Blurry Microgeographies of the New Normal: Grappling with COVID-19 Disruptions, Disgust and Despair in Switzerland

Sven Daniel Wolfe

svendaniel.wolfe@unil.ch

Institute of Geography and Sustainability

University of Lausanne

1015 Lausanne Switzerland

Abstract

This paper investigates the adjustments to everyday life among ordinary Swiss residents from a variety of backgrounds after a year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Grounded in an appreciation of the quotidian, the paper explores how pandemic-related disruptions have destabilized the traditional boundaries between work and leisure, producing a blurry everyday life that combines labor with home time and, subsequently, results in confused and uncertain reactions to the challenges of prolonged lockdown. This has been exacerbated by a fragmented government response due to Swiss federalism, combined with a climate of poor communication from authorities. The paper highlights how respondents from all corners of this small but diverse country experience feelings of fatigue, frustration, and isolation that transcend linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic divides.

Keywords: COVID-19, minor theory, micropolitics, everyday life, Switzerland

"I am stunned by how indecisive and incompetent is the government. Everything is so vague, from lockdown to vaccinations. I did not expect this! Just who is in charge of these things?"

> *-Nicola, speaking on zoom, in between work meetings and caring for her six-year-old son*

Dispatches on coronavirus and everyday life

 "I have up days and down days," a woman writes from Bellinzona, in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland. "I'm getting tired of the down days though." As of this writing, it has been a year since COVID-19 upended daily life and sent the nation into lockdown. The early days of

the pandemic were, for many, frightening and new: most of the country was shuttered, there was panic-buying at grocery stores, and the population was forced to adopt new spatial and social practices like obligatory masks in public and disinfectant stations at every door (Wolfe 2020). Bolstered by overall high trust in government, however, people took well to these changes, as federal authorities took charge of the lockdown and explained complicated epidemiological, legal, and economic plans in plain language (Geiser 2020). Now, a full year after the first lockdown, how are people in Switzerland living with this prolonged uncertainty? How has the ongoing pandemic forced adjustments to the conduct of daily life? Based on interviews and conversations with twenty-two Swiss residents from diverse communities, this chapter shares glimpses of lived experience under different lockdowns in the center of Europe. It determines that, in the first year of the pandemic, both fear and novelty have been worn down by time, and respondents from all corners of this country instead share feelings of fatigue, frustration, and isolation that transcend linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic divides.

To make sense of these revelations, the paper turns to Henri Lefebvre and his critique of everyday life (Lefebvre 1991), where the quotidian is conceptualized as an inextricable part of capitalist modernity. Alienation refers to the notion of a lack of control and autonomy over one's life, time, and environment – or, in short, to the idea of a human being not in unity with themselves and their society (Lefebvre 1991, 1:73). Lefebvre sees alienation as the fundamental force behind the study of everyday life, but at its highest level he identifies a dialectic between alienation and disalienation and in so doing attempts to grasp both the universality of the phenomenon as well as the particularities of the everyday (Lefebvre 1991, 1:76). At a practical level, alienation and disalienation can be understood through work and leisure, as labor separates people from meaning and depth in the conduct of their lives, only for them to search for reconnection in the pursuit of leisure. The commodification of leisure in postwar capitalism reveals a deeper dialectic between alienation and disalienation, however, as commercial leisure hides deeper alienations beneath a beautifully packaged exterior. These relationships have been evident within Switzerland for decades, as the march of globalized neoliberal capitalism has fed and fed off of the secretive banking sector and world-renowned tourist, hospitality, and medical industries (Guex 2000; Major 2012; Mussalam and Tajeddini 2016; Muth 2018), making this mountainous European country of

8.5 million one of the wealthiest in the world (World Bank 2020). All of this has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdowns, from the economy to the dependability of Swiss planning to the pursuit of disalienation through leisure. These disruptions have destabilized the boundaries between work and leisure, producing a blurry everyday life that combines labor with home time and, subsequently, mixes alienations and disalienations.

