The construction of a Hegemonic Social Representation: Climate Crisis and the role of COVID-19 in defining Survival

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Abstract

The present paper discusses how Climate Change and the COVID-19 pandemic can be read as two facets of a Hegemonic Social Representation under construction, the representation of Survival, reshaping other hegemonic, socially shared representations in the Western culture such as Science, Politics/Democcracy and Nature, on an unprecedented scale. A Hegemonic Social Representation is proposed in this paper as a useful tool to conceptualise major changes in social thinking, at the interface of individual and collective dynamics. A Hegemonic Social Representation is defined as the cristallisation of a meaning-complex on what is valuable and vital for a community, generating competing social identities, practices and social policies. The paper revisits the concept initiated by Moscovici and focuses on the role of competing groups, generating opposing perspectives. We argue that at this crucial point, a close attention to the way in which meaning is negotiated across a series of key elements of the Hegemonic Social representation of Survival will help better informing communication and action concerning Climate Change.

Introduction

In January 2020, COVID-19 (a novel coronavirus) was declared a public health emergency by the World Health Organisation, two months later it was confirmed as a

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pandemic (WHO.int, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken world governments and health systems in their attempts to deal with the emergency. It has taken a heavy toll, in terms of individual lives and livelihoods. Additionally, 'lockdown' measures put in place by many countries as an attempt to control the spread of COVID-19 infections, have impacted individual freedoms, having an unprecedented impact on lives and how we live in the 21st century. Citizens have found themselves "becoming the news" and the new "geographical borders" are the walls of their homes. Lockdowns have also reduced economic activity. For example, the forced reduction in tourism due to the cancellations of flights and closure of holiday hotels, has impacted tourism and the way in which people in the industry think about future developments for the sector (Prideaux, Thompson and Pabel, 2020). It is therefore not surprising that the COVID-19 pandemic is often referred to as a 'crisis'.

The overall the social, political, and psychological impacts of the pandemic are still to be ascertained. In their book, *Together Apart: The Psychology of COVID-19,* Jetten et al., (2020) present a series of key issues faced by societies in the wake of the crisis, arguing that a psychological perspective can not only account for some of these issues, but also give useful insights on how to deal with the pandemic. They argue that the COVID-19 "crisis" has led to a realisation of a common "destiny". Nevertheless, a collective social identity which would support coordinated action to tackle the pandemic, has yet to be constructed (Jetten et al., 2020). Jaspal and Nerlich (2020), suggest that a *social representations* perspective can help enhance our understanding of the way in which people talk about, feel and act in response to the perceived threat of the pandemic. Similarly, we argue that a social representations perspective can highlight how multiple divisions and power differences at the global, national and community levels result in a "battle of signification", where opposing groups fight to determine labelling and action. Importantly, for the argument presented in this paper, Jaspal

and Nerlich (2020) refer to their work in the area of climate change (CC) as a similar instance in which the application of a social representation perspective – combined with identity process theory – can give useful insights on the processes involved in the sense making and reaction to an existential threat (e.g. Jaspal, Nerlich and Cinnirella, 2014). There is little doubt that CC is also a global phenomenon which is posing an existential threat to humanity (IPCC, 2014). However, environmental activists have struggled to present CC as an emergency (e.g. Thunberg, 2018). We argue that a social representation perspective can help us better understand this difference, and identify a more efficient way to think about the important dimensions of the battle of signification.

Despite their importance, social representation can go unacknowledged; Moscovici (1988, p.220) writes about the impact of unacknowledged social representations and how a major event or change be revealing, drawing on the story of Sinbad the Sailor he explains:

> *Travellers land on an island and marvel at the pure spring water and the abundance of fruit in the orchards. Some drink their fill, others bathe. Others again light a fire and prepare their meal. They do not realize that this island is a huge fish that has been asleep for so long in the ocean that trees have grown on its back. Feeling the sting of the fire lit by the travellers, it suddenly rises up and dives down, pulling down everyone with it towards the abyss. Here we have a powerful image suggesting representations that have objectified for so long that we no longer notice them. But that does not prevent their being almost ubiquitously the substratum of everything that we conceive as materially independent and given in social life. Under the impetus of some event or change, these representations resurface. And as everything today is in flux, they make themselves felt even before crystallizing in a specific action or reality."*

In this paper we argue that the current global pandemic and the CC debate have both

reinvented - and helped resurface – the *hegemonic social representation* (HSR) of survival,

by reshaping other HSRs such as science, politics/democracy and nature.

