The Construction of a Hegemonic Social Representation

Climate Crisis and the Role of COVID-19 in Defining Survival

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

Keywords: climate change, COVID-19, social representations, environment, psychology

In January 2020, COVID-19 (a novel coronavirus) was declared a public health emergency by the World Health Organization, 2 months later it was confirmed as a pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken world governments and health systems in their attempts to deal with the emergency. It has taken a heavy toll, in terms of individual lives and livelihoods. Additionally, "lockdown" measures put in place by many countries as an attempt to control the spread of COVID-19 infections, have impacted individual freedoms, having an unprecedented impact on lives and how we live in the 21st century. Citizens have found themselves "becoming the news" and the new "geographical borders" are the walls of their homes. Lockdowns have also reduced economic activity. For example, the forced reduction in tourism due to the cancellations of flights and the closure of holiday hotels has impacted tourism and the way in which people in the industry think about future developments for the sector (Prideaux et al., 2020). It is therefore not surprising that the COVID-19 pandemic is often referred to as a "crisis."

The overall social, political, and psychological impacts of the pandemic are still to be ascertained. In their book, *Together Apart: The Psychology of COVID-19,* Jetten et al. (2020) present a series of key issues faced by societies in the wake of the crisis, arguing that a psychological perspective can not only account for some of these issues but also give useful insights on how to deal with the pandemic. They argue that the COVID-19 "crisis" has led to a realization of a common "destiny." Nevertheless, a collective social identity that would support coordinated action to tackle the pandemic has yet to be constructed (Jetten et al., 2020). Jaspal and Nerlich (2020) suggest that a *social representations* perspective can help enhance our understanding of the way in which people talk about, feel, and act in response to the perceived threat of the pandemic. Similarly, we argue that a social representations perspective can highlight how multiple divisions and power differences at the global, national, and community levels result in a "battle of signification," where opposing groups fight to determine labeling and action. Importantly, for the argument presented in this paper, Jaspal and Nerlich (2020) refer to their work in the area of climate change (CC) as a similar instance in which the application of a social representation (SR) perspective – combined with identity process theory – can give useful insights on the processes involved in the sense-making and reaction to an existential threat (e.g., Jaspal et al., 2014). There is little doubt that CC is also a global phenomenon that is posing an existential threat to humanity (IPCC; see https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/ipcc_wg3_ar5_summary-for-policymakers.pdf). However, environmental activists have struggled to present

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CC as an emergency (e.g., Thunberg, 2018). We argue that a SR perspective can help us better understand this difference, and identify a more efficient way to think about the important dimensions of the battle of signification.

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

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

In this paper, we argue that the current global pandemic and the CC debate have both reinvented – and helped resurface – the hegemonic social representation (HSR) of survival, by reshaping other HSRs such as science, politics/democracy, and nature.

The Role of Hegemonic Social Representations

In this paper, we propose that social representation theory revisited, with insights from political philosophy and social theory (Arruda, 2014; Castoriadis, 1998; Magioglou, 2014; Magioglou & Obadia, in press; Thompson, 1982) can provide an important framework to understand the tensions arising from the global threats of CC and the COVID-19 pandemic. More precisely, we use Hegemonic Social Representations (HSR). The HSR concept which was introduced by Moscovici (1988, 2007), is combined with the theory of central imaginary notions (Castoriadis, 1998), and Gramsci's work on hegemony (e.g., Stavrakakis, 2017). Magioglou and Obadia in their 2013–2014 research seminar at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, discussed the heuristic value of HSR from this interdisciplinary

perspective, referring to democracy, religion, and the economy as HSR (https://calenda.org/266441?lang=en; Magioglou & Obadia, in press). In other words, HSR is not conceptualized just as a "bigger" SR, neither as a collective representation, in the way, Durkheim has defined it (2001). The heuristic value of an HSR in our view is that it involves institutions, social practices, roles, and social control, it also unites more than two or three "empty signifiers," defined by Laclau (1996) as ambiguous constructs which often elude attempts at definition. Different social groups will try to reconstruct and appropriate signifiers, interpreting them in ways that may be mutually exclusive. Laclau uses the example of "order" and "justice" as empty signifiers, where different groups try to impose their definition as the only valid one, "filling in" the meaning void.