Uncovering the everyday

This paper reveals residents' blurry microgeographies of alienation and disalienation through a series of vignettes and quotations drawn from the quotidian experiences of twenty-two people living in all three major linguistic regions of Switzerland: the German-speaking east, the Italian-speaking south, and the French-speaking west. Working inductively from grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1997), there were two initial strategies for contacting participants: first, working through existing professional and personal networks to identify interested people, and second, invitations issued anonymously through social networking sites targeted at Swiss German, French speakers, and English speakers. In all cases, further participants were identified through a horizontal/wide snowball approach (Geddes, Parker, and Scott 2018), and contacts continued until saturation was reached. Here, this saturation refers not only to theoretical saturation, meaning the point at which no new insights were uncovered (Charmaz 2011), but also to satisfying the paper's goal of reflecting at least some of Switzerland's diversities, regardless of the fact that this study cannot be extrapolated to the national population

The representation of population diversity began from a checklist to ensure that major population groups were accounted for, oriented along intersectional lines – with the understanding that this is subjective and not comprehensive: linguistic (German, French, Italian, English), residency status (citizens or any of the varieties of permanent resident, from those who must renew their permits annually to those who have settled here but lack the vote), family background (Swiss or immigrant), home environment (more urban or more rural), gender (female or male), and age (younger, middle, or older). Clearly, any given respondent would fill multiple slots on this checklist, so there might be a middle-aged English-speaking permanent resident man living in an urban environment; a young woman citizen from an immigrant background living in a peri-urban settlement; and an elderly, native-born

Swiss woman living in a rural village. The salient point is that the background work continued until the diversity of these categories was fairly represented. Anonymity of participants was guaranteed, all names have been changed, and no identifying details have been communicated in this paper. Interviews and discussions were all conducted online, and mostly over text chat, though a few discussions with individuals were conducted over zoom. Chat transcripts and notes were entered into qualitative data analysis software and coded for themes, which arose inductively over time. After coding, the most representative, significant, and symbolic quotations and vignettes were selected for inclusion in this paper. The findings are presented as a series of snapshots of daily life in Switzerland, one year into the pandemic that disrupted and restructured the functioning of a famously orderly nation.

Disenchantment and despair

"In the first wave, I was actually quite happy. We stayed at home and baked a lot, and watched movies. It wasn't easy, especially with school, but it wasn't bad…" Sabrina, a middle-aged woman from Zurich, was one of many who expressed almost a kind of fondness for the early days of the pandemic. Despite the uncertainties of the early lockdown, "there was something kind of exciting about it," admitted Fabienne, a young Swiss woman living in a suburb of Bern. "I didn't have to commute anymore, which was strange at first, but actually nice when I got used to it." Alain, an elderly man living outside of Geneva, said "I'm retired, so I didn't notice too many changes, but it was nice not to have so many planes flying all day. Back then, I listened to every government announcement…." All told, there was a tendency to romanticize the early phases of the pandemic, which stood in marked contrast to the more negative opinions on the current moment. Alain tuned out of the coronavirus news long ago: "I don't bother listening to the press conferences any longer. There are so many of them but they say nothing." Similarly, Fabienne admitted that she spent the first months obsessively checking the case numbers and worrying about the growing number of deaths, but now: "It sounds mean, but I can't look at that stuff anymore." And Sabrina complained, "the children are bored of being inside all the time, and I can barely work with them at home. My husband gets to close the door to his home office, but I'm working in the living room… I feel absolutely trapped."

Though the details and causes differed, these people all communicated a broad sense of disenchantment with the handling of the pandemic in Switzerland. Partly this was due to the prolonged nature of the restrictions that had curtailed the ordinary conduct of life since March 2020. "I'm so tired. Of everything," said Tanja, a graduate student in Fribourg. But this disenchantment was also due to a number of uncertainties, as highlighted by this group of statements from other people: "I know it's stupid to say this, but I just want all this to be over,"; "I don't think people are going to be able to cope for much longer. They are going to go crazy and get together, and then we'll never get out of this,"; and "I don't trust government to handle this anymore." Numerous respondents spoke of a lack of faith in officialdom, which is notable because the Swiss typically have extremely high levels of trust in government, even regardless of transparency (Mabillard and Pasquier 2015).

