow richer and richer. For this elite class of people, exploitation of the Global South no longer provides the resources needed to support the middle classes of the Global North. Corporate attacks on syndicates and unions have undermined the ability to defend and support workers' rights, and the sense of precarity has only intensified. To this we can add the now undeniable climate crisis, the effects of which can be seen wherever we look. People feel hunger lurking at their backs, growing closer and closer.

Taking all this into account, it is vital that dissidence be accompanied by processes of coordination. We need to be able to name and clearly identify the roots of precarity, the true threats to life. How can we do this? By calling out necropolitics, which takes the side of big business and private interests in any conflict between capital and our very own lives. We cannot limit ourselves to simply denying and rejecting the absurd accusations spat out by the far right; we must recognise the fear of life-threatening precarity, challenge it and offer responses. It is impossible to deny that

Conflict can be exhausting, but we all stand to gain a lot from focussed discussion of these matters. Only conflict and dissidence can question the status quo, and thus encourage social change.

the means of production, health, shelter and ways of life of the majority of people are being destroyed, but neoliberalism remains an abstract concept which seems very distant from the everyday lives of many people. It is our duty to bring it to the awareness of the general public, and to draw attention to its social and economic workings, which cause so many people to live as prisoners of fear and panic.

Compassion will have to play a significant role in all this work. It is essential that we recognise our fear of destruction as something real and legitimate, and as something very human that we all share. On the other hand, there is an undeniable trend towards perpetuating certain privileges within social movements, and we have to keep this in mind and be prepared to have difficult, complex and potentially confrontational discussions. Conflict can be exhausting, but we all stand to gain a lot from focussed discussion of these matters. Only conflict and dissidence can question the *status quo*, and thus encourage social change.

If we recall the process through which Black feminism reached its central position in academic debates and contemporary social movements, we can see that this was achieved through confrontation, specifically by confronting white privilege. It is therefore important to develop collective strategies for managing conflict, and in a more individual sense we need to be ready to be confronted, and to listen when our problematic behaviours, however unconscious they may be, are pointed out. As subjects of privilege, we must be open to being challenged and accept it as an opportunity to learn, without letting defensiveness be our default reaction. Solidarity is not just the product of contact between different identities, we need to willingly surrender to the mutual transformation that this dialogue implies. This is what will create long-lasting solidarity.

There is a dangerous account of the developments of recent decades as a linear timeline, in which each progressive movement supplants the previous movement and rejects its principles, thus raising the bar of what can be considered *truly* progressive or feminist. First there was feminism, then gay and lesbian liberation movements, next the queer movement, and then transfeminism. However, our real story is one of difficult and necessary coalitions between overlapping communities and movements which, now more than ever, need to find ways of working together through networks built on solidarity. We should remember that consensus is not essential for solidarity, and that solidarity is not always beautiful: often it necessarily entails anger and strife.

Our current moment highlights the necessity of alliances rooted in solidarity, and there is a very clear reason for this which we cannot lose sight of: Neo-Fascism. We believe it is important to call this phenomenon—fascism—by name because it does not just attack some distant thing called “gender ideology”; its attack is baked into a virulent and apologist defence of traditional values, of the heteronormative family and patriarchal power, not just on a personal, household level, but at the level of public policy. If we look at, for example, the right wing antifeminist movement, attacks are not only levelled at women’s sexual liberty and reproductive rights, but they are also, simultaneously, aimed at same-sex marriage and trans rights. They are aimed at workers and at the rights of indigenous people to make sovereign decisions regarding shared wealth. They are trying to repeal progressive laws in order to restore a social order which, in their eyes, has been destroyed by progressive, dissident forces. It is not a reaction, it is a process of restoration. They want everything to go “back in its place”, and not just on a legislative level: they want to force political and sexual dissidence back into the closet, to close community centres and criminalise or pathologise new forms of social organisation, in the public as much as in the private sphere.

Accordingly, now is not the time for transphobia to step forward as the champion of feminism. A feminism which discriminates, and which accepts or promotes inequality is not feminism. Nobody is safe: you might not consider yourself to be a dissident, but under fascism someone will make that decision for you. Anyone

feeling a violent impulse to do so could attack you in the street, simply because they thought that you were not abiding by the parameters traditionally assigned to your gender. In light of this, the feminist movement's defense of the rights of women is also the movement to defend gay people, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people and anyone else who has a dissident gender identity. These struggles are all connected by a common set of aforementioned enemies.

Diverse identities and shared goals

Feminism is defined by solidarity across sex, race and national borders. Its strength lies in the ability of all people to connect to this space without leaving behind their own identities. It is not easy to move forward side by side with different political allies but it is our only option if we are to fight this new fascism, which is rooted in white supremacy, hypernationalism, devastation of the Earth by large corporations and the "freedom" to attack other members of society. The mobilisation needed to confront all of this must be built around a solidarity which is continually expanding.

Recently, there has been a lot of talk about what is referred to as "identity politics" which, according to some people, provokes infighting within progressive movements and undermines the left's real objective, which should ultimately always be focussed on class and capitalism. From this perspective, identity politics is seen as superfluous, but what it seems to ignore is that there is already a preexisting feminist critique of capitalism. There are feminist strikes, as well as a long tradition of Marxist feminism which has been debating and analysing the role of reproduction labour and care in society from a materialist perspective for decades. We also have feminist

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queer, gay and lesbian movements which are centred on equallity and freedom, i.e. on the right to live free from violence and discrimination. All of this is to say that the radical aspirations of these social movements, which so many people reduce to being about identity, are in fact nothing more and nothing less than the fundamental pillars of the most basic democracy.

