The Roots of Neglect: Towards a Sociology of Non-Imagination

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Abstract: The sociology of expectations has helped academics and policy analysts to understand how socio-technical imaginaries are not only hypothetical and "in the future", but how they create realities in the present. They do so by shaping what gets funded, who gets hired, and even how people lead their lives as they consider some futures more likely than others. While this focus on the performative power of specific visions and expectations has been hugely important, there is another situation that has arguably been at least equally impactful on the present: the absence of (alternative) expectations of the future. It is the absence of specific imaginations of the future that people deem desirable that explains why, despite being fully aware of political and economic practices and arrangements that are detrimental for human and planetary health, we have not changed these arrangements.

Keywords: non-expectations; neoliberalism; strategic ignorance; complexity; crisis.

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1. Introduction: The State We're in

It has become a truism to say that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fault lines of our societies. This is also why, even at the very early stages of the pandemic, some people were hesitant when politicians talked about the way back to normal life. This sentiment was trenchantly expressed by an anonymous graffiti artist in Hong Kong: "Normal was the problem in the first place" (Wintour 2020; see also Wagenaar and Prainsack 2021).

What exactly was the problem? I believe it was – and is – nothing less than the way we organise our society, including our economy. It is harming people and destroying the planet. Racism, sexism, coloniality and oth-

er forms of injustice and exploitation – of people, and of the environment – are written into our social, political, and economic institutions. In many world regions, people suffer (and often seek to flee from) climate change, violent conflict, and sexualised violence. Social and economic inequalities are increasing almost everywhere. Anne Case and Angus Deaton (2020) famously coined the term "deaths of despair" to refer to the phenomenon that more and more people in the rich world no longer have any motivation to stay healthy and fit, or even alive; there is nothing for them to live for. Young people are afraid that even if they manage to make a good living and live as healthily as they can, they may not make it to old age as climate change will end their lives prematurely.

The reasons for this situation are manifold and have been analysed in a broad body of literature within and beyond of academia in recent years. At the heart of the problem lies what Hendrik Wagenaar calls a "mirage of economic democracy" (Wagenaar, 2023). Because of the intrusion of the corporate-financial domain and its values and practices in every sphere of society as well as out private lives, Wagenaar argues, democratic politics (and policy) have lost their power to shape the workings of society. As Karl Polanyi described in his 1944 seminal book (Polanyi 2001 [1944]), although markets – understood as spaces for the exchange and sale of goods – have existed almost as long as humans have, a "great transformation" took place in the 19th century. Local and regional markets grew together into a large system that began to regulate itself. Markets became increasingly powerful. Gradually, even those things that had previously been freely accessible and belonged to everyone, such as labour or land nature, were transformed into market goods – often by force of law. Those who worked as independent producers were turned into wage labourers (e.g., Maddison 2008). Control over the production of money was given to private banks, long before "debt-driven growth and deregulated finance" became key elements of neoliberal economics (Bollier and Conaty 2015; Pettifor 2017; Wagenaar and Prainsack 2021, Chapter 8). While "the market" had previously been a part of society, it now began to break away from it and become a sector of its own, obeying its own laws. At some point, society no longer ruled the market economy, but the market economy began to dominate all most other aspects of society. This process has progressed so far that today that most of us can no longer imagine a world without the primacy of economic thinking. At the same time, politics creates laws that support the expansion of markets instead of containing them. Neoliberalism, which is sometimes described as the pushing back of the state, is much better captured as the use of government and governance to expand the rationales and rules of markets – and to support the interests of powerful market participants who have become quasi regulators.

The result are societies in which social and economic inequalities continue to grow. Because "the market" (and "the economy" more broadly) are treated as separate from society, as something that observes their own

rules and should not be "interfered with", we have become accustomed to their destructive effects on the environment and the wellbeing of people. The conceptual and categorical separation of "the economy" and the rest of us has arguably made it possible that the same people who book a "green" holiday in eco-sustainable accommodation fly around half of the world to get there. That we have "ethical fashion" delivered to our homes by a UPS driver in a truck without air condition in the searing heat – a situation which made headlines in the summer of 2022, not because it was an exceptional incident but because the company refused to do anything about it even after one of their drivers died (Fox 11 Digital Team 2022).[1] The same people who share stories of labour exploitation on social media, continue to buy goods and services from the offending companies, and continue to engage in the very same practices that caused the root of the problem – here, climate change – in the first place. Framing this situation as hypocrisy or cognitive dissonance of a comfortable, well-off middle class is not very helpful – there are structural grounds for the discrepancy between political ideals and everyday practice.

Why is this the case? And why have we not changed the arrangements that cause the problems that our societies are acutely dealing with? With the COVID-19 pandemic still not behind us, and amidst wars and a very tangible climate crisis, the flaws in the way we have organised our economy, our political decision making, and our social order, is becoming painfully visible – and tangible. It should not have taken the COVID-19 pandemic for us to realise that something is very wrong. We have been aware of these issues, and often also know how they could be addressed. There is no dearth of literature on the human causes of climate change, the detrimental and even deadly effects of austerity, and the political, economic, and health-related outcomes of grave inequalities. Why have we not something to change this situation?