When questioned directly about this, a rural woman remarked, "It's the fault of the Federal Council. Berset announces new rules but no one understands what's happening in our lives. It's a different world there." Alain Berset is one of the Federal Councilors who shares the rotating Swiss presidency, and has become admired or reviled (depending on who is speaking, and when) for his handling of the pandemic. In her village, many measures to stem the virus spread seem superfluous and bureaucratic, if not outright stupid. Social distancing makes no sense on her farm, and she knows everyone in the village store, so it feels strange to keep the required distance. Technocratic solutions like the government-sponsored contact tracing app are equally ignored. "I'm not installing any government [obscenity] on my phone," she laughed.

SwissCovid, the contract tracing app, is another point of common complaint. Despite initial enthusiasm and some national pride about pioneering contact tracing in Europe (SwissInfo.ch 2020a), many respondents had problems with the app. Marco, a college student and grocery store worker, said "I have the app of course, but I'm a bit skeptical that it works. I've had no pings and I don't know anyone else who has either. Does it actually work?" At his job, Marco sees many hundreds of people a day, but has had no risky contacts according to the app. This is due to the fact that the app will only issue a warning under two conditions: first, if you have had contact with a known infected person at less than 1.5 meters distance for a period of at least 15 minutes; or second, if you have had contact with several known infected persons at

less than 1.5 meters distance and for less than 15 minutes per person, but for a total of 15 minutes or more overall (FOPH 2020). These limitations, combined with the fact that use of the app is voluntary, means that Marco's app is not likely to register any contacts – even though it is plausible that he is exposed to many infected people each day. He explained, "When I work the cash register, I sit behind a plastic shield, and everyone has masks. I know that helps… But when I am stocking shelves, I am often quite close to customers. Isn't it possible that we could get infected that way?" Since these contacts are far less than 15 minutes, however, the app has not registered any risk.

Other respondents doubted the privacy protections of the app or consider it an intrusion by government into their private lives. Miriam, a professional whose job requires in-person contact, continues to commute around the country by train despite the pandemic. "I don't like wearing masks on the train," she said. "It gets hot and uncomfortable, especially because I wear glasses. I do it because it's required, but I won't install the app, because I don't want anyone to know where I go. I don't trust any company to keep that information private." This lack of trust speaks to a failure of communication on behalf of the health authorities and government overall, particularly given the traditionally high levels of trust exhibited by the Swiss. Sentiments of this type were communicated by multiple respondents, reflecting a broad sense of disenchantment with official institutions and their handling of the ongoing pandemic: "I've lost faith in their ability to handle anything beyond their paychecks," Miriam said.

This disenchantment was expressed in small complaints about a wide variety of quotidian frustrations and echoed by people around the country. One participant complained about the stupidity of COVID-related restrictions on movement, for example, noting that the closure of one entryway to a popular mall resulted in larger groups of people clustering around the other entrance. Another complained about a clothing store that closed half of the changing rooms: "Instead of people in their own rooms, where they are protected by doors and walls, everyone is waiting together in line, and of course no one maintains distance there." Similarly, another person complained about the national train service: "The train was completely full today. They should add more cars to each train, but instead I think they're using fewer because ridership has decreased." The common element in each of these complaints is the sense of

disenchantment with decisionmakers who seemed to prioritize financial or other logics rather than more comprehensible approaches to public health and quotidian convenience. In this way, these people expressed a novel alienation from their government, their shopping and travel environments.