The Role of Hegemonic Social Representations

In this paper we propose that social representation theory revisited, with insights

from political philosophy and social theory (Castoriadis, 1998; Magioglou and Obadia,

forthcoming; Magioglou, 2014; Arruda, 2014), can provide an important framework to

understand the tensions arising from the global threats of CC and the COVID-19 pandemic.

More precisely, we use "hegemonic social representations". The HSR concept which was

introduced by Moscovici (ref: Moscovici, 1988), is combined with the theory of central

imaginary notions (ref y Castoriadis (opcit)), and Gramsci's work on hegemony (e.g.

Stavrakakis, 2017). Magioglou and Obadia in their 2013-14 research seminar at the Ecole des

Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, discussed the heuristic value of HSR from this

interdisciplinary perspective, referring to democracy, religion and the economy as HSR[2]

(Magioglou and Obadia, forthcoming). In other words, HSR is not conceptualised just as a

"bigger" Social Representation, neither as a collective representation, in the way Durkheim

has defined it (1971). The heuristic value of a HSR in our view is that it involves institutions,

social practices, roles and social control, it also unites more than two or three "empty

signifiers", defined by Laclau, (1996) as ambivalent meanings between presence and

absence, positivity and negativity. Different social groups will try to reconstruct and

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[2] https://calenda.org/266441?lang=en

appropriate these signifiers, interpreting them in ways that may be mutually exclusive. Laclau uses the example of "order" and "justice as empty signifiers, where different groups try to impose their definition as the only valid one, "filling in" the meaning void.

In this sense – 'freedom' and 'justice' can be considered "empty signifiers' both absent and present (Stavrakakis 2017). Importantly, these signifiers can give rise to symbolic tension, as illustrated by Nescolarde-Selva and & Usó-Doménech (2014, p.73):

Two objects, essentially the same and with similar functions, but that are existentially different, become an interchangeable symbolic unit. While agreeing in their functions, with the same properties, both objects that existentially are different, become a unit in the symbol and are interchangeable. The symbolic image is not an "example" (an external and possible relation between two objects or connections), but an internal analogy (a necessary and constant relation).

Sniderman, et al., (1991), from the perspective of Political Psychology, have discussed the way freedom, equality and justice construct democracy, in a relationship of symbolic tension and antagonism (Magioglou, 2008; 2014).

Another important characteristic of a HSR is the link to a "value": HSR can be understood as something "valuable", it allows for signification battles between groups looking for legitimation and to impose their course of action. A HSR is therefore conceptualised as a matrix, in the way democracy has been a matrix of different political systems carrying this name, which can be used to legitimate or delegitimate political systems.

Hegemoic Social Represntations as a Matrix and the

battle for Meaning (generating Alternative, Polemic Representations)

To summarise, a HSR is conceptualized as a matrix of socially shared meanings constructed as something "valuable", and vital for a community. By assigning different *meaning* to the elements of the matrix, the same HSR may legitimate dominance and the status quo, or nourish dissent and minorities which will fight to reverse it (Guillespie, 2008). HSRs are socially, historically and culturally embedded, but they can encompass different time-periods and cultures. For example, democracy, as an HSR comprises different models, from the democracy of ancient Athens to representative democracy or socialism (Held, 1996). Importantly, this conceptualisation of HSR as a matrix of constructs allows for different groups to attach different meanings to its components. In this sense, HSR function as platforms for different forms of subjectivities and social identities.

