

Social Innovations and Crises: Avenues for Reflection and Action from our 2021 CRISES International Conference

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ABSTRACT

This review article draws connections between ideas expressed in some key presentations of the 6th International Conference of the Centre for Research on Social Innovations (CRISES). First, in reference to the lectures of Nancy Fraser and Loïc Blondiaux, we discuss the interconnectedness of crises (democratic, economic, ecological, and now sanitary). Then, in relation to the lecture by Janice Fine and the one by Dominique Méda and Julie Battilana, we review transformations in the world of work and the challenges it faces in terms of social and environmental justice. Finally, in reference to the lectures of Flor Avelino and of Jean-Baptiste Comby, which we set up in dialogue with each other, we examine the capacity of social innovations to reproduce or transform power relations. We conclude our overview by drawing our own conclusions on what these analyses mean for our work as researchers.

Keywords: crisis, social innovation, social justice, environmental justice, relations of power

INTRODUCTION

The Centre de recherche sur les innovations sociales (CRISES) took shape in the 1980s around one central question: what good can emerge during times of crisis? At the time, in Québec as in many other Western nations, the crisis of Fordism, alongside deindustrialization and massive unemployment, coincided with a movement to challenge the welfare state in its ability to respond to collective aspirations within society. Social innovations, from an economic standpoint, are fed both by an ideal of self-governance, reflections on employee participation in the workplace, and union movements. As for the questioning of the welfare state, it manifested itself in the burgeoning of popular initiatives and social movements that experimented with new models in the fields of health, education, and even land development.

Now, almost 35 years later, the crises have changed, as have social innovations, both in terms of their focus and their modes of action. The ongoing climate emergency calls for radical changes within an ever-shrinking time horizon. The COVID-19 crisis has repeatedly shaken our community life and essential democratic hallmarks. Transformations both in capitalism and in relationships of domination within our societies have led to new forms of resistance and experiments. Using a few notable examples from our last international CRISES conference in 2021, we will highlight some of these new developments. We will summarize the primary arguments to draw our own conclusions on the implications of these analyses on our own work as researchers.¹

CAPITALISM, DEMOCRACY, CLIMATE, COVID-19: A PERFECT STORM?

The lecture by Nancy Fraser (New School for Social Research), “Capital, climate, care: Anatomy of a crisis,” reveals the multidimensional character of the current crisis, its roots in neoliberalism, and the interrelations between its various manifestations: it is simultaneously a crisis in health, ecology, economics, social reproduction, and democracy. With their ceaseless quest for higher profits, capitalist societies are in a way programmed to destroy their own non-economic foundations, despite their reliance on them to function: social reproduction (or care), natural environment, public powers, and peripheral, expropriated populations that have been stripped of their ability to defend themselves. Fraser uses the term “cannibal capitalism” (Fraser, forthcoming) to refer to this process. According to her, the COVID-19 crisis constitutes a perfect storm in which all of capitalism’s dysfunctions have been pushed simultaneously to the breaking point. Thus, the pandemic is the unintentional result of a combination of global warming and the destruction of tropical forests, which caused the virus to spread from animals to humans. The effects of COVID-19 have been exacerbated by successive cuts in social spending, including for public health and research, which have stymied public powers’ ability to play a protective role. In turn, the crumbling public systems have added to the load in care labour by sapping the energy of caregivers and by burdening families—most often the women—with the responsibility of caring for children unable to attend school or daycare. Lastly, the workers recently celebrated as essential (healthcare aides, supermarket clerks, delivery workers, maintenance staff, warehouse workers) are forced to be exposed to the virus in order for their families and communities to function. In addition, essential workers are disproportionately composed of racialized populations that, on a global scale, are also the most affected by the ecological crisis and are last in line for access to vaccines. At the national level, they are also the least resourced for staying healthy and, for lack of options, are not able to refuse to carry out dangerous tasks in jobs that are unstable, non-unionized, and unprotected.

These crises are intimately linked; we cannot find solutions without considering the whole. But why do social movements have such difficulty in uniting to resist this capitalism in crisis? After all, given the insufficiency of current reformist remedies, there is, theoretically, space for more radical ideas—some horrible, some emancipatory—not unlike what happened in the 1930s. Every social movement needs to develop a holistic view of this social totality to understand who its potential allies are. At this point, there is a need for experience and social knowledge. The role of academics is to support these movements with their conceptual resources, which can help to bring a certain clarity to issues.

