

Ángeles Eraña\*

## The Current Change, A Conceptual Incongruity?

The world today continues to be the same as it was yesterday; today, just like before, people die from curable diseases; today, just like before, we women are victims of domestic violence and we're afraid to go out on the street, we're exposed to the many forms of gender violence that continue to multiply. Death is that tangible, palpable, current reality that it has always been, but, in contrast with yesterday, today there is a virus that reminds us of it and, with that, shows us to ourselves for what we are: we are mortal, we are as vulnerable as anyone else;<sup>1</sup> the possibility of ceasing to exist is real and is always just around the corner. The uncertainty that eats away at us today has always been there; the difference with yesterday's is that today it's visible. The unease about what will happen is exacerbated for different reasons. Among them is the certainty that we have no control over it; we can't even minimally predict when or how we'll be able to go back onto the streets. Today, in contrast with yesterday, the only thing that exists is the here and now, daily survival, navigating the waters of our homes to get through the day. As Rita Segato says, life turned into "at home." This brings a lack of contact, a reciprocity that cannot be corporealized, and, in that sense, does not produce a true exchange. But it also brings the possibility of domesticating the political.

The little differences between the world that was and the one that is, the differences that are barely perceptible in this world that continues to be itself, are beginning to



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become a process. This may well leave marks; that is, it may produce transformations that we will see later on.

In this article, I will sketch out some notes that may help us imagine —more than reflect on— the world that follows, the world that we're probably already experiencing but we don't see yet. And, from my perspective, it seems impossible to see the present changes because you inhabit them, you go through them. Only after they have happened do they become observable. This is particularly the case in a world where time is experienced as an economic entity, in which there is no time for time, in which time only exists for and due to production, in which it is measured by the standards that production imposes. In that world, the one we've been living in for several centuries now, recognizing change requires distancing yourself from it. For that reason, perhaps, it is so difficult to reflect on the transformations we are inhabiting today. We do so about those that others have gone through, those that somehow have already been consolidated and set. What we see, what we deliberate about, are, in a phrase, the consequences of change, the trail it leaves in its wake, the readjusting, the devastation when that exists or the tracks of its progress.

For these reasons, among others, talking about the change in the world after the pandemic —or during it—

\* Researcher at the UNAM Institute of Philosophical Research; mael@filosoficas.unam.mx.

is complicated: we are going through it; we are living it; and the changes that come with it—if they exist—are still opaque to us. Perhaps not all of them: the ones that have changed the immediate appearance of the world are palpable, but others, those that could transform the foundations of our planet, have not become fully visible yet.

The current situation is peculiar in many ways. One of them is what I was referring to in the previous paragraph: today's reality not only does not seem to move ahead, but it also propels us in an almost untimely fashion to think, reflect, and predict the changes that are brewing, those that are already occurring, those that we cannot yet see. The rush that constitutes us—the one born of the world of economic time and that is embodied in us—accompanies us in this impatient wait for the future, and, in the absence of any possibility of acting, pushes us to imagine. Every day many of us ask ourselves what the world will be like after lockdown, what world we will return to when science allows us to look each other in the face once again.

Perhaps we asked ourselves that question more at the beginning of the pandemic and less and less often now, but the interesting thing about it is that with lockdown came a sudden change. It was so sudden and unexpected that it was possible to see it in the very moment it happened, that we were able to perceive it as we experienced it. Here, it is worth reflecting about the characteristics and consequences of precipitous changes: they are a low-magnitude earthquake. You feel them, they shake you, and they seem to transform everything, but when they're over you can see that, while they did move around some of the debris, the foundations of our reality, the bases that hold up what was shaken, remain intact. Those brusque changes produce a kind of dizzy spell, and that sensation leads us to adapt quickly to our lives, to our ordinary way of being. We soon get used to its footprint and we make it ours. This does not happen with slow, drawn-out changes, those that last over time; those that, said another way, are themselves time. Those are like a persistent rain, a light mist that doesn't seem to wet you, but you end up soaked. Those are the ones that leave a footprint.

Confinement brings with it both kinds of transformation. The brusque and immediate one is palpable in some people staying at home and others not being able to do so; and it is embodied in the modes of time experienced simultaneously as a still pond and a running river. This sudden change in life, in activities, in social reality leads

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some of us to live “time-of-process,”<sup>2</sup> that is, to inhabit the passing of time itself; it leads us to rooting ourselves in the set of successive phases that constitutes our days.

We populate time in its immediacy, in the repetition of events that, nevertheless, only occur here and now. Others—women—, deluged with housework, care work, work that provides pay for survival, reside in that time without even being able to estimate its passing. It is as if there were no time, as if it didn't exist. Finally, there are those who have not been able to stay at home, for whom activities have changed only to the extent that the struggle for survival is harsher and harder: it's harder to move from one place to another, there is more fear of the people you encounter along the way, more contempt, more dispossession, a vacuum that inhabits time.