In this light, if we see HSRs as matrixes of empty signifiers rather than actual content, we can imagine how – by filling the "matrix" with different concepts, the very same HSR can take on very different meaning. In other words, the agenda setting literature (Shaw, Weaver, McCombs, 1997) suggests that media do not tell us what to think, but what to think about, and HSRs establish the important components to be considered when thinking about "big issues". Opposing social identities and alternative social representations are then mobilised to "fill in" the matrix with meaning in order to legitimate different forms of action, allocation of means and intergroup conflict or cooperation. For example, as we will discuss later, a HSR of CC will include elements such as science, nature and democracy, but what these elements actually mean to a group member, will depend on the predominant interpretation of the in-group. When the in-group (that is, the group one belongs to and/or identifies with) interpretation of the matrix elements is different from the dominant one, it will come to

construct what are the "alternative" voices, or "alternative social representations". The "winning" HSR will be the basis upon which political, social and institutional decisions are made for the society at large.

To summarise, a HSR is conceptualised as a combination of "empty signifiers" (Laclau, 1996) associated to core values with a highly legitimating power. They are matrixes of meaning making, but are also historical and societal, involving institutions, social control mechanisms and social practices. They constitute the battle ground of opposing interests and are co-constructed through power struggles, symbolically and materially.

The Case of COVID-19: research on Social Representations of the Pandemic

Research on COVID-19 from an SR perspective have focused on it as an emerging object of SR or its socially construted meaning for societies around the world. This is compatible with the mainstream SR theory, where a new reality or socially constructed object, e.g. COVID19, is emerging in the everyday experience of the lay people.This research describes how COVID-19 becomes "objectified" with specific images, as well as "anchored" to a preexisting system of categorisations, for example, it may be constructed as similar to a "flu" or to the HIV epidemic, these different constructions will have implications for how COVID-19 is faced..

These first data, although very interesting, only focus on one piece of the new symbolic puzzle. Nevertheless, the emerging data allow us to see how different parts of the world construct COVID-19 or preexisting HSR in science, politics/democracy and nature. Emgering themes we identified include:

a. **The role of science and expertise: to make sense of what is happening, but also to protect the population through medicine, mediated through the media**

Justo et al (2020) provide an example here. The authors describe the polarisation in the pubic debate in Brazil between the focus on public health and the focus on the economic crisis, with different institutions and public figures constructing COVID19 in different and oppositional ways.

b. **The lived, everyday experience of COVID-19: including feelings, practices, interactions of the everyday life anddeath**

Emiliani et al., used both questionnaires with free associations and qualitative data to demonstrate that, apart from descriptions of the everyday isolation and use of material such as masks and gloves, there is a feeling of void and a realisation of a deep change. However, there are alternative constructions of this change, one perceives the disruption and the changes in the everyday "normal" as negative, focusing on the socioeconomic disruption and the fear. The other emerging discourse focuses on disruption from a previous hectic everyday rhythm of life, with a connection to positive changes for the environment. This relates to media images of a clearer atmosphere, due to the reduction of emissions during the first lockdown. However, it is unclear from the research what factors (e.g. socioeconomic status) might be related to the differing constructions.

c. **The political: involving political leadership/decisions, policies imposed on everyday life, inequalities, conspiracy theories and fake news**

Sitto and Lubinga (2020), using a media analysis in South Africa, present the way politics and pre-existing social inequalities, including access to health care, are

involved in the social construction of the SR of the pandemic. They found COVID-19 was represented as a disease of the White and wealthy. This representation influenced how those not belonging to this social group behaved for example, lower adherence to guidelines to protect themselves, such as social distancing or wearing masks, was reported. Deeply embedded social inequality and mistrust for political leadership (represented as corrupt or profiting from the crisis) were also found to be important aspects of the SR of COVID-19 in South Africa.

Nature: as the body, as something to control with science, as a menacing external virus, and the role of CC Castro, et al., (2018) describe how a top down political approach (new legislation) to protect the environment and change practices, are facing opposition from ordinary citizens with a different understanding of the situation. This is an example of nature and politics as HSR, used to legitimate opposing courses of action and positions. Pizarro et. Al, (2020) in a comparative study through a survey via Qualtrics between Americas, Europe and Asia, analyse the range and content of Social Representations about the COVID-19 pandemic. The results highlight the importance of the above-mentioned dimensions: nature (as viral), emerging ecology, politics, economy and everyday citizens as villains, contribute in the construction of a HSR of Risk. Social Dominance and Right Wing Authoritarianism are the variables associated with contrasting representations of these dimensions. In other words, different social groups may construct differently the role of nature and of those considered responsible (political, economic, underdog villains) for the pandemic depending on their political ideology and their social dominance orientation.

