

SPECIAL ARTICLE

Autonomy, collaboration and light communities. Lessons learnt from social innovation

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Autonomy: from Greek *autonomos* 'having its own laws', from *autos* 'self' + *nomos* 'law'.

To discuss about autonomy we should start from indicating the "who" we refer to (who is the autonomous subject?) and the "what" (what is the norm he/she/it autonomously produce?). Depending on the different who and what, the notion of autonomy can have different meanings and be used in different fields of application.

In the following notes¹, the "who" are people living in the fluid world. That is, in the contemporary post-traditional², highly connected societies, colonised by hegemonic neoliberal ways of thinking and doing (a social environment that, in my view, is no longer confined to certain geographical areas, as the Global North, but extends itself to more or less consistent sectors of the society world-wide - included the Global South).

The inhabitants of this fluid world can be seen as connected individuals (Wellmann, 2002) people free of the previous social ties but nestled in a mesh of interactions taking place in both the physical and the digital worlds. These individuals, being engaged in a variety of conversations of different kinds and in different spaces, dissolve the previous communities (pre-modern communities and those that were formed in the last century) and produce unprecedented social forms based on the individual possibility to navigate in the complexity, making choices that, by all means are design choices.

The problem is that, most obviously, this new field of possibilities has been colonized by those cultural and economic forces which, as a whole, we can refer to with the expression neoliberalism. For what our discussion here is concerned, these forces are pushing people towards two catastrophic directions. The most classical direction is towards the creation of the *connected loneliness* of solitary individuals, more and more closed in their filter bubbles. The second one, which is dramatically growing in the last years, is the reaction to the first one and is people to an

imaginary past, trying to build pseudo-traditional communities that I will call the *communities of fear and hate*, closed in what they imagine as their own place by physical and cultural walls.

If these are our protagonists (our "who"), and this is the environment where they are living in, the autonomy they can produce (our "what") is the one needed to distance themselves from this neoliberal environment. That is, to choose to move against the hyper-individualistic, competitive, market-oriented mainstream ideas and practices (and their tragic implications in terms of inequalities and social desertification).

Given that, the question is: can we find examples of this form of autonomy? Luckily the answer is yes: in contemporary societies we can find people thinking and be-

Andrea Botero commented on "a social environment that, in my view, is no longer confined to certain geographical areas":

This was indeed the intention we had, the north/south in the CFP is not geographical.

Andrea Botero commented on "The second one [...] by physical and cultural walls":

Is it possible that there are more than 2 paths? What about those communities that are interested in continuing thinking of themselves as communities and are not interested in being "free individuals"... Is their only alternative that of being reduced to hate and fear? Sounds a bit to harsh?

Alfredo Gutierrez Borrero answered:

I share what Andrea says, perhaps not all the efforts to preserve, or recover the "biocultural memory" (case, for example, of Language revitalization, also referred to as language revival or reversing language shift) at least as I have had experienced it in Aotearoa and, of which Albert and Tina will have more to say, would fit on the label of communities of fear and hate. See for instance this Lakota 2016 film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wj-jackHWCw>

¹ The ideas I am proposing here are largely from my last books: *Design When Everybody Designs* (2015) and *Politics of the everyday* (2018 [forthcoming]).

² In the 1980s and 1990s, sociologists like Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash [2] argued that in modernity traditions were evaporating and with them were disappearing the conventions that until then had guided peoples' lives. Consequently everyone had to make their own life choices, meaning that they had to design their own everyday lives and indeed their entire life stories. More than twenty years later, this existential condition and its effects have become even more visible than they were then (Beck, 1999, 1992; Giddens, 1990; Featherstone et al., 1995).

having with this kind of autonomy. They are those who animate the complex and diversified social dynamics we normally refer to as *social innovation*.

In the following notes, I will use ten years of experience in social innovation (and in design for social innovation) to outline some aspects of the emerging autonomous ideas and practices. In particular, in the light of these experiences, I will discuss two relevant positions proposed by Arturo Escobar in the paper indicated as reference by the Call for Papers of this *SDRJ* Special Issue: "every community practices the design of itself" (Escobar, 2017, p. 5), and "(the) realization of the communal can be said to be the most fundamental goal of autonomous design" (Escobar, 2017, p. 6).