In the remainder of this article, I will attempt an explanation. I will explore several possible rationales for why we, collectively, do not act. I will conclude that a sociology of non-imagination that – like the way in which the sociology of expectations has helped us do within its remit – could help us understand the ways in which the absence of alternative visions and expectations creates facts on the ground.

2. Why We Don't Act: Four Attempts at Explanation[2]

There is one explanation for why we do not act that I will not discuss in this section, despite its importance. It corresponds with a good part of the body of critique of neoliberalism. In different variants and forms it revolves around the argument that neoliberalism, by using institutions and instruments of public governance to expand market interests, has eroded the key function of governing, namely, to increase the welfare of

people. I strongly agree with this critique and owe much of my own thinking to it. At the same time, I seek to go beyond it in the sense that I am interested not only in how this has happened (which is explained very well by Crouch 2011, for example; see also Gerstle 2018) but also in the deeper question of why we, as members of our societies, have allowed to let this happen. The explanations that I explore in this section are thus to be seen as complementing the explanations building upon neoliberalism critique, and not competing with it.

2.1 "More Prisoners than Students": Our Societies Are Too Old

In his 2018 book on *How Democracy Ends*, the English historian and political theorist David Runciman offers an answer to why, in so many democracies shaken by corruption, perennial crisis, and worsening conditions for workers and other groups, no political change is on the horizon. Runciman exemplifies his argument with the case of Greece. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, austerity measures had led to cuts in public budgets and services as well as income losses for many citizens, which in turn had contributed to a decline in physical and mental health in the population (e.g., Stylianidis and Souliotis 2019). Runciman is interested in why there are no revolutions[3] in democracies that struggle as much as Greece does. Part of the reason, he argues, is that Greece – to stick with this example – despite the hardships that its people have experienced in recent decades, is a rich country compared to many other countries in the world.[4] Between 1968 and the financial crisis in 2008, the Greek economy grew five-fold (Alogoskoufis 2021; see also Runciman 2018, 45). Greater wealth is a disincentive for radical change for those who remember how it used to be before things started to improve. In Runciman's words, people "think twice before tearing the whole thing down" (Runciman 2018, 45).

But how about the younger people, those who do not remember what things used to be like before the economy started to grow in the 1960s? This, Runciman argues, is exactly the point: there are not so many who do not remember. Greek people are old. In fact, they are one of the oldest societies in the world, with a median age of over 45. Only Japan, Germany, Italy, and Hong Kong have a higher median age (WorldData, n.d.). The youngest countries, Niger and Uganda, have a median age around 15. In Greece, there are more people in prison than studying at university, Runciman notes. In such societies, high youth employment does not fuel political protest simply because there are not so many young people to rise up. Indeed, research shows that countries with large proportions of young people – so-called "youth bulges" – are more likely to experience political violence (Urdal 2006).[5] If political uprise is a young people's game, then societies such as Greece are simply too old to play it. Today's "battles are taking place between men and women in business

suits armed with spreadsheets" (Runciman 2018, 44) – and these battles are not about what a new society should look like.

To be clear, Runciman is not suggesting that the advanced median age of Greek society – and that of most other societies in the Global North[6], in fact – is the only or even the main reason that is not radical change. Next to the growth of wealth over the last decades, another important argument, according to Runciman, is that democracy has very little to promise anymore. Not because there is anything wrong with democracy, but because what it has to offer it has already delivered: it has given people dignity and benefits (Runciman 2018, 235). In Runciman's words,

> The battles to expand the franchise have been largely fought and won. The state bears the burden of the huge range of public services that it is expected to provide. Levels of debt, both public and private, are high. Taxes could be higher – they have been higher at periods over the past hundred years – but the popular appetite for paying more is very limited. The current populist backlash in the established democracies is happening in places that have been doing their best with democracy for a while. (Runciman 2018, 101).

In summary, the first possible explanation for why we are not standing up to change the way that our society is organised, and the way in which our economic model is destroying people and the planet, is that we are, collectively, too old, and too invested in how things are. Many of us have grown into this system and lived in it for such a long time that we cannot imagine anymore that things could be different. We are implicated in it. But some of us do protest, you might think – and you would be right, of course. But the problem is that this action does not change the way things are. In the next section, I will argue that people's actions to change the status quo are sometimes not even seen.

2.2 We Do Act, but It Cannot Be Seen through the Traditional Lens of Participation

Political scientists tend so see citizen participation only when it takes place within the institutions of electoral democracy – such as when citizens start a formal initiative pushing for a change in legislation, when they turn up for a referendum, or cast a vote – or when they engage in political or even violent protest. The reference point is, thus, always the formal institutions and processes of collective will formation; citizens participate by being active within these institutions, or against them. What political science, and also mainstream policy analysis, does not see is when citizens engage outside of these formal institutional landscapes. For example, when citizens create solutions to problems of missing or defective social care (Wagenaar 2019), when they produce their own green energy, or when they change the way in which goods and services are traded from

commercial profit-driven modes to modes that foreground the wellbeing of people and the planet.