What is necessary is for all the forces that fall within the spectrum of political dissidence—marxists, progressives, queers, and so on—to fight side by side against their common foe. It is within the very space opened up by this struggle that we can put dissidence into practice. The idea of identity politics is being used to consolidate male supremacy's position at the forefront of left wing politics, and we therefore need to confront difficult decisions and complex but crucial questions at the heart of our solidarity alliance. However, we cannot lose sight of what is undoubtedly the most powerful identity-based movement in the world today: white supremacy, which is the fundamental identity at the core of all current politics. Right now there are ships, armed to the teeth with the most cutting-edge technology that humanity has ever created, patrolling the Mediterranean Sea, repelling fishing boats full of helpless people and turning them away to their deaths. These ships are defending an identity: one that is national, white and European, and they are but part of an entire political project constructed around this identity.

We should be clear what we are referring to when we talk about recognising diverse identities. It is not about trying to fight against heterosexuality, white men, housewives or the nuclear family. What we are trying to do is guarantee the full extent of civil and political rights for all people who do not belong to a hegemonic group. Obviously, in the neoliberal context we find ourselves in, we need to be aware of tactics of appropriation which, through individualism and consumerism, aim to redirect identity to create another source of fodder for their own systems. However, once our conditions are established, we must recognise that declaring and guaranteeing the right for minorities and the less privileged to exist under equal conditions is the only way for us to set aside differences and focus on the same objective: fighting against any and all forms of domination.

Moving from resistance towards the regenerative power of radical hope

An important source of inspiration in coordinating solidarity-based alliances which defend life and a planet under constant threat of subjugation is the struggles of indigenous people. In *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*, Ailton Krenack describes how indigenous people have survived the numerous "apocalypses" which they have faced. They have reinvented themselves and resisted, transmitting their knowledge and conserving forests, jungles and flora, as well as their ancestral knowledge. Krenak highlights the need to learn from the resilience of indigenous people.

However, looking back to what we can learn from indigenous peoples does not mean that we can ignore the challenges and opportunities that technology provides. Technology has, in our collective imagination, been hijacked by dystopian forces. We cannot imagine a world without it, because we are cultural and technological creatures, and so we should appropriate this technology and use it to create a worldwide network of solidarity. There is a word which has been used to death by neoliberals, and which we need to re-appropriate for our own ends: globalisation. How can we do this? By respecting our cultural and ideological diversity, while at the same time building a network of international collaboration and solidarity.

We need to invest in public space and develop meeting spaces where, through the arts and secular rituals, we sit down to eat at the same table, in as much of a literal sense as a figurative one. This may sound naïve, but it is not. This is what will save us: destroying the idea of the enemy and of danger. A prerequisite of progress is

faith in the possibility of changing and transforming reality. The future cannot exist without hope.

Elsa Dorlin talks about the joy of the strike, of the enormous and unconditional happiness involved in striking. When we talk about eating together, singing, or going on strike, we are talking about something intimately connected to collectivism and to community. These are lavish, luxurious moments rooted in joy and euphoria: the euphoria of saying "no", at last, to exploitation and extractivism, to the violence which has kept people down for so long. The act of saying "no" together with other people therefore becomes an overwhelming and immensely exciting moment of solidarity. The wild successes of of the *Ni Una Menos* (*Not One More* in Spanish, the feminist movement against femicide and violence against women) in Argentina and Latin America and youth movements against climate change are all examples of calls to action which have resulted in collective dissidence. There is a mutual call to rebellion which is being collectively constructed at this point in time, and it is exciting, electrifying, and even joyful.

When a group of Egyptian activists, who had participated in demonstrations in Tahrir Square in Cairo, visited the camp in Zuccotti Park several years ago, the first thing they did was ask about the music. "There's no music?", they commented. They went on to explain that "if there's no music you're not going to last long … you need joy". Regenerative joy, experienced with and through other people is an integral component of solidarity. How can we get hundreds of thousands of people out into the street? We need to make it something exciting, inspiring and enthusiastic, but not in a manic or fleeting way. It should be backed up by legislative action and other types of victory, such as the fight for abortion rights in Argentina, or anti-eviction movement in Barcelona. These have, in turn, inspired similar movements across the globe, such as in Oakland, other parts of the United States and Poland.

In spite of all the suffering we are seeing on a global scale and widespread feelings of hopelessness, movements like this can still allow us to feel moments of elation and regenerative joy, strengthening our sense of enthusiasm and mutual incentivisation. This is not about self-gratification, but a sense of harmony and satisfaction that we all can enjoy together. It goes beyond ourselves as individuals, this communal joy, and it needs to be an integral component to the survival of any solidarity movement. It provides the strength we need, and will form the backbone of all the struggles which must unite and join forces if we are to successfully confront Neo-Fascism.

Jean Wyllys

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This text is a summary of the ideas resulting from a conversation between the authors as part of the seminar entitled "From Disobedience to Solidarity", organised by the CCCB (Barcelona Contemporary Cultural Centre).

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