Popular disenchantment overlapped easily with a growing sense of despair. This was particularly notable among people who were striving to follow the evolving rules and restrictions. Marcus, an essential worker who could not stay home, echoed the same sentiment as Louise, a professional who had been sequestered in her home office for most of the year. Marcus said, "I miss going to restaurants and movie theaters. I think it will be many months before they open again," while Louise commented, "I wish I could go out and do things again, but I don't think it will happen for a long time." Both expressed frustration that other people were flouting the restrictions by meeting in large groups, going to illegal parties, or undertaking unnecessary travel like vacations. Louise: "I see pictures of people going on holiday and it makes me very angry. Why are you going out and having a good time when the rest of us are staying home and following the rules?" Marcus: "This is going to go on for a lot longer because of people like that." Sabrina, the working mother from Zurich, expressed similar feelings, but tied them into her complaints about family isolation: "It's very bad. We're not seeing anyone and the kids miss their grandparents. Meanwhile, my neighbor has friends over for coffee or drinks every day. It's so irresponsible! And because of her, we are stuck in this endless [obscenity] pandemic." Put another way, these are expressions of alienation from their communities.

Disgust and disinformation

One of the largest challenges faced by Switzerland in the past year is the relatively weak federal government. While the Swiss federal structure gives admirable local autonomy in ordinary circumstances, the prolonged public health emergency has revealed problems. The lack of a coordinated and coherent federal posture has resulted in a fractured response that disgusted many residents. One woman explained the results: "They closed all the stores in Zurich, which is good. What happens is that everyone who wants to go shopping will drive to Aargau [the next canton over], where everything is still open. By the time Zurich stores open again, Aargau will close its stores, so all the Aargau people will drive over to Zurich…" In this

way, the uncoordinated government response left space for individuals to undermine official restrictions and prolong the crisis.

At the same time, once the health situation grew too severe to be ignored, a more coordinated federal response drew criticism as well. When the federal authorities imposed a national closure of stores and restaurants in January 2021 (TheLocal.ch 2020), Antonio – a business owner in Lugano – complained: "They are taking too much control! ...I think this pandemic is an excuse for Bern to take more authority from the cantons." Thus, people who express opposing political opinions regarding the roles and scope of government both shared a common feeling of disgust. In both cases, this translated into a sense of alienation from government, as traditional understandings of self-rule and local autonomy were unable to withstand the pressures of the pandemic.

Similarly, a sense of disgust transcended political divides when it came to the personal usage of masks. While masks were required in public transit and while shopping in stores, their use in parks, squares, and while walking was less clearly defined. This blurriness led to some polarized opinions. The majority of respondents expressed a pragmatic attitude towards the necessity of masks, but a few were more ideologically-driven pro or con. These few expressed a sense of disgust that people would remove their masks at all while in public, and one complained about a transparent anti-mask strategy on transport: "Sometimes I see people on the train with a drink. You're allowed to eat and drink so they use that to get around the mask rules." In contrast, one respondent echoed a conspiratorial mindset and found masks to be a marker of a brainwashed population. He was vocal about his disgust towards the submissiveness of his fellow citizens. Several respondents expressed disgust in seeing this conspiratorial thinking expressed either online or on posters and stickers strategically added to public health advertisements around their cities. Many of these respondents admitted to tearing off the posters or stickers when they found them.

Regardless of individual politics, the broad sense of disgust seemed to be sparked by respondents witnessing others behave in ways that defied their own conceptions of propriety. In other terms, these people registered disgust when seeing someone break their conception of unity, resulting in a sharp sense of alienation. These violations of norms thrived

in the COVID-era climate of poor communication and outright disinformation. While conspiracy-thinking represented only a tiny minority of respondents, almost everyone expressed some degree of confusion or frustration at the opaque reasoning of decisionmakers, and it seems plausible that this opacity could create fertile ground for mis- or disinformation to thrive. Mario: "I think the government wants to keep us locked up forever." This clearly cannot be true, but it is significant that that Mario – who is a respectable employee in a large municipal administration – can say this and mean it. Among other respondents, this distrustful or conspiratorial mindset was most visible in two discrete areas: selective store closures and vaccine distribution.

