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Hope and care in dark times: a follow-up essay

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I would like to thank Nowak for their careful engagement with my essay which is best read as a reactionary product of my exasperation at a specific historical moment in time. In fact, there are a lot of things in my essay that I wish I didn't claim, such as the usefulness of the "veil of ignorance" of which logic, on a careful reading, relies on atomistic individualism—that I do not (or never intended to) support, even inadvertently. Regardless, if I were to explain why I had fashioned my ideas in a certain way at that time, I could probably muster a few words to say.

On hope, what I wanted to point out in the essay was the *uncertainty* of the Covid situation at that time, and what that uncertainty brings us in forging new future actions. I was not talking about "hope" in the sense of a blind or passive belief, but rather in the sense of staying active for a transition—preferably a transition with our collective intention. Because we just do not know what will eventually happen, and yet the assumption that our life would still continue is sustained regardless, one *can* speculate how something new and unexpected may be transitioned into something better. Relatedly, Wills and Lake (2020: 3-51) highlight the wisdom of pragmatism that not only provides guidance for dealing with uncertainty, but also views uncertainty as a possibility for our continuous trial and improvement. As philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (2007[1981]: 5) wrote decades ago: "*Angst* is an intermittently fashionable emotion and the misreading of some existentialist texts has turned despair itself into a kind of psychological nostrum. But if we are indeed in as a bad state as I take us to be, pessimism too will turn out to be one more cultural luxury that we shall have to dispense with in order to survive in these hard times" (emphasis in the original).

For a lot of people, "hope" is not a luxury; it simply is a useful mechanism of concatenating lives in dark times. Simone and Pieterse (2017), in *New Urban Worlds*, challenge the "common sense" assumptions about slums and informal settlements as "inhabitable" or "the areas to be developed." They also warn, however, the danger of romanticising hope. As they critique:

> Surviving the uninhabitable… becomes testament to human will and capacity, echoed through the in-vogue parlance of social resilience. It minimizes the impact of injustices of past and present and also fuels sentiments which would claim that, if only the inhabitants of these cities would do what humans are truly capable of doing, of deploying those inordinate skills of survival to the exigencies of urban remaking, then new cities would be truly possible (ibid.: 62).

Simone and Pieterse hence urge planning researchers to delve into the details of how the urban is lived through the everyday experiences of the ordinary publics, "[f]or details…

they lure curiosity; they can exist without excessive ideological baggage; they don't necessarily belong to anyone in particular" (ibid.: 63). The direct implication of paying attention to such "details" for the planning discipline is that one should abandon the fixed understanding of what should be "adequate" or "inadequate" when it comes to the plurality of the urban. The only reliable source of information that defines the "adequacy" should come from the communities who actually inhabit the everyday realities of that particular space: "The intricacies of everyday life can be part of the story of structural change and urban governance, just as the details of administration and finance are part of the fabric of everyday life" (Simone and Pieterse, 2017: 196).

Whether one should be hopeful or not, or how one can stay hopeful (when everything seems to be falling apart), is a question to be answered by each city collective in a specific time and place. Indeed, Covid now no longer is the only problem that demands the most attention of our time; it is the war in Ukraine, energy crisis, gun violence, the rise of extreme right, to name a few. But, if it is in light of "problems" that we get to conceptualise a "non-problematic" state (Savransky, 2021), a "crisis" is a not an occasion for rejecting life, but a moment of restoring a sense of what it feels like to be alive. My essay was a mere gesture expressing what kind of "sense" the global health crisis undeniably evoked, and what that *could* mean for city practitioners if they were to will a version of (what I proposed at that time to be) "better future".