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

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

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

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

Hegemonic Social Representations as a Matrix and the Battle for Meaning (Generating Alternative, Polemic Representations)

To summarize, an HSR is conceptualized as a matrix of socially shared meanings constructed as something "valuable," and vital for a community. By assigning different *meanings* to the elements of the matrix, the same HSR

may legitimate dominance and the status quo, or nourish dissent and minorities which will fight to reverse it (Gillespie, 2008). HSRs are socially, historically, and culturally embedded, but they can encompass different time periods and cultures. For example, democracy, as an HSR comprises different models, from the democracy of ancient Athens to representative democracy or socialism (Held, 2006). Importantly, this conceptualization of HSR as a matrix of constructs allows for different groups to attach different meanings to its components. In this sense, HSR functions as platforms for different forms of subjectivities and social identities.

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

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

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

Research on COVID-19 from an SR perspective has focused on it as an emerging object of SR or its socially constructed meaning for societies around the world. This is compatible with the mainstream SR theory, where a new reality or socially constructed object, for example, COVID-19, is emerging in the everyday experience of the laypeople (Duveen, 2008). This research describes how COVID-19 becomes "objectified" with specific images, as well as "anchored" to a preexisting system of categorizations, for example, it may be constructed as similar to a "flu" or the HIV epidemic, these different constructions will have implications for how COVID-19 is faced (Coli et al., 2020).

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

(a) *The role of science and expertise: To make sense of what is happening, but also to protect the population through medicine, mediated through the media.* Justo et al. (2020) provide an example here. The authors describe the polarization in the public debate in Brazil between the focus on public health and the focus on the economic crisis, with different institutions and public figures constructing COVID-19 in different and oppositional ways.

(b) *The lived, everyday experience of COVID-19: Including feelings, practices, interactions of the everyday life and death.* Emiliani et al. (2020) used both questionnaires with free associations and qualitative data to demonstrate that, apart from descriptions of the everyday isolation and use of material such as masks and gloves, there is a feeling of void and a realization of a deep change. However, there are alternative constructions of this change, one perceives the disruption and the changes in the everyday "normal" as negative, focusing on the socioeconomic disruption and the fear. The other emerging discourse focuses on disruption from a previous hectic everyday rhythm of life, with a connection to positive changes for the environment. This relates to media images of a clearer atmosphere, due to the reduction of emissions during the first lockdown. However, it is unclear from the research what factors (e.g., socioeconomic status) might be related to the differing constructions.

(c) *The political: Involving political leadership/decisions, policies imposed on everyday life, inequalities, conspiracy theories, and fake news.* Sitto and Lubinga (2020) using a media analysis in South Africa, present the way politics and pre-existing social inequalities, including access to health care, are involved in the social construction of the SR of the pandemic. They found COVID-19 was represented as a disease of the White and the wealthy. This representation influenced how those not belonging to this social group behaved, for example, lower adherence to guidelines to protect themselves, such as social distancing or wearing

masks, were reported. Deeply embedded social inequality and mistrust for political leadership (represented as corrupt or profiting from the crisis) were also found to be important aspects of the SR of COVID-19 in South Africa.

Nature: As the Body, as Something to Control With Science, as a Menacing External Virus, and the Role of Climate Change

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

The idea of "common destiny" referred by Jetten et al (2020), can be reframed as a narrative of survival. In other words, the idea of shared, common destiny is – according to this view – an essential element of guaranteeing survival. We argue that the empty signifiers described above (i.e., science, the everyday, ordinary or normal experience, politics/democracy, and nature), are involved in the construction/re-emergence of the HSR of survival as common destiny. This HSR is starting to materialize in collective actions, oppositions, and gradually will redefine other HSR and recombine them in new ways.