The idea of "common destiny" referred to by Jetten et al (2020), can be reframed as a narrative of survival. In other words, the idea of a shared, common destiny is – according to this view – an essential element of guaranteeing survival. We argue that the empty signifiers

described above (i.e. science, the everyday, ordinary or normal experience, politics/democracy, and nature), are involved in the construction/re-emergence of the HSR of survival as common destiny. This HSR is starting to materialise in collective actions, oppositions and gradually will redefine other HSR and recombine them in new ways.

As described above

Climate Change and Survival

By drawing parallels between some of the key issues brought to the fore by the pandemic and those pertaining the CC debate, we will argue that this ongoing process will determine whether COVID-19 will raise awareness and influence policy making towards environmental protection and a new form of globalisation (with regional and global political power stepping in to support people and communities). Additionally, we argue that it may also influence the degree to which it will stimulate hateful and stigmatising forms of action. Raising awareness that we are in a malleable phase of the reconstruction of a HSR of survival will allow reflection on the determinants and consequences of the prevalence of certain interpretations of reality over others. It will also support identification of the challenges ahead concerning the re-negotiation of meaning, structures and behaviours which will allow the COVID-19 crisis to open the door to a "new normal", in which addressing the negative impact of human activity on the environment is incorporated in the post- COVID recovery plan. Jetten et al., (2020) argue that a common social identity is the key to success in facing this new global challenge. We argue that positive social identities refer to HSRs for legitimation. It is by reinforcing the argument of a democratic balance of powers and a concept of nature and science as stakeholders in an understanding of an international public sphere and resources that "we" will not be created in opposition to "they" as in Sherif's seminal work (e.g. Sherif et al., 1988).

In building this argument, we will rely on examples drawn from the COVID-19 ideological battleground, and highlight parallels to the CC issue. As illustrative examples, we will focus on how COVID-19 has led to challenge and redefinition of Hegemonic Representations of science, politics/democracy and nature. These constructs are also key elements in the constellation of meanings associated to the phenomenon of CC and the role of humans in relation to it. At the same time, these ideas have become the ground of a battle of ideologies, and it is our contention that the winners of the battle will have also an increased weight in the CC battle.

To summarise our objective, after reviewing the ongoing research on COVID19 and CC (e.g. Emiliani et al., 2020), we observe two potential tendencies: a. alignment of the symbolic and meaning construction of CC with Covid19 for the HSR of survival with a common social identity (also Jetten et al.,); or b. survival in opposition of CC where it is the survival of a group against others (of the fittest, the most powerful, the ingroup).

The meaning of Survival

COVID-19 has had a great impact, amplified by the lack of coordination in the global sphere. The multilateralism put in place after the major crisis of WWII, with a system of international organisations financed by nation-states, has been in crisis and a lot of un-charted areas without political or other regulation have become exposed (Le Drian, 2020). The World Health Organisation, for example, has an advisory role and depends on nation-states for funding. COVID-19 is exposing further its vulnerabilities and the organisation does not have the legitimation and means to take the necessary action (Hale and Held, 2017). Individuals, local communities and nation-states are left to face an emergency that would require more cooperation and coordination (e.g. Jakovljevic et al., 2020).

COVID-19 emerged quickly and has become the epicentre of our existence, and a life-death issue. It is difficult to escape conversations, jokes, fear, the sickness itself or the death of a loved one. Mesfin (2020) explains:

> "*For perhaps the first time in modern history, the entire, interconnected world is focused on solving a single problem. The novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, and the disease it causes, COVID-19, have transfixed the global community, as leaders and citizens seek to respond to a threat whose dimensions are neither entirely certain nor entirely known*", (p. ??).