Innovation studies have found that what they call "household innovation" – that is, "the dedication of household resources to creating a product or process that will generate a service flow in the future" (Sichel and Von Hippel 2021, 639) contributes much more to the economy than commonly assumed – because it is largely invisible to analysts (Sichel and Von Hippel 2021). What Sichel and Von Hippel conclude for technological innovation seems to apply also to other types of innovation – such as the care cooperatives and other social enterprises in the Netherlands that Wagenaar (2019) writes about. One big advantages of such citizen-initiated and citizen-led organisations is that they have links to the communities they are serving, instead of being implemented top down. They respond to the specific characteristics and problems of the community, instead of representing a standardised, anonymous answer to a problem that other communities may have. Despite their significant innovative potential – e.g., by establishing new modes of service provision, by creating local non-profit barter economies, or by challenging the normative conceptions of the issues that they set to solve (see Wagenaar 2019, 310), these social enterprises are often not seen – neither by policy makers nor journalists nor most academics. Besides the limitations of the theoretical lenses of scholars and the pragmatic and ideological ones of policy makers, there may be a deeper, structural reason for this, which I will turn to next.

2.3 Hegemony and Complexity

In our 2021 book *The Pandemic Within: Policy Making for a Better World*, Hendrik Wagenaar and I attribute our collective inability (and not only unwillingness) to change the status quo to two main predicaments: complexity and hegemony. Talking about complex systems is equivalent to talking about the intrinsic structure of the world we live in. It is impossible to wish complexity away – it is a characteristic of both social and material reality. It comes from the interactions between the system's various components, not only from the actions of individual components. This makes it so hard to understand complexity, and impossible to predict it. This means that even if we want to act on a specific problem, if we have analysed why it needs addressing and how we want to address it, complexity can come in the way. In public policy, this phenomenon is known as the "law of unintended consequences": policy solutions, despite being well intended and designed well on the surface, can be ineffective or even make problems worse instead of alleviating them (see Sterman 2002) – because the world talks back. Within complex systems such as the world we live in, when we intervene on one specific problem the repercussions of that intervention can be felt in many or even all other

fields. Although we are aware of the individual components of the issue, we find it difficult to understand how they work together:

> Policy resistance arises from the mismatch between the dynamic complexity of the systems we have created and our cognitive capacity to understand that complexity (Sterman 2002, 5).

This situation can be avoided only if policy makers try to harness complexity, rather than denying or resisting it (e.g., Wagenaar 2007). Recognising complexity is not the same as declaring something to be complicated. An internal combustion engine, for example, is complicated: it contains many parts which need to interact in precise and predictable ways with all other parts. A small group of friends, however, can form a complex system; it is often impossible to predict what they will do. Emergent outcomes, to use the terminology of complexity theory, are the results of the group members' interactions and actions. Emergence signifies that the features of the parts cannot fully explain the whole. This contradicts traditional policymaking, which tends to use the characteristics of individual components as our leverage points for group intervention (see also Wagenaar 2007). More often than not, policy makers who do not acknowledge and harness complexity attribute the failure of their policies to individual behaviour. Rather than gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the structural roots of these behaviours, they blame climate-destructive practices, for example, to individual "choices" and try to persuade or nudge people to change these.

Hegemony, which we describe as imaginative captivity, is the second reason that we have not yet acted on the state of the globe (Wagenaar and Prainsack 2021). Hegemony renders us unable to look beyond our immediate, moral, and practical concerns. In a world that makes sense to us, we live, work, breathe, and "know our way". Because we have been socialised into specific systems of practices and judgments, the features of these systems have become self-evident to us. They comprise specific methods of appreciating, seeing, and acting. Their shape and meaning are built into the very structure of our language.

Hegemony serves as the reference point for how we are in the world. For instance, when we constantly hear experts, politicians, and news anchors use the word "economy", we assume that there is an entity, distinct from the rest of society and in opposition to the natural environment, that is run by professionals (business managers, economists, the financial press, central banks, and so forth), operates according to its own rules, and that its smooth operation somehow ensures everyone's well-being. The reporting of statistics such as fluctuations in the gross domestic product, the number of unemployed people, the rate of inflation, and other metrics confirms that depiction day in and day out (see also Mazzucato 2018). We assume the existence of the economy, and even when

we are critical of certain aspects of it (such as large inequalities in wealth, or its contribution to global warming), it does not occur to us to question the category and the tacit assumptions of its functioning itself. We do not notice that it is a self-referential system that reinforces itself by the very metrics that it uses. In this manner, hegemony concerns the very intelligibility of our world, the way we determine what can be judged true or false in the first place. The "economy", as discussed at the beginning of this paper, as a separate realm, performing to its own laws, to be managed by people with specialised knowledge, is the tacit background of our life-world, somewhat like a landscape or cityscape. We live in it, but we do not see it (Wagenaar and Prainsack 2021).