The closure of most stores and restaurants at the end of 2020 (and the further tightening of restrictions at the beginning of 2021) was marked by incomplete information, confusion, and a sense of unfairness. "Why should our restaurant be closed when hotels can stay open?" complained a waitress, referencing the selectivity of the closures that shuttered local restaurants but allowed tourist-oriented restaurants in resorts and hotels to stay open. The lack of transparency behind this decision led to accusations of lobbying, corruption, and unequal treatment: "Without ski tourists, our winter economy would collapse," explained a small-town teacher. "I want to take my family to a restaurant but we would have to stay the night in an expensive hotel." A taxi driver noted the irony of bringing in foreign tourists during a pandemic: "We can't go see our relatives but wealthy English skiers can bring coronavirus here as long they pay." Nearly 10,000 British tourists came to Switzerland in the first weeks of December 2020, spreading a new mutation of the virus at the ski resort hotspots, before flights were halted (SwissInfo.ch 2020b). Similar exposures and subsequent quarantines and bans were imposed on travelers from South Africa, after it was discovered that they were spreading a different variant (Swiss Federal Council 2020). The taxi driver continued: "It would have been smarter not to have any ski tourism at all, but money is more important than health."

The uneven closures also affected the stores that were allowed to remain open, for example Coop and Migros, the nation's largest grocery store chains. These stores often sell much more than food, and even smaller outlets routinely carry office supplies, crafting materials, kitchen goods, and assorted household items. Larger outlets resemble full department stores, with

entire floors dedicated to clothes, toys, sporting goods, computer equipment, and more. The closures affected Coop and Migros in peculiar ways that resulted in a great deal of popular confusion. Store employees cordoned off different aisles or portions of aisles with tape, preventing customers from purchasing items stocked there. It was patently unclear and often illogical which items were blocked from purchase. Margarita explained the confusion: "My son lost his hat at school, but I couldn't buy a new one at Migros. They closed off all the winter clothes, but I could buy swimsuits if I wanted to." Similarly, Denise couldn't understand the logic behind selective closures: "I thought we could start a lockdown hobby, but it is not so easy. Sewing thread was illegal to buy, but crafting beads were available. That's fine if you want beads, but what about sewing?" Often, the effort to explain the reasoning behind these decisions treaded close to conspiratorial thinking: "It must be some sort of secret business decision," said Roland, a mechanic. "They want to protect sales at their stores while they're closed, but no one thinks of the needs of ordinary people." One strategy for circumventing these rules circulated online: people could sneak a forbidden item from behind the tape and then use the self-checkout machines to purchase the banned goods.

Vaccine distribution was another area rife with miscommunication and confusion. Switzerland's fractured governmental response to the pandemic was reflected clearly in the differences between cantons in their vaccination acquisition, delivery, and reporting. One respondent said, "Every canton reports how many vaccinations they accomplished this week, but no one says if the week is seven days or five days. They all have different reporting and no one knows the actual numbers… They promise to have everyone vaccinated by [3 months from the time of this discussion], but I haven't even been signed up yet." As the cantons established different delivery criteria, residents tried leveraging various local advantages to get on the list: "My mother can't sign up in canton X, I don't know why. We're trying to sign her up where we live [in canton Y], because she's in a vulnerable group and I want her to get the shot as soon as possible." The slow delivery and lack of national standards was frustrating for many, particularly in light of Switzerland's wealth and reputation for organization and professionalism. "I'm ashamed of how badly this is happening," said Veena. "There has to be an explanation. I think someone is making a lot of money somehow." And Deana said, "It is incredible to see how badly the Swiss government is handling the vaccination effort. I'm also surprised that the public hasn't put more pressure on them." As before, the lack of

coordinated action and transparent communication led to a situation where people themselves tried to explain the failures of systems that had, in previous experiences, worked well. A distrustful or conspiratorial mindset will certainly not help with the official rumors that only vaccinated individuals with a certificate might have the privileges of international travel, or even visiting local restaurants and bars (SRF.ch 2021). In this way, the pandemic has caused profound alienations from the ordinary conduct of life, to the degree that some people are even doubting whether the will be allowed to move freely within their own city.

Vignette: Annette, 41, office worker

"My daily life has changed, of course. I used to travel a lot, both around the country and internationally. I'm grateful that we have a car! I won't take a train anymore. Even with the car, we won't cross the border. We used to go shopping abroad on the weekends, but now you have to check the internet for the crossing details, and maybe once you get there something changes and you can't come back. It's too much of a hassle.