Despite the existence of a common objective and the realisation of a common destiny in facing a threat to survival, if action is not coordinated and our common resources are not put together, groups will be fighting literally and symbolically for meaning making in order to legitimate their course of action (Bibby, Everest & Abbs, 2020).

Actions to counter the COVID-19 pandemic are taken at the level of the individual, the communities and nation-states. Both at the individual and community level, the rupture provoked by the pandemic raises questions like: why has the pandemic happened? how? what does it mean for me (us), who should be blamed? what should be done? In other words: How to make sense of it? A dilemma faced by ordinary citizens, policy makers, scientists, religious leaders and atheists alike. Meaning-making is a collective process involving both dialogue and conflict, and the literature on intergroup communication processes in intergroup contact situations highlights the crucial role played by dialogic engagement in promoting positive outcomes (Nagda, 2006). The battle of signification will therefore have consequences for survival: how we define it, who are the main actors, and what are the key components of the

redefined global community's response to this threat? As we discussed earlier, when

reviewing the SRs associated to COVID-19, three other HSR and main areas of contention

among different groups in this battle, have been science, politics/democracy and nature. We

will now turn to analyse each, and to link them to CC as a matter of survival.

Science

The COVID debate often revolved around the role of **science** in our society. So in one

camp we see science as responsible for the creation and spread of the virus in certain

conspiracy-theory accounts (Imhoff and Lamberti, 2020), as backing up with fake or

manipulated data an inexistent threat, or science - and the production of a vaccine - as the

only potential saviour, able to rescue humanity from this "invisible enemy". Thus, a

discussion on the role and purposes of scientific evidence in the public sphere is brought to

the fore with unprecedented urgency and emphasis in this context. Luckily for scientists,

Plohl and Mushil (2020) show that in a sample of 525 English speaking participants recruited

on social media, the average level of trust in science is high (4.12 in a 1-5 Likert scale), in

line with polls which suggest that (at least in the UK) the majority of people would rely on

[medical] scientists' advice on the best way to address the emergency (Carrel, 2020). Thus,

while social psychological work warns us against ignoring the impact that a small, but

consistent and committed minority has on the general populations' attitudes and behaviours

(Wood et al., 1994), the debate over where the responsibility lies, what is the role of science

in it and what is the best way forward is still very much in favour of science being a guiding

principle in the public's decision making when facing a threat to survival.

When it comes to the CC debate, we see similar tensions between a view of science

and scientists as interested elites who are responsible for or complicit in the environmental

crisis (Douglas and Sutton, 2015), proponents of an inexistent crisis for their own individual

interests and gains, or committed and competent members of society who are capable of

guiding us to safety (e.g. Woods et al., 2018). We argue that the way in which we understand

the role of science in our societies, and its legitimacy in driving political decision making is

an important element in the matrix also when it comes to the challenge to survival posed by

CC, and that the way in which this has been seen within the COVID-19 crisis could play and

important role in the debate. We make a case, however, that – while it is important that

science is included in the considerations about the best way forward, in order to be able to

develop the sense of "we-ness" that Jetten et al., (2020) refer to, it is important to reconsider

and reshape the way in which we understand "expertise".

Science and Democracy or Science and Populism: The Role of Expertise

Experts and expertise are other significant ideological battlegrounds: who is allowed to

speak, whose voice is heard and with what authority? Indeed, scholars have started exploring

the various forms of "ordinary expertise" in the media. For example, Erikson and Thornberry

(2016) edited a special issue dedicated to ordinary expertise, in the media which

demonstrated on the one hand the ubiquitous presence of "traditional" experts (i.e.

individuals with academic qualifications or relevant experience who are deemed

knowledgeable and able to transfer their knowledge to others, Livingstone and Lundt, 1994),

and on the other, the shifting forms of expertise were presented e.g. … (e.g. Chovanec,

2016). In the case of COVID-19 coverage, we have "the establishment" (the State) and its

representatives, claiming they are grounding their policies on the advice coming from

experts. Additionally, we also have "alternative" experts who propose different readings of

the phenomenon and argue for alternative forms of intervention (see, e.g. Horton, 2020).