Hegemony also has a firm hold also over our ethical considerations, as it entails a particular moral order. It confers intellectual authority to designated experts and, conversely, withholds it from others, such as "ordinary" citizens or marginalised groups.[7] Think of the awe with which the pronouncements of Central Bank presidents or captains of industry are received by the media, while those drawing attention to human-made climate change are dismissed as hippies or eco-warriors. Closely related to this is how hegemony also shapes moral sensibilities. It instructs us how to feel. In our 2021 book Hendrik Wagenaar and I took a bet that people looking back at the 2020s from a few decades in the future will be shocked when they read how governments demonised welfare recipients, condemned hundreds of thousands to a precarious existence by abolishing worker protections and fighting unions, or destroyed precious public sector institutions by handing them over to private corporations, or how corporations condemned hundreds of thousands to a precarious existence by abolishing worker protections and fighting unions. They may experience the same kind of moral outrage that many of us are experiencing right now at historical accounts of blatant sexism and racism when they read or see how we condoned an economic system that forced retirees out of their homes and into a precarious nomadic life (Bruder 2017). In our book we imagined how in the future, historians will look back at today's debates where demands for workers' rights or state-regulated universal health are met with angry cries of "socialism". We believe – and hope – that there will be a world where the moral inertia towards these destructive aspects of our economic and political order will be met with astonishment. That we do not perceive great outrage at these things happening in front of our eyes today – this is hegemony at work.

What makes it difficult to break free from hegemony is that we cannot merely think ourselves out of it. Hegemony, understood as imaginative captivity, is anchored in our personal, social, economic, and political practices. As we argue in our book,

> the world is self-evident to us because it rests on a bundle of practices, into which we have been thoroughly socialised and which are held in place

> by institutions, beliefs, understandings, ideologies, and identities. This is where hegemony and complexity meet. Try to reform one aspect of this dense structure (for example, introduce sustainable production methods) and you run into another set of institutions and practices that push back (the international finance system, or the large network of carbon subsidies, for example). Resistance to change is not so much a psychological quality, as Elisabeth Shove (2010) pointed out, but the effect of being caught in a web of practices. When the solutions to improve a given situation are framed in the same terms as the very situation you seek to change, you know you are in a hegemonic situation. Or, reversely, when some reasonable proposals are met with incredulity, dismissed as impractical or not worthy of serious discussion, this is another sure sign that you find yourself caught up in a hegemonic situation. (Wagenaar and Prainsack 2021, 18)

To give an example: what do you think when you hear that, to save money, governments need to spend? Most of us believe this statement to be false because we have been told for years and decades that it is. That this statement is false is part of the hegemonic narrative we grew up with. But this statement is correct: to save, governments need to spend. Investing in public services and infrastructures creates value and saves money for solving the problems that austerity created later on.[8] A state does not save money when it leaves people to their own devices. Unlike a company, a state cannot – and obviously should not – lay off people. People living in long-term unemployment or abject poverty are not only experiencing great hardship, but they are also costly for the state. If ethical arguments are not sufficient to make the case for government spending, economic arguments should: having large numbers of people living in poverty is expensive. It may be cheap in the short run, but adds up later. A string of research on the social costs of austerity programmes testify to this (e.g., Karger 2014; Ortiz et al. 2015). Despite all these facts, most of us believe the statement that states need to spend in order to save to be false.

Taken together, hegemony and complexity go some way to explain why we, collectively, have not managed to change the problematic state of the world so far. Many are trying to break free from the current order of things; they protest oppression, injustice, dictatorships, and the exploitation of people and the environment. But usually, their actions remain without a lasting effect. Sometimes the reason for this is that those who stand to benefit from the status quo actively work to thwart attempts to change it – think of voter suppression, the prohibition or sabotage of unions, or the simple lobbying of governments for the interests of the carbon industry or other big business. Very often, however, their protest is not only dismissed by powerful elites but also by their fellow citizens – those people who suffer from the precarisation of labour, climate change, and illiberalism as much as they do. That these fellow citizens do not join the protest, that so many of us believe it is better to stick with the "devil we know" rather than leap into the unknown, and that so many feel that

it would be too messy to uproot a system that they got used to – this the result of the joint effect of hegemony and complexity.

And there is yet another, and at least equally important, problem that helps to explain why we do not act.

2.4 We Cannot Envisage a Future for Which Our Current Action Would Be Necessary

In 2021, social theorist Jana Bacevic wrote a text titled "Why we don't act" (2021), referring to the failure of so many governments all around the world to take effective action to protect people from COVID-19. She drew an analogy to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, when there was sufficient knowledge for people to have been able to predict what would happen, yet they were still taken by surprise. Bacevic explained people's inertia in the following way: "It was rather that they could not imagine a future in which their present action was required" (Bacevic 2021). Bacevic said something of key importance here. Even if we know what is wrong with the status quo, even if we know how we could address specific problems, we lack a bigger narrative of why we should act. We lack a vision of what our societies would look like in a better world. Without such a vision, given how difficult it is to change our existing political and economic order, it is not worth bothering.