The kids are very tired. My oldest goes to school, and he's young enough that for a long time he didn't have to wear a mask, but now they changed the rules. He has to have a mask on all day, even when doing sport. It's cruel. I don't like that he has to go to school because I know the risks, but I'm also glad that he gets to have some social contact. It's very hard for children otherwise. My daughter is at home and it's extremely hard for me to work. I give her the iPad but I don't want her to watch all day. I have to work and I can't be a parent and do my job at the same time.

I've been home office for almost a year. I miss my colleagues and I want to go out for coffee and for drinks. Simple things like that. I drink a lot now, after the kids are asleep. I'm nervous about my husband being out for work, but I'm also jealous because he sees his colleagues and friends at work. I would love that. But I won't do it because it's not safe. I think my husband should stay home. His boss won't let him. There is no government requirement to work from home. It's only a recommendation, so businesses can do what they like. My husband was scared before, but he's less scared now. I think he's gotten used to things by being out all the time. That's the opposite of me. I think staying inside is making me a little paranoid sometimes, but come on, there's a global pandemic! It's not made up!

Most of all, I miss not worrying. I think back to my problems before 2020 and they seem silly. There are so many things that we took for granted. I can't imagine seeing someone's face on the street anymore. I'm really used to the masks and I think they would look a little naked without them! I wonder if we'll ever go back to walking around without masks. I feel bad for the kids. It must be so hard, especially for babies. Think about how strange it must be to grow up in a world where everyone is wearing masks. I think it's sad.

For our holidays we rented a lonely house in the mountains. We didn't see anyone. We stayed up in that house for a week, and when we got tired of it we moved to a different house for another week. It was so relaxing to get out of our flat. That's the hardest part for me, just stuck in the same place all the time, doing the same things every day. It's a year of this already and there is no sign of when it will end."

Vignette: Thomas, 29, designer and student

"The hardest thing about the pandemic is that it makes it hard to go meeting people. I can't really keep up with friends in the same way. We write one another and that's OK but dating is more complicated. Meeting a girl for a date is almost impossible. There are no cafes or clubs open so you can't just go for a drink. In the summer you could meet for a walk or something but now it's miserable weather. It's dangerous to meet someone new anyway and at the start I had lots of questions. Do you keep distance from them? What if you want to kiss? Long term couples have it much easier.

I was very lonely at the start but luckily, I found a girlfriend pretty soon and we've been dating for most of the pandemic. She lives in [city X] so we don't see one another often enough. It's nice to have someone to text though. Sometimes we spend the weekends together and that's great. It's complicated, though, because I have a roommate and so does she. That means that there's this extra risk, and we have to be careful about who is in the bubble. If I see her one weekend, then I can't see my parents the next week because it's too dangerous. I don't want to get tested because it's expensive and it hurts. The tests are free if you have symptoms, but not everyone is symptomatic. It doesn't make sense.

My job is the hardest thing for me. I have two bosses and they don't let anyone work from home. They're conservatives and they live in big houses in the country, you know the type. They don't ever wear masks inside and they think the whole thing is made up. Well, the best news is that they both got it. They gave it to each other, and now they're quarantined in their houses in the country. I know I shouldn't laugh but it feels great. I'm ready to quit but I have to save up a bit more so I can do my master's without being distracted by a job. I just want to work and not worry about anything else.

Studying has been really complicated. There was a combination of online and in-person classes at the start. It's not so easy to pay attention after a while. I don't mind it because I've had some experience working already, but I think it's quite hard for some of the others. The rules keep changing and I don't know what next semester will look like. I quite miss being in class and eating at the cafeteria and all that. University feels different without that social aspect. I'm a bit worried about what kind of job I'll get after all this, but I don't think of that much at the moment. Everything else is quite hard, and if I can't find a good job then I can always go back to what I'm doing now.