Social innovation and a new kind of communities

Looking attentively at the complexity and contradictions of contemporary societies, against the mainstream trend towards both social desertification and carcinogenic tribalism of the community of fear and hate, we see a growing number of people that are creating new salutary social forms, based on the re-discovery of collaboration and of the quality of places.

Once we start to observe society, looking for initiatives like these, a variety of interesting cases appear: groups of families who decide to share some services to reduce the economic and environmental costs, but also to create new forms of neighborhoods (cohousing and a variety of forms of sharing and mutual help within a residential building or neighborhood); new forms of exchange (from simple barter initiatives to time banks and local currencies); services where the young and the elderly help each other, promoting a new idea of welfare (collaborative social services); neighborhood gardens set up and managed by citizens who, by doing so, improve the quality of the city and of the social fabric (guerrilla gardens, community gardens, green roofs); systems of mobility in alternative to individual cars (car sharing, carpooling, the rediscovery of the possibilities offered by bicycles); new models of production based on local resources and engaging local communities (social enterprises); fair and direct trade between producers and consumers (fair trade initiatives) (Manzini, 2015).

These are *transformative social innovations*³. They appear as *creative communities*⁴ and, when successful, evolve into *collaborative organizations*: groups of people who choose to collaborate with the aim of achieving specific results and creating social and environmental benefits.

In the past decades, a growing number of collaborative organizations have merged with digital social networks creating unprecedented networks of people who are digitally and physically connected among themselves and with the place where they live, apparently straddling the 'space

of flows' and the 'space of places', leveraging globally networked information and local face to face exchanges.

This kind of social innovation is important for different reasons. What interests here is that it shows us the existence, and therefore the viability, of new forms of community: communities that exist and thrive in the present fluid world, contrasting its colonisation by neo-liberal ideas and practices. Despite their diversity, these communities do have characterising traits that distinguish them from other social forms and that permits us to make some steps forwards in the discussion on autonomy and design for autonomy.

Lessons learnt 1: Autonomy as collaboration

Let's consider, for example, people who choose to start a cohousing: we can see that, by doing this choice, it is possible for them to create self-managed nurseries, services for the elderly, purchasing groups, and neighbourhood sport and recreational activities that would otherwise have been unthinkable. Similarly, by working together in a neighbourhood garden, plant enthusiasts can enjoy more than just a pot on the balcony, or people suffering from the same illness may be able to find better help and support for everyday problems together, than can be provided by the normal health service. So, generalizing, we can say that by adopting a collaborative approach, the involved people

Tina Engels-Schwarzpaul added:

Ezio, are you perhaps referring here to nationalist and neo-fascist groups? Maybe a brief clarification of whom you are thinking of would be useful. For me, the comparison of German neo-fascist groups with Maori and Pacific groups in that regard is interesting and also very troubling. Sometimes, it seems they use the same language talking about the same values... and in a perverse way, they probably even are in a way. However, there is a huge differential of power and position between them (even though most members of right-wing groups do seem to belong to populations which were marginalised under neo-liberalism). And that is crucial to me in reading their politics. I would associate the term of "communities of fear and hate" with the German right wing, neo-fascist groups but not at all with Maori or Pacific communities who want to protect their moana (ocean), whenua (land) and tangata (people and their culture).

Arturo Escobar finally said:

I think both the notion of the two catastrophic directions and the responses to it are very interesting. Those who write about the communal (or the need to re-communalize social life) often overlook the risks of the two directions Ezio maps. At the same time, it is possible to argue that at least in some parts of the world, and despite contradictions, there are constructive efforts at re-communalizing (often times re-connecting with nonhumans as well) that need to be taken into account.