However, we also have the views and experiences of ordinary people such as frontline

workers or those who have lost a loved one to COVID-19. These propose yet other accounts

of what is going on and why. It becomes therefore important to consider how expertise is

defined and understood in a democratic society facing a threat to its survival, and whose

voices are constructed as expert voices, worth being listened to, and why.

Curran et al., (2014) have provided initial correlational data showing how a wider

representation of democratic (non-establishment) voices in the news can lead to improved

engagement in politics. The data from the same study however show (Tiffen et al., 2014) how

establishment voices still constitute the vast majority of the voices heard in news media

across the nine sampled nations. Coen et al., (in press) argue that for more successful

communication among citizens on CC impact and responses, and that it is important to

redefine expertise and give broader representation of different experiences and competences.

Thus, we argue for scientific evidence as an ongoing process and not as an objectivation,

should be a guiding principle, an element in the matrix when it comes to addressing and

debating CC as a challenge to survival. At the same time, though, we suggest that the

inclusion of "ordinary citizens" as legitimate voices and elements in the HSR matrix, would

strengthen the perception of CC as an issue which directly involves every individual in a

society, each bringing to the fore their unique understanding and experience in the solution of

this global emergency. In order to achieve this, however, there needs to be a consideration of

another important battleground: who are the ordinary citizens and what is their role in

democratic societies?

Ordinary People and Democracy

Issues surrounding individual versus institutional responsibility were highlighted in

deliberation about lockdown measures adopted by some governments (see also Steffens,

2020). For example, in nations (such as Italy or the UK) in which Governments took more

radical measures by imposing a lockdown, the issue of individual responsibility has appeared in governments' demands to abide by lockdown regulations, as well as on media coverage of the (minority) of instances in which individuals breached the rules, thus, effectively shifting responsibility from rule makers to rule breakers (e.g. Christodoulou, 2020 ; Scognamiglio, 2020). Sweden - traditionally characterised by risk-averse and cautious measures in the face of pandemics, has adopted a different response model, what Gititli Nygren and Oloffson (2020) call *ethopolitics:*

> *"The moral component means that individuals are expected to self-regulate in*
> *accordance with the norms of a moral, or rather ethical, righteous life (Rose 2001),*
> *where responsibility for the avoidance of risk is bestowed upon individuals, who are*
> *supposed to regulate themselves in line with the directions of health authorities."*
> *(ibid, p.4).*

Similar debates occur on the CC front, where individuals' own responsibility and behaviour are often contrasted to that of others' (and institutional), in order to justify engagement or lack of engagement with environmental issues. For example, Woods, Coen & Fernandez (2018), show how individuals commenting on CC related news display arguments in support of or against action aimed at reducing CC emissions, based on the extent to which they attributed moral responsibility to single individuals, groups (e.g. scientists, politicians) or nations. So, the framing of (moral) responsibility for dealing with a global crisis as something to be assigned to different social actors, is associated with support for different types of interventions, both in the context of the pandemic and in the context of CC.

The COVID-19 crisis has also sparked a rejuvenated sense of community, where ordinary citizens signed up to volunteering initiatives in support of the most vulnerable in society, as well as coordinated efforts to support others locally or via social media (e.g.

Booth, 2020), demonstrating how ordinary people display greater solidarity and altruistic

behaviour in emergency situations (Drury, 2018). In other words, independently from the

attribution of responsibility, ordinary citizens have been able to self-organise and support

each other, build communities and coordinate action in a truly democratic fashion. Thus, in

order to emphasise the sense of "we-ness" when dealing with the CC emergency, it becomes

important to better understand and define who "we" are, and to what extent we have

representative portrayals of ordinary citizens. Tensions between ordinary citizens and

political elites are characteristics of another important area we now turn to consider: politics.