The lack of such a vision, and a narrative of how we get there, also helps to explain one of the seeming paradoxes of democracy. In his most recent book, Thomas Piketty (2022) showed that although the world has become more equal in the last 100 years, not much has changed for the 50 percent of people who held virtually no share of the global wealth then, and who still hold hardly any wealth at all today. For those who live in democracies, why have they not voted out the political elites who are responsible for these persisting inequalities (which in many democracies are actually growing)? For those who live in undemocratic, autocratic regimes, why has there been no revolution? Piketty does not answer this question in his book. I believe that Bacevic does, at least in part. It is because of the power of stories that convey that if the economy does well, everyone will benefit. That high income or corporate taxes stifle innovation. That the state must save money by not spending it on people. And that the economy is a system separate from the rest of society that one must have expert knowledge of in order to criticise it – not to mention "interfere" with it. These stories are articulated over and over by almost all societal actors – and believed, and retold, by many of the people who suffer from it. They are hegemonic in the sense we described above. More often than not, information about the fate of disadvantaged people does not become part of the main narrative – because it does not fit. It has no anchor point. To give a concrete example: if income is framed as payment for labour, then there is no conceptual space for people to receive an income for

anything else than labour. Not only does this make it impossible to conceive of income that people may "deserve" if they do not work for it – such as an unconditional basic income – but it also moves out of collective sight a huge source of income of the wealthy, namely income from capital.

The fact that the suffering of many people has no conceptual frame, no anchor point, represents an instance of epistemic injustice, which Miranda Fricker (2007) famously defined as injustice experienced by people in their capacity as knowers. According to Fricker, epistemic injustice typically appears in one (or both) of two forms. The first is testimonial injustice, when the knowledge of a person is dismissed due to prejudice (because she is a poor person, or "only" a patient and not a doctor). The second form, hermeneutical injustice, takes place when people have no reference point to even conceptualise or articulate their disadvantage. Fricker's own example is sexual harassment experienced by a person at a time and place where there is no societal conception of this phenomenon. The person may feel hurt or even traumatised without being able to articulate what is wrong. This, I argue, is happening to the majority of people in many countries at the moment, who are living in poverty or worrying about their livelihoods while a small stratum of people is becoming richer. Many of them feel that there is something wrong with this situation, but they have no conceptual anchor point to articulate how it is wrong, and that – and how – it could and should be different.

Ruha Benjamin (2019, 162) argued that "[c]alls for abolition are never simply about bringing harmful systems to an end, but also about envisioning new ones". The same is true for our narratives about the increasing power of tech corporations and other multinational businesses; our narratives focus on the obscene wealth and power that they are accumulating, and not on the harm that this does – or how things could be different. Referring to the surveillance studies community, Daniel Susser (2022, 297-298) argued that:

> [u]nless we introduce competing visions of a good technological future, the most we can hope for […] is to realize Silicon Valley's vision – minus some of the harm.

We need a vision of the future that integrates all fields of policy making, and all fields of societal practice, of what a better future could look like. If we had a narrative that focused on why so many people in most countries of the world are still struggling, instead of a narrative that focuses on progress and increasing wealth, there would be much more pressure on all of us to act. As Bacevic argues, it would need to be a story about what a future should look like for which it is worth acting upon the present.

3. Towards a Sociology of Non-Imagination

The sociology of expectations has been an important and fruitful field of academic and policy-relevant exploration and insight. Despite its focus on technological innovation, its core tenet that expectations are not merely feelings or thoughts but instead "an intensely future oriented business with an emphasis on the creation of new opportunities and capabilities" (Borup et al. 2006, 285) is relevant far beyond the field of science and technology. It has shown, as Kornelia Kondrad and Knud Böhle (2019, 102) put it, how:

> [c]collective expectations and imaginaries, their explicit claims and implied framings, prestructure which developments are considered relevant and urgent, possible or inevitable,

in fields as diverse as biotechnology, healthcare, and green technologies.

I argue that, in addition to the sociology of expectations, we need a sociology of non-expectations – or, more precisely, of non-imagination.[9] As Susie Scott (2018) pointed out, understanding deliberate inaction is not the same as making sense of other, non deliberate forms of non-doing. Analysing political struggles to suppress actions to abolish racist or sexist policies, for example, is not the same as understanding instances where racism or sexism are not even seen as a problem, and no alternative is thus imagined. In Scott's words, we need to attend not only to "'acts of commission' (doing nothing) [but also to] more passive 'acts of omission' (not-doing/not-being something)" (Scott 2018, 4). Such as sociology of non-expectations (or a sociology of nothing, as Scott would call it), is not merely of academic importance. The absence of visions about what an alternative, better, future should look like creates facts on the ground. It makes us accept the status quo, or the supposedly "natural" course of things, as a given, and it makes us put up with its negative effects. In the worst case, it naturalises specific distributions of power and agency, and suggests that these are beyond our control.