Loïc Blondiaux (Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne), while he shares Fraser's concluding observations on the responsibility of academics, has a different point of departure in his lecture entitled "As modern democratic systems crumble: What strategy?" The terms "crumble" or "collapse," increasingly employed when analyzing what is to become of our natural ecosystems, are used here to describe the state of our democratic institutions (Ziblatt et Levitsky, 2018). Specifically, it is representative liberal democracy as we have known it for the past two centuries that is no longer functional. Elections are hamstrung by abstentions; parliamentary assemblies are less and less sociologically representative of the sovereign people; professionalized parties limit themselves to the role of selecting candidates, abandoning their responsibilities for political socialization and the elaboration of platforms; and the media sphere is short-circuited by "fake news," where the very definition of a shared reality is no longer guaranteed. Blondiaux identifies three specific pathologies that are perturbing liberal democracies. First, there is one of representation, with the end of the fiction of representation (Tormey, 2015), the quest for horizontality and the refusal to recognize legitimacy through delegation, because of those very delegates who founded the "elective aristocracy" of our current political regime. Next, there is a pathology of deliberation, as exchanges over social media and the news media grow ever more polarized and frenzied, and political debates are subject to "brutalization," to borrow a term from historians of World War I. Lastly, there appears a pathology of liberty. As freedoms are rolled back, governments become more and more illegitimate, and opposition becomes increasingly virulent. The trials of terrorism in the recent past, the pandemic of today, and the climate emergency of tomorrow all lead governments to restrict freedoms and normalize state-of-emergency procedures. We can add to this situation an increase in powers of surveillance, not only by the police, but also by private enterprise; in this "surveillance democracy" and "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2019), the increased security to which citizens subscribe is acquired at the expense of their freedoms.²

As liberal representative democracy gives its last gasps, two competing models face off: the temptation of authoritarianism, under which China has at times shown itself as a model of efficiency in contrast to European "illiberal democracies," and an epistocratic model, in which a government comprised of experts with knowledge of the laws (economic, health, etc.) make decisions while flouting civic participation. For Blondiaux, the collapse of our natural ecosystems, given imminent conflicts over vital resources and massive migrations, threatens to make peaceful consensus even more difficult. At the same time, the path of democracy is the only possible way to successfully negotiate massive transformations in our lifestyles that will require a socio-ecological transition backed by a powerful collective will. For the protection of democracies, Blondiaux identifies four strategies, specifying that the latter are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, it is crucial that all four be activated if we want to find a democratic solution. Still, he warns that it is possible that our natural ecosystems will collapse before our political institutions do, although the opposite is possible as well.

The first strategy is the reformist route: transforming our electoral rulebook to minimize majority bias (where a relatively low number of voters can ensure a political majority), instituting citizen-initiated referendums, reforming campaign finance mechanisms that currently accord too much power to the largest donors, and, finally, engaging in constitutional reforms. Next, the deliberative strategy: making

use of deliberative bodies and lotteries and conducting experiments at different levels where “mini publics” reflect as equals on societal issues, even those considered delicate, and achieve a consensus based on their collective intelligence (Blondiaux et Manin, 2021). Thirdly, the communalist strategy: empowerment at the local level for occasional elections, but also, especially, for experiments in self-organization, communal management, and prefigurative democracy, in order to demonstrate that living, housing and producing can exist beyond the scope of state capitalism. The concepts of the “commons” (Dardot et Laval, 2019) and of “libertarian municipalism” (Bookchin et Eigliad, 2006) provide theoretical support to these local experiments in the reappropriation of daily life. Finally, the fourth strategy is the necessary ethical revolution that must return value to collective life, participation, and deliberation as essential conditions of our existence, well beyond the work/consumption/leisure triptych that currently rules our lives. Education and culture have a key role to play in producing behaviours and imaginations adapted to this regeneration of democracy.

This reflection on the articulation of crises, particularly those of capitalism and democracy, was also addressed in two other important lectures that focussed primarily on the future of work, but also on its ties to collective action.

FROM WORK TO COLLECTIVE ACTION?