³ It must make it clear that this social innovation, *transformative social innovation*, is a subset of social innovation as a whole. Indeed, there are innovations that go in different directions from the one I am indicating: ones which are not radical in character, but limit themselves to proposing incremental modifications, or which go in a direction that is completely opposite to that of environmental and social sustainability. Thus it must be understood that when I write "social innovation", the expression should be read as an abbreviation for: social innovation that transforms the existent by taking steps towards sustainability. The expression, "transformative social innovation", was introduced in the ambits of the European research project, *Transit*, which ended in 2017. The task was to investigate "'transformative social innovation' initiatives and networks in an attempt to understand processes of societal transformation" (Kemp et al., 2017, p. 3).

⁴ Anna Meroni (2007, p. 9) defines creative communities as groups of people who have been able to imagine, develop, and manage a new way of being and doing.

can achieve results that they would not have been able to get alone (Sennett, 2012). Not only. Because collaboration modifies the system in which it operates, extending the field of possibilities, doing so they also change the local socio-technical system, orienting its evolution in a different direction from what had appeared dominant until then.

At the same time, it goes without saying that to imagine and set up one's own collaborative initiative, it is necessary to distance oneself from the processes of exasperated individualization that dominate contemporary society, thus creating, consciously or unconsciously, a local discontinuity at cultural level too. In fact, all these activities move from an autonomous attitude: to leave the dominant idea that, in the name of individual freedom, tend to cage everyone into an individualism as extreme as it is impotent. Not only, to practice different forms of collaboration, the involved actors leave their traditional roles (that of consumers, clients, patients or users), to become active in solving a problem or opening a new opportunity collaborating with others.

In conclusion, looking at these cases of transformative social innovation, it can be seen that their driver is an autonomous attitude that brings people to choose to collaborate, joining forces with others and working together. In turn, we can see that it is this form of collaboration that creates opportunities for local systemic changes, opening spaces for more autonomous behaviours. The result of that is that we can observe a strong correlation between autonomy and collaboration: when one grows so does the other, and vice versa.

Lesson learnt 2: Communities as spaces of possibilities

Collaboration, for its same nature, has a double effect: as we have seen it permits to get otherwise unachievable results and it produces, as a kind of valuable by-product, relational goods, such as trust, empathy, friendliness, capability to listen to each other and do things together.

It comes that, when in a given context there is enough density of collaborative activities, such as collaborative housings, local production networks, elderly and children care services, communal gardens, neighbourhood regeneration initiatives, the relational goods accumulates and generates the new kind of communities I want to discuss here: new communities that can be seen as meshes of conversations in which people take part in different ways and for different reasons, having the ability to choose where, how and for how long to allocate their resources, in terms of attention, skills and relational availability.

Focusing on these new communities, it comes that the first characteristic that distinguishes them from pre-modern ones is that the ties created within them are the result of a choice. And this is way we refer to them as intentional communities.

A second characterising aspect, and this is the one that distinguishes them from the intentional communities of the 20th century (from political parties, trade unions and also from the various forms of alternative community that emerged in the last century) is their multiple, non-exclusive, reversible character, and various levels of commitment it may require. As a result, those who take part

in these communities do not do so to find themselves a readymade solution and/or identity, but rather to build their own solutions and identity through the choices and negotiations they put into effect. It follows then that the larger the number and the wider the diversity of opportunities for encounters and action they offer, the more important they will be for their members.

Therefore, these new communities can be described as mesh of collaborative encounter made possible by the existence of a space of opportunity which offer possibilities for expression and comparison, where solutions are looked for to problems, and that are open towards new prospects. It comes, that these communities are defined by the quantity and quality of the conversations active within them. These can be conversations with no practical aim; or they may be geared to action.

In conclusion, contemporary communities are the result of individual autonomous choices and are characterized by the quality and density of the conversations that occur in them and the capacity of their members to transform these conversations into actions capable of achieving shared results. In turn, these conversations for action would not happen in absence of an appropriate space of opportunity. Therefore, we can say that the existence of these communities corresponds to the one of the existence of a favourable space of possibility. And vice versa.