No matter whom you talk to, the widespread communication of Covid as a disease has had a considerable impact on each of our lives one way or the other. This is in fact a remarkable example of the present state of society where a representation from afar can have as ubiquitous of an impact as a first-hand experience. The entire world then turns into a market place of attention machines, a contest for the most sensational content in the most sensational form. This presents us with a unique moment of self-reflection and responsibility, in terms of how we think, speak, behave, and function in the world; it is "caring" with a mixed baggage, as "self-care" is now inseparable from "caring about others". This has indeed been the case of Covid health crisis: do I wear a mask for my health? Or for you? Or for my political statement? Or our collective social good? It is "governmentality" manifested; but once it did, it made clear of the ethical challenges of our everyday life, as much as it drew the shadows of a surveillance state. In Koopman's re-reading of Foucault, modernity presents an enmeshed future of freedom and power as each entangled with one another in a reciprocal *and* incompatible relationship—crystallising "a double movement of liberation and enslavement" (Koopman 2013: 163); "Foucault's claim is that modernity produces emancipatory freedom and disciplinary power as two reciprocal but incompatible aspects of our existence" (ibid.: 170). In the ethics of late Foucault, the concepts such as self-transformation, transgression, experimentation, aesthetics of existence are introduced, where one can engage with everyday practices of freedom *through*, not against, power. How this relates to a practice of "caring" is that one must start from one's relationship to oneself inseparable from one's surroundings, considering what would be the *ethical* responses to the consequences of our everyday power relations (e.g., in our home, work places, public spaces)—in the form of experimental transformation that is both self-reflective and critical (regarding one's existential complacency in the current operationalisation of power): "The problem, then, is not to liberate, is not to free the self, but to consider how it could be possible to elaborate new types, new kinds of relationship to ourselves" (ibid.: 174, from Foucault, 1997[1984]: 282-283).

As a concrete example of "caring" in terms of city planning, it has become increasingly fashionable for cities to explore the viability of pursuing a more "self-sufficient" approach to waste management, rather than exporting them offshore. The potential actions may include: (a) minimizing food waste and conducting a scaled-up approach to managing organic waste so that we can reduce cost, (b) increasing the number of local craft centers to repair and restore consumption products, and (c) managing land use development at a city-region scale so that we can "re-use"/ "refurbish" existing building sites and materials. As Nowak notes, it would indeed be for the best if similar issues relating to environment planning and land use could find a regulatory anchor. At the same time, however, such interventions would have to be weighted with the ever-changing social realities of market-driven urban development, e.g., green/ecological gentrification, the impacts of density on housing unaffordability, or the spatial consequences of circular economy (as in who will get to live further away from waste management sites, and who won't). This is the key challenge faced by different cities all around the world attempting to legislate "the right thing to do"—socially and ecologically: what is the degree and scope of our "care" for the world (Fraser, 2009)? The neighborhood (e.g., gentrification and eviction caused by "green"/higher density development projects)? City jurisdictions (e.g., cost-effective resource management for a more conscious use of tax payers' money)? City-regions (e.g., environment justice issues relating to the locations of regional waste facilities)? Nation (e.g., geopolitical relationship with the countries we export our waste to)? Nation-regions (e.g., should we care about our relationship with China more than we do about Africa if we're physically located in Asia)? The global society (e.g., is it ethical to dislodge our own waste onto other countries' shores)? Who counts as "us"?

If there were an easy solution for the complex socioeconomic-environment problems of the urban, we would all live in a world of harmony and solidarity. We are fortunate to be in today's era of modern science and medicine, where fact-driven projections and modelling can assist us in terms of reaching a more expanded terrain of possibilities. However, at times, facts are not enough. As Nelson (2017: 14) put it, "[i]f facts alone could lead us to the promised land—facts about climate, gun violence, terrorism, war, racial prejudice, economic inequality—then we already live in a paradise of facts. The problem is not that we do not know what is happening but that we cannot bear to be changed by that knowledge." The very act of translating knowledge into action has been the primary goal and underpinning philosophy of planning, which shares its roots in pragmatism (Lake, 2017). And from a pragmatist's perspective, a "solution" can only be as good as how the question is asked, because in fact, knowledge can turn into an action when our inquiries are linked with what we truly care about—amongst all the dark things that demand us to care. As Savransky (2021: 10) eloquently put it,

> A solution, in other words, is only ever as good as the manner in which the problem is posed. But the problematic is felt before it can be stated, and it is in and through the very process of inventing a manner of giving expression to the feeling which the dark presence of the problematic makes felt—that is, in the process of developing an sense of the problem – that the always ongoing and unfinished metamorphosis of the indeterminate situation that called for it gets underway, forming subjects and objects, redistributing their roles, gradually determining the contours from which a range of possible solutions will be derived, tracing the possible shapes of worlds which demand to be made but will never dictate the terms of their own making.

Who problematises what? Why is that particular matter being problematised and not others? Who gets to mainstream a particular kind of problematisation, and what are the power relations behind such representational politics? This is the question for all urban denizens in configuring what "justice" means to them, to their immediate environments, and to the environments connected through shared language and imagination.

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Biography

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