Political Leadership and Trust

Politics is a fundamental area of contention and debate. On the one hand, we have a

representation of politics as decision-making for the collective. In this case, politicians

present themselves as custodians and protectors of the public interest, in a *primus inter pares*

fashion. On the other hand, politics can be represented as "other", and politicians as self-

serving representatives of the elites. The extraordinary case of Dominic Cummings (chief

advisor to the UK prime minister at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic) illustrates this

point. It emerged that Cummings had travelled while the country was in lockdown and had

COVID-19, which were both against the rules he contributed to establishment of This gave

rise to a scandal and the demand from part of the public for Cummings to resign; it seemed

that the political elite were issuing rules for the population, while not abiding by them. While

this is in itself a very interesting case study, which illustrates many issues (including the

attempts on the part of government and majority MPs to reframe the actions of Cummings as

the behaviours of a concerned father and loving husband), in this specific circumstance, the

battle of meaning concerns politics and what political representatives stand for. In a way, this

debate resembles the debate concerning populism and populistic views, and the fact that this

faux pas was committed by a populist leader is not lost on some journalists (Hyde, 2020).

The divide between political elites and citizenry in the public's understanding of what politics

is and what it is for, is present also in the CC debate, where academics call for a re-definition

and re-construction of the political in relation to this issue (Swyngedouw, 2013). The below

description of the way in which CC is addressed in the post-political Western democracies

seems to parallel significantly what happened during COVID-19 emergency:

> *"Although disagreement and debate are of course still possible, they operate within an*
> *overall model of elite consensus and agreement, subordinated to a managerial-*
> *technocratic regime (Crouch, 2004). Disagreement is allowed, but only with respect to*
> *the choice of technologies, the mix of organizational fixes, the detail of the managerial*
> *adjustments, and the urgency of their timing and implementation, not with respect to*
> *the socio-political framing of present and future natures."* (ref, p. 6)

In other words, the hegemonic definition of politics in the anthropocenic western world has

completely lost elements in the HSR matrix which allow to us imagine and construct a

different future for its survival. One of these elements concerns humans' relationship with

nature.

Nature: "bras de fer" with Nature or a Socially Constructed HSR?

Nature and our relationship to it is another area which has been brought forward in the

COVID-19 debate: , nature can be seen as an "invisible enemy", a "threat" to human lifestyle

and our very existence: e.g. bats or wild animals are carriers of viruses; the last frontier is

between them and us; contact with them might be dangerous (e.g. Harari, 2020). This

understanding of nature might also target and stigmatise the eating habits of certain

populations and cultures which put in danger the rest of the humanity. It divides "us" and

"them" which can bring further conflicts and divisions. In this logic, punishing these

populations is the best way of action, (Kapler, 2020). Nature is also represented as a passive

resource to exploit for humanity, particularly in neoliberal discourses of modernity. In this

sense, there is a division between humanity and nature, but also a relationship of dominance.

Contrastingly, nature is seen as a resource and a refuge for people struggling in these

unprecedented times, with calls for individuals to take advantage of the forced reduced

reliance on technology and artefacts, to re-engage with nature and "the old ways". People

have started noticing the effects of reduced pollution in the atmosphere, the appearance of

birds and animals in the absence of noise and threat posed by transport, and have started

appreciating the value of walks in parks and in the countryside to de-stress (Honey-Roses et

al., 2020). This is a more positive view of nature, but still relies on the same idea of nature

being something at the service of humans.

Naomi Klein, in "This Changes everything" (2015) argues that the key to addressing the

climate crisis is to reconceptualise our perception of nature, and our relation to it.

Conceptualising nature as something we are part of, and we need to respect and work in

harmony with, would help address the thorny problem of the way we relate to it. Thus, Klein

challenges the predominant representation of nature and proposes an alternative

representation. The philosopher Michel Serres argues that global environmental change has

forced us to reconsider our relationship to nature. In his influential 1990 book, *Le Contrat*

Naturel, Serres calls for a natural contract to be negotiated between the Earth and its

inhabitants. In the author's view, our survival depends on the extent to which humans can

join together and act globally, on an earth now conceived as an entity. Tracing the ancient

beginnings of modernity, Serres examines the origins and possibilities of a natural contract

through an extended meditation on the contractual foundations of law and science. The new legislators of the natural contract must bring science and law into balance.