There are several concepts and bodies of work that could underpin such a sociology of non-imagination. An obvious one is a form of soft power that political scientist Peter Digeser called the Second Face of Power (Digeser 1992; see also Dahl 1957, 202-203). The First Face of Power, following Digeser, is the one that most people have in mind when they think of power. It includes an open conflict and crude domination, sometimes even brute force. It materialises when an actor – a person, an organisation, or a state – makes another do something that the latter does not want to do, either by use of force or direct pressure. The Second Face of Power, in contrast, refers to situations in which an actor prevents somebody else from doing what they want to. The recognition of this less openly visible dimension of power is largely owed to the work of Peter

Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz who, in a landmark article in the early 1960s, drew the attention of political analysts to:

> instances of power where actors are not constituted as parties to a conflict and/or issues are not defined as contentious (c.f. Bilgin and Elis 2008, 9; see Bachrach and Baratz 1962; 1963).

Analysts of the Second Face of Power look at decisions that were not made, or processes that resulted in certain items never making it onto agendas. As such, the Second Face of Power is closely related to Miranda Fricker's notion of epistemic injustice – the injustice that is done to people in their capacity as knowers, when their expertise or experience is ignored due to prejudice or other problematic reasons. It goes beyond epistemic injustice, however, in that it also often has tangible social, economic, and political consequences. And while some practices that fall under the remit of the Second Face of Power would count as deliberate inaction in Scott's typology – e.g., if they result from a political agenda not being pursued because its proponents are being actively silenced – the Second Face of power can be a useful analytical lens to recognise power as a tool of inaction.

Another important body of work that a sociology of non-imagination could draw upon is scholarship on ignorance, pioneered by Linsey McGoey. Different forms and meanings of ignorance come to bear here. *Strategic ignorance*, as many readers of this journal will know, refers to the deliberate creation of ignorance for strategic purposes (McGoey 2019) – such as the throwing into doubt of scientific evidence on human-made climate change. *Useful unknowns* (Bacevic and McGoey 2021), in contrast, are mobilised when policy makers and other actors gain from "genuine" unknowns – such as the impossibility to know what the next mutations of the SARS-CoV-2 virus will look like. The midpoint between a useful unknown and strategic ignorance is what Bacevic and McGoey call *surfing ignorance*. It conveys "the active, institutional capacity to willfully steer 'unwilled unknowns' to meet different goals" (Bacevic and McGoey 2021, 2). It happens when decision makers choose not to look for evidence on an unknown because they fear that this evidence could go against their interests, or conflict with their goals in another way.

A third tradition that a sociology of non-imagination could be informed by is Post-Normal Science, which was introduced by Silvio Funtowicz and Jerome Ravetz in the early 1990s (Funtowicz and Ravetz 1993; see also Dankel et al. 2017). In contrast to normal science in the Kuhnian sense (e.g., Kuhn 1962), which is based on the solution of scientific "puzzles" that are described and solved within established scientific paradigms, in some situations, policy development requires Post-Normal Science: namely in situations where facts are uncertain, values are in dispute, stakes are high, and decisions are urgent (ibid). Understood not as a replacement but as a complement to normal science, within Post-Normal

Science, both the problem descriptions and the solutions are considered according to criteria of the communities that are affected by the policy or decision based on the science. Going beyond regular public participation exercises, Post-Normal Science turns the traditional domination of (supposedly) hard facts over (allegedly) soft values on its head: local, community-based knowledge can turn out to be the most robust reference point for how a problem should be framed and addressed to be solved effectively. It overcomes the imaginative hegemony of established paradigms that typically limit our actions already at the point of posing the problem in a particular way. In this way, Post-Normal Science does not only help us to understand why certain problems cannot be solved effectively, and why we cannot imagine alternatives, but it can also help us to build these alternatives – which I will focus on in the final section.

4. Conclusion: Gardening, Not Engineering

In the previous sections I have discussed several explanations for why we have not acted on the status quo, despite knowing how harmful our way of working and living is for people and for the planet, and despite solutions having been suggested for several of these problems. For example, to address the societal invisibility of unpaid labour, and the situation that so many people work in jobs that make them – literally – ill, universal basic income has been proposed as a solution (see e.g., Robeyns 2001; Haagh 2019). Some argue that such a universal basic income – because it would reduce work commuting and change the way that people consume – would also make our lives more sustainable (for a summary and critical perspective, see Howard et al. 2019). For the latter, which is arguably the biggest challenge of all, models such as economies without growth, solidarity economies, or commons as an alternative to capitalist extraction have been proposed (e.g., Bauhardt 2014; Bollier and Helfrich 2019). But none of these solutions have been taken up and implemented by any government in the world. This is, as has been argued – and as I have sketched above – perhaps related to most democracies in the world getting older, and the transaction costs for radical change being too high for most people. It is certainly due to our being captured in an imaginative hegemony. We cannot think beyond the world that we see and enact every day.