The lecture by Janice Fine (professor at Rutgers University), “Resisting the future of work: Building a future for workers,” serves as a vibrant call to deconstruct the deterministic fiction of the “future of work,” an extremely in-vogue concept in the United States according to which it becomes impossible for workers to act collectively and democratically to control the large-scale technological and economic trends of our era. The pandemic has only accentuated this discourse by highlighting the refined systems of control deployed by the likes of Amazon, the 21st century’s “prime” symbol of capitalism. However, technology merely serves as a smokescreen for the actual working relationship, as the organizational dispersion and algorithmic surveillance used by the company make it difficult to determine who is responsible for its exploitative practices. Moreover, traditional labour market regulations offer little control over these modalities of human labour mobilization. Given these dramatic trends, workers have little structural power, which would normally stem from a strategic position in the production process or a collective capacity to negotiate for better working conditions. Both are radically restricted due to the weakened labour movement in the American private sector, a situation not seen since the end of the 19th century.

In counterpart, workers have developed associational powers (various types of associations of marginalized workers, who use technological tools for communication and vehicles for offering various services), symbolic powers (of influence and public opinion, via accounts of exploitative practices and the “naming and shaming” of the businesses involved) and institutional powers (using precedents as leverage to change laws). Janice Fine gives multiple examples, including among others those of 226 worker centres that unite workers based on geographical region or work sector (Fine, 2006) and of the OUR Walmart movement. These various associations have achieved victories at the local level with regard to working and hiring conditions (health and safety, wage increases, time off) as well as effecting major institutional changes at various levels. Fine cites as examples: increases in the minimum wage in over 29 states and 44 localities, the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights,

modalities for collective negotiation won by independent contractors in New York and Seattle, and a policy adopted by New York City that ensures certain protections for freelancers. Those who seek a common path to success may find that this collection of disparate examples leaves something to be desired. However, as Fine highlights, these experiences share common attributes: an organized and unified base of workers who are able to articulate a moral criticism of what they experience at work, and a collection of demands that directly target businesses and/or the courts, municipal councils, legislatures, and government agencies.

Another lecture emphasizes this link between work and collective action, taking as a point of departure “The Working Manifesto: Democratize, decommodify, remediate.” This lecture originated as an op-ed piece written during the height of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 by Isabelle Ferreras (Université catholique de Louvain), Julie Battilana (Harvard University) and Dominique Méda (Université Paris-Dauphine). Shared in over 43 newspapers around the world, the text became a manifesto signed by over 3,000 academics across five continents. Ultimately, it became a collective work translated into 28 languages to which twelve researchers contributed. During the CRISES conference, Julie Battilana and Dominique Méda presented the main elements of this manifesto, including the following central thesis: democratizing businesses and decommodifying labour are simultaneously the means for ensuring dignity for all and for spurring collective action to remediate our polluted planet. As suggested by Méda in her lecture, this health crisis reveals our total lack of preparedness against shocks to the system, particularly those to come as a consequence of the ecological crisis.

In terms of strategic decisions, democratizing workplaces means giving a powerful voice to “providers of labour” rather than only to “providers of capital” (Ferreras, 2017). This is both a social justice issue for the recognition of labour and a means to upend the traditional distribution of power, which over the past decades has emphasized shareholder value, fostering short-term thinking and the externalization of both social and environmental costs. While principles of co-management and co-decision-making have existed within the cooperative model for decades, the question is how to disseminate these principles across countries in accordance with local economic and legal configurations, particularly throughout the value chain of multinational firms in the Global South.

Decommodifying labour requires an understanding that labour is not a product but a right, as recognized in Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is crucial if we are to reverse current trends, which have been exacerbated by unemployment, as well as by the Uberization of the economy and of work itself. We must therefore provide access to work for everyone who wants it in order to ensure workers’ dignity and their ability to contribute to their communities. The “job guarantee” model in the United States (Tcherneva, 2020) and the long-term “Zero Unemployment Zone” experiments in France and Belgium bring critical support to this reflection. These initiatives determine useful jobs by starting from needs in local regions and communities, especially from a social and environmental point of view, and the skills of unemployed people. The question of the evaluation, distribution and scaling of these programs is now a determining factor.