Given that, the autonomy of these communities, their capability to operate in opposition to the neoliberal main trends, emerges from the integration of the multiplicity of individual autonomous choices of its members. For the sake of our present discussion, this structural character has an important consequence: to understand these communities and their functioning they cannot, and should not, be considered as living organisms: their autonomy cannot be described as autopoiesis. These communities, in fact,

Andrea Botero commented on "autonomy as collaboration":

I see this in principle as in line with Escobar's insight that the idea of *autonomía* described e.g., by his cases is related to interdependence and therefore requires common ways of working... however that one being more politically charged. Or charged politically in a different way :)

Arturo Escobar commented on "strong correlation between autonomy and collaboration: when one grows so does the other, and vice versa":

As somebody who was involved in the creation of a co-housing from the start fifteen years ago in Carrboro, NC (I've been living in the same co-housing for ten years now), I see the dynamic that Ezio depicts clearly at play. I also see some of the contradictions (inherent to all these processes, as Ezio well analyzes in *Design When Everybody Designs*): the recreation of "the individual" at a higher (or different) level. It would take much longer to explain, and we have to be mindful of the fact that I am talking about the US, i.e., the land of radical individualism par excellence, but I could perhaps say that the generalized social ontology of the society "leaks back" into the collaborative experience, creating a limit from the inside... which is fine, really, it's just the way it is... Eco-villages in Latin America (by no means perfect places) sometimes err in the opposite direction: that is, disabling, or bracketing, the need for mechanisms of respect for personal differences and needs.

are open to their environment and do not have the internal goal of continuously reproducing themselves. On the contrary, their existence is given by actions aiming at connecting inside and outside and, doing so, at creating the conditions for their existence and continuity in time.

Lesson learnt 3: Community building and enabling ecosystems

For contemporary communities the expression *community building* has to be taken literally: communities are built from their molecular elements, meaning from the various types of encounter between people, and between people and places, that constitute the relational material they are made of. Thus, community building corresponds to creating opportunities for people to meet, and enhancing the quality of these encounters.

Given that, another important point must be underlined: community building never finishes. In fact, in a fluid world, the stability of the forms is always associated with the continuity of the surrounding conditions that generated them. Thus, on conclusion of the initial stage of community building in the strict sense, it moves on to the management stage. However, this requires not only the minor interventions to ensure continuity of functioning that are normally implied by the term, but also ongoing activities geared to maintaining the conditions required for the community's long term existence. This calls for periodic initiatives that revitalize the community, bringing new life and ensuring continuity of commitment and generational turnover.

Therefore, in my view, the Escobar's idea that "(the) realization of the communal can be said to be the most fundamental goal of autonomous design" (Escobar, 2017, p. 9) could work for contemporary communities too, but the terms it uses must be re-defined and/or changed.

In my view, the "autonomous design", intended as the "*community (that) practices the design of itself*" for the contemporary communities does not work. Given that a community to exist requires an appropriate enabling ecosystems, the realization of the community requires the design of this enabling ecosystems. A design activity that, for me, corresponds with design for autonomy and therefore, design for social innovation: a design activity that must be done by both involved actors and teams of external experts.

Lesson learnt 4: Communities and designing coalitions

The ecosystems that make the new community possible should permit various people to participate in collaborative activities and the life of a community in different ways. That is with varying degrees of commitment and responsibility. Some may be *active* in the activities that the community proposes; some may be *proactive* and *creative* in the definition of the activities themselves (and it is these that keep the community itself active). By allowing everybody to find their own way of participating, this enabling

ecosystem brings out, catalyzes and systemizes the resources potentially available. To do so, however, it must not only offer people the possibility of getting involved in the ways and times possible for them. It must also articulate a cultural proposal in such a way as to align it with their diverse motivations and/or trigger new ones.

At the same time, social innovation tells us that the new communities, with these characteristics, emerge and live thanks to the existence within them of particularly pro-active, motivated people with a considerable degree of mutual understanding. Together, they form designing coalitions which, whether formally or de facto, try to put their collaboratively produced ideas into practice and keep them going.