The very definition of nature, its relationship with humans and its role in the organisation and management of our societies is therefore an important area of contention, intensified by the COVID-19 crisis, which will play a significant role in the way in which we deal with CC as a survival issue.

The "new normal"

It is our contention that in this battle of meaning, the "winning" versions of a HSR will determine the dominant view of what is "normal" and "desirable" in society. In other words, the "winning" representations will determine the reference points against which individuals will construct and evaluate their own position and understanding of society, the default.

In this light, it is not surprising to see how environmentalists and environmental groups have tried to claim the space of representation, adopting a similar language to that used in the context of COVID-19 to advance its demands on CC. An example is the slogan "let's flatten this curve too" proposed by Extinction Rebellion to stress how the COVID-19 emergency has shown that societies are able to radically change their way of living in the face of an emergency, when faced by an existential threat. The movement's name in itself is evocative of survival, and often claims its actions are driven by the need to guarantee the survival of all forms of life on Earth.

The popular hashtag #notgoingback is used on Twitter to indicate the desire of activists to use the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to move away from the "old" normal, which has contributed to the emergence of the CC. Interestingly, Prideaux, Thompson & Pabel (2020), draw on lessons learned from COVID-19 to re-design and transform the tourism industry in order to address the CC. Similarly, Honey-Roses et al., (2020) illustrate post-COVID-19 considerations concerning the future of public spaces. There seems therefore to be an appetite, at least among some, to transform the challenges posed by COVID into opportunities to redesign societies and lifestyles in a more environmentally-friendly way.

While desirable (at least for the authors), this endeavour, and its outcomes are not guaranteed. Indeed, the push to "go back to normal", and the exploitation of the crisis to push further current ideological (capitalistic) agendas and values, constitute a significant challenge (Swyngedouw, 2013). The outcome of which, we argue, will depend also on the outcome of the "battle of meaning".

Survival: an Inclusive Social Identity or as the Ingroup (fittest, "best", powerful)?

We argue that the battle of signification occurring over COVID-19, the latest threat to survival, will have a significant impact on the way in which people will think about survival in global terms, and act upon environmental issues. Already established HSRs such as science, democracy/politics and nature will be re-interpreted and reconstructed by different groups in order to legitimate their social identity and action, in a new form of globalisation imposed by the realities of the pandemic.

From the psychological perspective of metamodernity (e.g. Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010), survival can be considered a form of HSR under construction or a "central

imaginary notion" (Castoriadis,1998) of what constitutes a key part of the globalised world. It acts as the matrix for the creation of other meanings, practices, institutions and social realities. Democracy, nationalism and economy, are examples of HSR in modernity, in other words, complex matrices of meaning, culturally created and claimed as legitimating agents in the debates taking place in highly unequal societies. Groups in competition are constantly reconstructing them. Dominant groups, marginalized minorities, groups with different interests, try to impose their definition as the only legitimate and to legitimate their course of action. In other words, different groups might recognize the "existence" and importance of a HSR and take position, either by supporting its mainstream definition by dominant groups, using a strategy of reinterpretation, or rejecting it altogether and offering an alternative HSR. In the case of CC, whether and how science and nature will be included as key stakeholders within the global community, our understanding of politics and of the role of ordinary citizens in the shaping of the future global society will have important consequences for the way in which we understand and justify the way in which our societies and Communities will address the global environmental crisis, providing guiding principles and dimensions along which strategies will be formulated and evaluated.

To conclude, COVID-19 has highlighted some important battlegrounds in the construction of what we understand as survival, restructuring its components and its interpretations. In particular, science and scientists, the role of their expertise in public debates and decision making, the role of ordinary citizens in the public sphere, our understanding of politics, political priorities and nature. We have shown how these are key elements of contention also in the case of the CC debate. As Farr (1993) suggests, in order to be able to fruitfully contribute to society "the scientist [...] must make some concessions to common sense, or else risk their advice either being misunderstood or not being acted upon" (p. 198). It is our hope that this paper has demonstrated that the adoption of the theoretical

framework we propose can go further and enable scholars reflect on how HSR and meaning

making processes and common sense affect social, political and economic decision making in

the face of global issues.

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