Collective time also has its rhythm, and that rhythm has also suffered a change. If we think that this time is measured, at least partially, by the operation and results of the means of production, then we know that their meter is slowing down today, and even pausing on occasion. This can be perceived in the slightly gentler sounds of the city: fewer cars, fewer planes in the sky, fewer shouts—also fewer laughs and conversations, but more birds and crickets. But our world's way of being, the “productivist rigor” that guides it and governs the time that makes it,<sup>3</sup> will not be able to stand this calm for long. The question arises, then, of how we will exit from it. And that leads us to think about the other kind of transformation, the slow, gradual profound transformation.

This change is the one we are going through and do not yet see. As I said before, we can imagine it. Imagination requires perception, and after nine months we can begin to divine the pandemic's tracks. They are not only perceived in the deaths counted or estimated, but are also beginning to be carved into us. Our bodies, our meanderings, and our gaze are diminished; our relations with others,

almost absent. The absence of an embrace is increasingly noticeable; limiting ourselves vis-à-vis others contains us, but now we're released and we're afraid to embrace each other again. The gaze through the screen promotes a failed reciprocity, the absent other presents herself in her own intimate space, but is untouchable. The other has no smell, her gestures modulated by the light of the screen, her voice distorted. The signs of confinement are also printed on the street and in the silences (or the soothing sounds) I described above. With these data, we can envisage the new reality that may not be so very new.

We can ask ourselves and use our imaginations to respond. We can think, for example, will time slow down? Will it be possible to once again take up the activities we used to do? Will our fear, already rooted in the other, grow? Will the structure of desire change? And, what consequences might all these things have for the structure of society, of the world that we inhabit and that inhabits us? Eva Illouz maintains, "The consumer culture places desire at the very center of subjectivity."<sup>4</sup> If we think that this is our culture, that our world is mounted on a relational structure that requires consumption (and the mass production of commodities) to subsist, then we will know that desire is at the center of our subjectivities:<sup>5</sup> we are in part what we desire and we desire what we are not, what we lack. So, we are also what we are not.

Desire is produced in affections, in that which affects us, that touches us. In the world we lived in before confinement, desire had a peculiar structure: there was always a kind of inadequacy; if what was desired appeared, it was insufficient; in contrast, its absence made it appear satisfactory. This structure corresponds to our subjectivities; we live in a perennial state of dissatisfaction: our desires are always on the point of being realized, but we never really reach the point of realization. This is due in large part to the fact that the object of our desires materializes in some commodity and the means of production always pay attention to generating new objects so that our desire continues to exist and is never realized. What structures our desire is the promise of a future that never comes.

The question is whether the temporal modifications and our perception of them will generate changes in social relations and, therefore, in our subjectivities and the structure of our desire. Perhaps, if time begins to pass more slowly, we will be capable of redirecting our desire, capable of recognizing the precise importance of what we desire,

of realizing that the satisfaction of our longings does not depend on the promise of a better future, but in the eternal realization of what exists in a transitory manner. Perhaps the imposed distance that we have had from others breaks down the walls of eternity and will allow us to perceive that the absence of the other is also isolation from ourselves. Perhaps we can understand John Berger when he says,

Not all desires lead to freedom, but freedom is the experience of a desire that is recognized, assumed, and sought out. Desire never implies merely possessing something, but transforming that something. Desire is a demand: the demand for the eternal now. Freedom does not consist of fulfilling that desire, but of recognizing its supreme importance.<sup>6</sup>

Today, it seems difficult to know what the world will look like when this process ends, what marks it will leave, what transformations will be fixed. Hopefully, it will be a world populated with people, with bodies capable of knowing and recognizing their multiple lacks, one where we will be able to see that what we are not is also what we are. Hopefully, it will be a world with various and multiple aromas, with gazes that find each other, and others that miss each other. That world is right now beginning to constitute itself through a long, slowly evolving process that we are experiencing today. That's why it seems important to scrutinize the process itself and labor so that its wake embraces us all equally. ■■■

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the article, the author consistently uses the feminine form of indefinite pronouns even when referring to the entire population. In English, this is only possible occasionally without being extremely—and misleadingly—awkward, but it is important to state the author's intent. [Translator's Note.]

<sup>2</sup> Rita Segato (2020) talks about this, about extra-economic time, time that does not necessarily turn into a commodity, and points to the idea that this may be a counter-hegemonic position involving important transformations in the structure of society (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9cTp85Hma4E>).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Eva Illouz, *Por qué duele el amor* (Buenos Aires: Katz Editores, 2012), p. 60.

<sup>5</sup> Frederic London, *Capitalismo, deseo y servidumbre. Marx y Spinoza*, Sebastián Puente, trans. (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2015), p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> John Berger, "Hoy el infinito está del lado de los pobres," <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2006/04/24/oja108-berger.html>.