In fact, observing how things actually go in practice in such cases, an issue arises that is crucial for us: the relationship between open, light communities and groups of more connected, motivated and active people who operate within them as a kind of open and flexible design and management teams. In other words, the experience says that these light communities are started and then can last in time thanks to the activism of some of the community members, alone or in collaboration with experts, who operate as designers, managers and often producers of the activities that, with time, lead to the building, management and regeneration of the communities they are part of. We can call them *designing coalitions*⁵.

It comes that, if it is true that contemporary communities are the result of interweaving conversations linked in a light and fluid way to common themes and issues; to be lasting these communities must include designing coalitions, in the sense of groups, that vary with time, of people from within or from outside the community. These people are often motivated to act by different factors, but have converging ideas about the results to achieve, and together they have the skills and abilities needed to put into practice what they have decided to do. Being able to form these coalitions and keep them active, while keeping their relationship with the rest of the group open and dynamic, is crucial to the positive functioning of every collaborative activity; and thus of every community to which it refers.

Andrea Botero commented on "on the contrary [...] in time":

This sounds for me quite autopoietic :)

Arturo Escobar added:

I agree. I think Ezio is articulating a framework for communities/the communal that has parallels, but also differences, with what perhaps could be called more intensely relational communities, such as some indigenous communities (which are also under pressure for individualizing de-communalization, of course). It would be useful to build a sustained conversation between diverse notions of the communal, from the perspective of a series of axes, such as degrees of relationality (and how to conceptualize these?), types of conversations for action, type of attachment to place, relations to non-humans, and so forth."

⁵ The expression "designing coalition", as it is used here, also includes the evolution of the initial, strictly designing coalition towards a coalition that operates in the production and management stage of an initiative (if it is legitimate to extend this expression to these stages, it is because in a fluid world, these stages too are characterized by a considerable designing component).

Conclusions: Light communities

In my view each one of the listed character has some implication our discussion on autonomy and commonality. As a whole they tell us that the kind of communities we should think to are quite diverse from the traditional ones and are characterized by the *quality of lightness*.

I believe that the idea of lightness I am proposing here may be a useful stimulus in the discussion on new communities. However, to make it so, we must give the term lightness a deeper connotation than that often attributed to it. To introduce this value of lightness, in my book *Politics of the Everyday* (Manzini, 2018 [forthcoming]), I refer to the meaning given to it by Italo Calvino in his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988) and I say: "In this book, published in 1988, Calvino proposed 5 words that expressed the qualities he would have liked for the twenty-first century. The first is lightness. Calvino wrote 25 pages to say what this meant for him, and with reference to literature. As many and maybe more would be necessary to say what this term might mean for the encounters, conversations and communities that we would like to see emerge in a fluid world. But one sentence from Calvino can help us to say it more concisely here. To introduce his point of view on lightness, Calvino made reference to *De rerum natura* by the Roman philosopher Lucretius, and wrote "it is the first great work of poetry in which knowledge of the world tends to dissolve the solidity of the world, leading to a perception of all that is infinite minute, light and mobile... the poetry of the invisible, of infinite unexpected possibilities" (Calvino, 1988, p. 8-9). The encounters and conversations that give rise to light communities, in the sense that Calvino gives the term, are therefore those that give a deep perception of what is minute, light and mobile: of what makes visible that which is not so; of that which opens up new possibilities. Calvino rightly says that his discourse about the quality of lightness does not mean that weight does not also have value and quality. It only means that he has more to say about lightness. The same is true for the encounters we are talking about. Light encounters are not the only ones that may enrich a space of opportunities. However, they are the ones that are more probable today, and therefore the ones that need to be understood better, given their unprecedented nature" (Manzini, 2018 [forthcoming]).

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Arturo Escobar commented on "Six Memos for the Next Millennium":

I remember being very taken by this book when I first read it when it came out... I'll have to get back to it. Is there perhaps a dialectic between lightness and weightiness? Do both point at the pluriverse from difference directions?