Lastly, for pollution remediation on a global scale, Dominique Méda addresses the idea of “environmental reconversion.” This term designates not only industrial transformation but also intellectual reconversion. From a societal standpoint, this means moving from a collective unconscious structured around conquering nature to one centred on care, both of humans and of the biosphere. In the academic world, this approach implies a reconfiguration of the humanities and the natural and social sciences. Modifying our cognitive frameworks also means changing our points of reference, starting with what we mean by “growth” in the GDP, its major ecological limitations, as well as everything that it makes invisible (care, volunteering, etc.). Environmental reconversion also requires industrial restructuring, which includes replacing and reducing jobs with major carbon footprints. These enormous movements in the workforce must be considered on a societal level, in relationship to land-use development as well as to collective solidarity.

What is especially compelling about these three propositions is how they are articulated. Indeed, environmental reconversion is not possible without the democratic participation of workers, especially those who are most vulnerable, in the decision-making process. Job guarantees can help to secure the professional paths of employees moving from polluting industries to green jobs. The decommodification of labour is needed to ensure that this transition does not compromise the dignity of workers, but assesses their value, just as it does that of businesses, not only in terms of financial solvency, but also of social and environmental contributions. This democratization of businesses can transform relationships of power, opening the door for addressing societal challenges within organizations.

Another quality of the “Working Manifesto” is its ability to connect theoretical and macrosocial reflections with ongoing experiments on a global scale. This entry point for innovating socially and questioning one’s contributions to macrosocial change is further explored by two lectures focused on the issue of ecological transitions.

WHICH SOCIAL INNOVATIONS FOR THE ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION?

Flor Avelino (Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam) (“Power dynamics in transformative social innovation”) and Jean-Baptiste Comby (Université Paris 2 Panthéon-Assas) (“Composting toilets and hybrid cars: Environmental dynamics in the ruling classes”) share at least one perspective on social innovation: its transformational power is limited and, for both authors, this limitation is revealed by analyses of power dynamics in a broader sense. In addition, according to both researchers, who draw on empirical studies of social innovation networks, we need to improve our understanding of relationships of power and domination in the field. The many echoes between these two lectures and their points of divergence have brought us to present them in tandem.

The call for “systemic” or “structural” changes forces the social innovation world to question both the power of the individuals and organizations resisting these changes, and the transformative power that can lead to the development of new innovation actors. Power appears differently depending on the position of the actor holding it. Avelino defines power as “the relational and structural ability (or inability) of actors to mobilize resources and institutions to attain their objectives.” Rooted in a multidisciplinary perspective, this “dialectic” conception of power implies a series of tensions between power “over” and power “to,” centralized and decentralized power, power that

constrains and power that enables, et cetera. From this, a series of paradoxes reveal themselves through actions, as the fact that decentralization can lead to recentralizing power elsewhere, or that the power of undertaking an action can lead to exercising power over someone else. Thus, to truly contribute to social transformation, social innovations must take place in complex power dynamics whose final forms are not always predictable.³

Comby's critical approach mobilizes Pierre Bourdieu's sociology in terms of *field* and *habitus* while drawing inspiration from the analysis of justifications for capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018) to evaluate power relations. He highlights the ability of the bourgeoisie to endogenize ecological alternatives under a "weighted ethos" that erases the conflict between radical change and greenwashing under capitalism. For Comby, it is a matter of explaining how the ruling classes maintain a legitimizing discourse intended to preserve their social standing, privileges, and power in the face of calls for systemic and structural transformations. To do so, he analyzes innovations, social alternatives, and "solutions" as ideological statements more than as real devices for transformation leading to sustainability. Social innovation, in this sense, is a register that actors can employ when justifying themselves; this is precisely what the ruling classes do when integrating the idea of innovation into their weighted ethos. These actors can thus become virtuous promoters of social innovation in the environmental sphere, with food for example, while leading the most destructive lifestyles in terms of carbon footprints (housing, transportation, leisure) when compared to the working classes.