Drawing upon the work of Jana Bacevic (2021) and others, I have argued that getting out of the mess we are in will require envisaging a future for which it is worth intervening into the status quo in a major way. It will need to be a vision of a society for which it is worth accepting the discomfort and uncertainty of braking with what we have known. Hendrik Wagenaar and I have started to sketch such a vision (Wagenaar and Prainsack 2021). A society that is oriented towards the welfare of people and the planet, we argued, requires strong public infrastructures and services

that ensure that everyone's basic needs are met, in addition to a way of reorganising the relationship between government and the business that re-establishes the primacy of the former. Importantly, this newfound power of government is not to be used to discipline and exploit people as it is the matter today; governments have been willing enablers and accomplices of the exploitative and extractive business practices that they so frequently bemoan. In contrast, it is to be used to further the welfare of all people in a society. In our book we used the example of the "Red Vienna", namely the period between 1919 and 1933, when a Social-Democratic administration developed an innovative, integrated and highly successful public housing policy. The public housing built in this period was not merely a social housing for people who could not otherwise afford a home: it was a vision of a flourishing society where everyone should be able to lead a good life regardless of their inability to pay for it. The housing estates built in this era – and many afterwards that were inspired by it – bear little resemblance with the dreariness of social housing projects in the United Kingdom or other countries. They are solid, well-built and often beautiful buildings surrounded by parks and gardens. Many of them have childcare facilities and swimming pools. There is wide agreement that Vienna's current high quality of living up to this day is directly related to the achievements of the Red Vienna period. The historian Wolfgang Maderthaner called Red Vienna "one of the most extraordinary, creative and courageous communal experiments in modern European history" (2019, 24). This is all the more astonishing as the Social-Democratic administration of Red Vienna only lasted 14 years, operated in an increasingly hostile political environment, and faced a series of momentous challenges at its inception. Yet it had a vision, a humanist-socialist vision of emancipating the working class. Our own vision for the future of our societies includes a return to "good government" in the sense of a bureaucracy and administration that is committed to making everyone's life better and proudly pursues it. It is a vision of a society in which the state is no longer a dirty word.

Which leaves us with the question of how we get there. My honest answer is that I am not sure. I know that it will require both pressure from the people and the willingness of political decision makers to take risks and take unpopular decisions. My hope is that the combination of increasing costs of living, the fallout of climate change, and other hardships will not push people to escapism or resignation, but it will lead to collective action for change. But one thing that will be crucial about implementing the vision of a future for which, to use Bacevic' words again, it is worth acting upon the present is that it should be envisaged as a project of gardening rather than engineering (see below). Complexity, as I argued above, is not to lead us to fatalism, to throw our hands up into the air because "everything is so complicated". It calls upon us to harness complexity (Wagenaar 2007) in the spirit of humility and openness and the continuously

proliferating possibilities of what Connolly calls a world of becoming (Connolly 2011). We cannot do this without having a new concept of how things not only hang but also develop together, and of our place, as humans, in this interconnected web of flows, energy and materiality.

This is diametrically opposed to how policy makers are trying to address the large societal challenges today. When EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced the European Green Deal in 2019, she did it with the following words: "this is Europe's man on the moon moment" (c.f. Hutchinson 2019). She thereby framed the project of making Europe more sustainable as an engineering project. The concept of engineering, in turn, is strongly related to many of the innovations made over the past 200 years, including electrification, pharmacology, information and communication technologies, and the machines that revolutionised transportation, agriculture, and education. Some of the largest and most impressive engineering projects in the world – the Large Hadron Collider, the Delta Flood Management complex in the South-West of the Netherlands, the Oslo to Bergen line, and the Pyramids of Giza – are all examples of humankind's mastery over the natural world. They make it possible for people to cut across mountains by rail, push back the sea, look up into space, and treat diseases. This idea of human mastery is evident not only in the projects that "big engineering" has taken on, but also in the very nature of the discipline. Precision and the capacity to accurately predict how a tool, machine, or system will behave and the effects it has on the specific area of the environment in which it functions are crucial to engineering. This implies that the engineer must not only be aware of all the variables and aspects that may affect how the machine or system functions, but also have control over them.

But we cannot be in control of the planet. We are also unable to "manage" the climate because it is a complex system with which we are inextricably linked. We may be able to harness it, but we cannot and should not try to control it. Engineering sends the wrong message when it comes to building a sustainable society, regardless of how much it has contributed to global prosperity and progress and how useful the engineering metaphor has been in demonstrating that human ingenuity and perseverance can successfully tackle the most difficult challenges. The reductionist, universalist approach to knowledge can only take us so far. We cannot avoid complexity. We require more gardening rather than more engineering.