I'll get the vaccine when it's my turn, of course I will. It will be a long time before that happens, though. They're concentrating on the elderly now and it will be some time before they get down to me. I do wish it would happen sooner though. I want it all to go back to normal. It's like everything is still going on but everything's harder."

Vignette: Hannah, 56, housecleaner
"You have to keep a positive attitude. We quarantined ourselves for ten days a few months ago, because we were exposed to someone who had it. Nothing happened to us, thank god, but it was frightening for a time. What we did was try to do everything just as before. Wake up, breakfast, all of it. The only difference was that we couldn't go out and shop for food. My son bought food and left it on the doorstep. We didn't see anyone. We watched a lot of movies and we video called lots of people. That's how we celebrated Timo's birthday [her husband] – on zoom.

Timo works from home and he gets up every day at 5:30. He's on the computer at 6 and he's always well dressed. I don't like these people who work from home in their bed and pajamas. That's not serious. Timo is on at 6 and then when he's done, he's done. Orderly. Then it's time to celebrate with a beer and plan our holidays. When the pandemic is done I want to go to Ireland. Timo wants to go to Dubai. I think we're going to do both because we didn't go anywhere on holiday last year. Life is short, and I didn't go anywhere for the first forty years of my life. I was always working. Now I want to celebrate and enjoy. It's unfortunate that the pandemic interrupted everything, but we have to make the best of it.

I don't avoid my family. I still see my children and grandchildren. That's not going to stop. But I don't have many contacts outside of that, and when I do, it's naturally with a mask. I think it's more difficult for my friend. She moved to [our village] because she wanted to learn the language. Everyone in the big cities speaks English, so it's easier to learn in a small place like this. The problem is that it's a real challenge for her because of the masks. It's hard to see and hear. We used to trade language lessons – I learn English from her and she learns from me. We tried meeting with masks on but it was too hard. We meet on zoom once a week but it's not as good as in person, but it's better than nothing!

I'm grateful that Timo and I are healthy. I'm grateful for my children all nearby. I would not like it if we all lived far away."

A condition of prolonged uncertainty

Over the past year, what first seemed as merely a shock or disruption – however severe – proved instead to be a long-term shift in the conduct of everyday life. The quotations and vignettes highlighted here provide snapshots of a variety of blended alienations and disalienations, as the blurry geographies of COVID-19 home and work life altered daily life in ways both subtle and profound. Overall, the first year of the pandemic can be seen as a condition of prolonged uncertainty that throws into relief some of the ways that people from a variety of backgrounds in Switzerland understand dramatic multiscalar change.

To make sense of these changes, the paper makes use of the Lefebvrian alienation-disalienation dialectic, using everyday life as an entry point. Through an exploration of daily

practices, it is possible "to extract what is living, new, positive… from the negative elements: the alienations" (Lefebvre 1991, 1:42), or in plainer terms, to highlight moments of separation and of unity in the midst of pandemic-driven instability. By presenting the experiences in their own words of twenty-two people from a variety of linguistic, ethnic, geographic, and socio-economic backgrounds, the paper offers a snapshot of a nation in extended crisis, and wracked with uncertainty. Most immediately, this is seen in the blurring of the divisions between work and leisure, but it also takes shape in a new and surprising distrust of government that, for some, even borders on the conspiratorial.

Most of the people featured here suffer from a lack of trust engendered by a fractured government response, poor communication, and repeated lockdowns and associated partial closures. While many initially supported the early phases of the government responses to the pandemic (Wolfe 2020), over the past year this positivity has largely evaporated. In its place is a weariness and distrust – a profound disalienation – that cannot easily be relieved. In pandemic Switzerland, the Lefebvrian alienation-disalienation dialectic has been replaced by a blurry everyday reality that has left many with a sense of timelessness, of endless lockdowns followed by momentary lessening of regulations (or just flagrant breaking of rules) until the case numbers inevitably rise again. It has introduced in many a new feeling of governmental distrust, of disenchantment, despair, and disgust. This is the new normal: with the numbers of ill and dead rising, with skepticism that vaccine targets will be met, and a quiet hope that someday these difficulties will lessen, daily life somehow still goes on.

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