Avelino, in contrast, considers social innovation from a much more pragmatic perspective, highlighting its transformative potential in the sense that it "challenges, alters or replaces dominant structures and institutions that underlie crises and societal challenges." Her empirical work proposes numerous examples of social innovation, via 20 international networks of local initiatives across 27 countries, that have succeeded in changing social relations and institutions, whether in renewable energy communities that reconfigure relationships between consumers, energy producers, and governments, or in eco-villages that invent new ways to govern themselves, such as through a socio-cracy. There is, then, plenty of transformative social innovation in power relations, often through cases of reinventing social relationships and ways of thinking, doing, and organizing (Avelino, 2021). But in order for these new ways of thinking, doing, and organizing to become truly transformative, it remains necessary that they be disseminated and systematized. Under these conditions, they are subjected to various processes that govern their evolution under the jurisdiction of the state (bureaucratization and standardization), of the markets (commodification), of the community (socialization and communalization), or of a hybridization of these domains. In each case, the relationship to power takes a slightly different form, placing innovations to one side or the other of the dialectics of power. According to Avelino, such conditions generate this paradoxical obligation for social innovation that seeks transformation to spread and institutionalize itself, which exposes it to significant risks of being denatured or watered down, and, in the end, serves only to reproduce the power relations that it attempted to transform (Avelino, 2021).

Here we come very close to the notion of watering down what Comby analyzes. For him, the dissemination of social innovation would be, above all, a process that chips away at the conflict be-

tween societal models by drawing attention to innovations, alternatives, and “solutions” on an individual level, from which one’s weighted ethos would allow one to choose. Thus, studying various activist scenes at the COP21 (de Moor, Morena et Comby, 2017), he demonstrates how “Montreuil became the kingdom of composting toilets and alternative media; the Grand Palais that of the hybrid car and commercial media,” but, at the end of the day, the weighted ethos of the ruling classes blurs the boundaries between acts that radically challenge the system (such as degrowth) and those that merely “green” the system (the green economy is the most candid format). The power order is not at all shaken by this bourgeois consensus, because “this fluidification of relations between the economic sphere and the environmental movement is not symmetrical and tends to favour businesses over activists.” This brings us back, in a certain sense, to the question of power and its paradoxes, as behind this weighted ethos that authorizes compromises between a commitment to environmentalism and a consumerist ethos there is a certain reconciliation between economic and cultural bourgeoisies that “share a concept of a legitimate lifestyle founded on material ease combined with a plurality of moral quandaries.”

LEAVING THE CONFERENCE: WHAT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR RESEARCHERS?

By way of conclusion, we would like to suggest some shared points between these different contributions. First, these researchers put our current crises in perspective by removing the emphasis on urgency that forces us to consider them as temporary inconveniences and exogenous shocks imposed upon us without any intrinsic causality. The routinization of “states of emergency” and the “we have no alternative” verdicts (much like the “future of work” discourse) is a means of suspending not only reflexivity, but also collective action. The contributions cited here ask us, in contrast, to consider the joint foundations of these crises, their interrelatedness and their circular dynamics, whether in terms of the vulnerabilization of society through Nancy Fraser’s “cannibal capitalism” or in terms of the complementarity of the courses of action in the “Working Manifesto: Democratize, decommodify, remediate” presented by Julie Batillana and Dominique Méda.

The transformative ambition of these contributions is on a macrosocial scale. But it is in the cracks opened by these different crises that the social innovations under discussion are most often deployed. A shared point between most of the social innovations under study at this conference is that they operate more through an interstitial strategy rather than through rupture or symbiosis, to borrow Wright’s typology of social change (2010). The issue of how they circulate and become institutionalized, whether in public policy, in businesses or in the commons, is rendered especially relevant by two factors. On the one hand, the analysis of relations of power reveals both the force of antagonisms as well as the ability of preservers of the status quo to absorb and dilute social innovation. On the other hand, the environmental crisis challenges the feasibility, in terms of windows of opportunity, of incremental, step-by-step change.

The role of academics is then called into question. Beyond inspiring passionate conferences such as this one, these contributions urge us to better articulate critical analyses and contributions to collective experimentation. A common thread that CRISES researchers have maintained for multiple

decades, beyond the specific niche of partnered research, is the responsibility for all academic institutions to take part in societal transformations that can no longer be put aside.

NOTES

1. All of these lectures and the discussions that followed are freely accessible online.
2. The use of quotation marks serves to highlight concepts as the authors use them.
3. These quotations are taken from the conference proceedings, accessible online at: <https://crises.uqam.ca/activites/colloque-international-crises/> (under Actes numériques du colloque)

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