An excellent engineer should be very logical and analytically inclined, have a strong mathematical foundation, and be problem-solving oriented. A good gardener needs very different skills, such as the capacity to pay attention to, "listen to", and learn from nature. Gardening is a relationship, not a project of mastery. Even with the most thorough research and meticulous planning, a garden cannot be planned on a drawing board and then just "executed". The gardener must work with a certain amount of uncertainty because she cannot control all the factors that will affect the

outcome. She can analyse the soil structure, know everything there is to know about plants, consider the principles of garden design, and precisely dose irrigation. Even then, however, she will only be able to create a garden that is somewhat similar to the vision she has in her mind; yet, she will never be able to predict the exact result. She is unable to predict how the weather, wind, insects, parasites, and other elements that make up and inhabit a garden would act. Instead of designing a garden, a gardener takes care of one. She is conversing with the materials she works with. She can grow seedlings, weed, or sow seeds, but she can never totally master. I think this is the best way to develop and put into action a future vision.

The American ecologist Robin W. Kimmerer describes in her 2013 book *Braiding Sweetgrass* how she learnt to listen to the stories that plants had to share from her parents and grandparents. Her training in plant biology at university made her unlearn the analytical skill of hearing that her family had taught her, and to train her analytical skill of seeing. She writes:

> I honor the strength of the language [of science] that has become a second tongue to me. But beneath the richness of its vocabulary and its descriptive power, something is missing […]. The language that scientists speak, however precise, is based on a profound error in grammar, an omission, a grave loss in translation from the native languages of these shores (Kimmerer 2013, 48-49).

These words are not merely a critique of the reductionism of science; rather, they are a call to replace the grammar of accuracy, mastery, and control with a grammar of interconnectedness (Kimmerer calls it "a grammar of animacy"), which an openness for the unexpected and for that which we do not yet know but must learn from others.

Kimmerer makes use of a traditional approach to understanding, observing, and relating to the natural world that is shared by many indigenous people. It entails educating our senses as well as re-evaluating how we view the natural and human world. The idea of the world and our place in it is one of connection and process. It calls for a different perspective on time – not the hypertime that punctuates modern capitalism, but rather the slower, deeper time of growth and development. And the adoption of values such as humility, compassion, balance, and joy, where we expose ourselves to learning from nature rather than pushing ourselves on it to further our short-term exploitational objectives.

This does not mean that we should give up engineering and stop planning. The Grand and the Modest Story need not be in conflict with each other. To fight climate change, develop renewable energy sources, phase out carbon fuels, stop the loss of biodiversity and soil erosion, and deal with the effects of global warming, we need all the technological ingenuity and knowledge we can conjure. Engineering remains an important and highly suitable approach to complicated challenges – just not for complex ones. For the larger challenge to build sustainable societies, relational, and holistic modes of knowing ought to serve as our compass.

Instead of mastery and control, this is a joint process of "coming to know", as Lianne Betasamosake Simpson (2014, 7) calls it. We need to start with digging up the foundations of our society, and plant the seeds for a better one. We need to replace the roots of neglect with the roots for flourishing. And then: tend, watch, learn.

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Notes

[1] UPS were not contractually obliged to provide air condition or even a fan in delivery trucks, a spokesperson of the company said (Sainato 2022). World-wide, every summer, a growing number of workers die in increasingly hot conditions.

[2] This sub-header was inspired by Bacevic (2021).

[3] I use the term "revolution" according to the definition of Shults (2002, 1027): a revolution consists of (1) a radical mass protest; (2) a change of political power at the hands of elites; and (3) significant systems changes. All three elements need to be present for a political uprise to be qualified as a revolution.

[4] In 2022, 100 countries had a higher poverty rate than Greece (Worldpopulation Review 2022). In terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Greece ranked in 51st place worldwide.

[5] The correlation between youth bulges and political violence is particularly strong in the case of internal armed conflict in starkly autocratic regimes (Urdal 2006). It should be noted that this does not mean that younger people, as such, are more likely to engage in political protest than other ones (e.g., Caren et al. 2011); what research suggests is that the existence of large proportions of young people, whose opportunity costs to engage in political uprises are low, makes political violence more likely. The youth bulge literature should be read and interpreted in conjunction with research that suggests that large population increases in societies where these are unaccompanied by increases in productivity, and investments in human and physical capital, also increases the risk of political violence (e.g., Acemoglu et al. 2020; see also Goldstone et al. 2022). It has also been found that strong labour markets can mitigate or even suppress the negative effects of youth bulges (Weber 2019), suggesting that the relationship between youth bulges and political violence is complex. (Higher education is not always negatively associated with political violence; see Østby et al. 2019).

[6] In Europe, the youngest society is Albania with a median age of about 34. The United States have a median age of 38.5 (WorldData.info, n.d.).

[7] In this sense, hegemony is closely connected to epistemic injustice, both in its testimonial and its hermeneutical form; see Fricker 2007.

[8] Another reason why this statement is true is that countries are not individual households who have to earn the money they spend beforehand, if they do not want to go into debt. But this is a story for another time.

[9] John Gardner and colleagues (2015) write about a "sociology of low expectations", based on their analysis of how clinicians develop visions of the future together with their patients that accommodate doubt and uncertainty. This work is highly valuable but very different from a sociology of non-expectation that is attentive to the performative effects of the lack of specific visions and expectations.

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