Climate Change and Survival

By drawing parallels between some of the key issues brought to the fore by the pandemic and those pertaining to the CC debate, we will argue that this ongoing process will determine whether COVID-19 will raise awareness and influence policy-making toward environmental protec-

tion and a new form of globalization (with regional and global political power stepping in to support people and communities). Additionally, we argue that it may also influence the degree to which it will stimulate hateful and stigmatizing forms of action. Raising awareness that we are in a malleable phase of the reconstruction of an HSR of survival will allow reflection on the determinants and consequences of the prevalence of certain interpretations of reality over others. It will also support identification of the challenges ahead concerning the renegotiation of meaning, structures, and behaviors which will allow the COVID-19 crisis to open the door to a "new normal," in which addressing the negative impact of human activity on the environment are incorporated in the post-COVID recovery plan. Jetten et al. (2020) argue that a common social identity is a key to success in facing this new global challenge. We argue that positive social identities refer to HSRs for legitimation. It is by reinforcing the argument of a democratic balance of powers and a concept of nature and science as stakeholders in an understanding of an international public sphere and resources that "we" will not be created in opposition to "they" as in Sherif's seminal work (e.g., Sherif et al., 1988).

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

To summarize our objective, after reviewing the ongoing research on COVID-19 and CC (e.g., Emiliani et al., 2020), we observe two potential tendencies: (a) alignment of the symbolic and meaning construction of CC with COVID-19 for the HSR of survival with a common social identity (see also Jetten et al., 2020); or (b) survival in opposition to CC where it is the survival of a group against others (of the fittest, the most powerful, the ingroup).

The Meaning of Survival

COVID-19 has had a great impact, amplified by the lack of coordination in the global sphere. The multilateralism put in place after the major crisis of WWII, with a system of international organizations financed by nation-states, has been in crisis and a lot of uncharted areas without political or other regulation have become exposed (Le Drian, 2020). The World Health Organization, for example, has an advisory role and depends on nation-states for funding.

COVID-19 is exposing further its vulnerabilities and the organization does not have the legitimation and means to take the necessary action (Hale & Held, 2017). Individuals, local communities, and nation-states are left to face an emergency that would require more cooperation and coordination (e.g., Jakovljevic et al., 2020).

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

> "For perhaps the first time in modern history, the entire, interconnected world is focused on solving a single problem. The novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, and the disease it causes, COVID-19, have transfixed the global community, as leaders and citizens seek to respond to a threat whose dimensions are neither entirely certain nor entirely known." (p. 1)

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

Actions to counter the COVID-19 pandemic are taken at the level of the individual, the communities, and nation-states. Both at the individual and community level, the rupture provoked by the pandemic raises questions like: Why has the pandemic happened?; How? What does it mean for me (us)?; Who should be blamed?; What should be done? In other words: How to make sense of it? A dilemma faced by ordinary citizens, policymakers, scientists, religious leaders, and atheists alike. Meaning-making is a collective process involving both dialogues, and conflict, and the literature on intergroup communication processes in intergroup contact situations highlights the crucial role played by dialogic engagement in promoting positive outcomes (Nagda, 2006). The battle of signification will therefore have consequences for survival: How we define it?; Who are the main actors?; and What are the key components of the redefined global community's response to this threat? As we discussed earlier, when reviewing the SRs associated with COVID-19, three other HSR and main areas of contention among different groups in this battle, have been science, politics/democracy, and nature. We will now turn to analyze each and to link them to CC as a matter of survival.

Science

The COVID debate often revolved around the role of science in our society. So in one camp, we see science as responsible for the creation and spread of the virus in certain conspiracy-theory accounts (Imhoff & Lamberty,

2020), as backing up with fake or manipulated data an inexistent threat, or science – and the production of a vaccine – as the only potential savior, able to rescue humanity from this "invisible enemy." Thus, a discussion on the role and purposes of scientific evidence in the public sphere is brought to the fore with unprecedented urgency and emphasis in this context. Luckily for scientists, Plohl and Musil (2021) show that in a sample of 525 English speaking participants recruited on social media, the average level of trust in science is high (4.12 in a 1–5 Likert scale), in line with polls that suggest that (at least in the UK) the majority of people would rely on [medical] scientists' advice on the best way to address the emergency (Carrel, 2020). Thus, while social psychological work warns us against ignoring the impact that a small, but consistent and committed minority has on the general populations' attitudes and behaviors (Wood et al., 1994), the debate over where the responsibility lies, what is the role of science in it and what is the best way forward is still very much in favor of science being a guiding principle in the public's decision making when facing a threat to survival.

When it comes to the CC debate, we see similar tensions between a view of science and scientists as interested elites who are responsible for or complicit in the environmental crisis (Douglas & Sutton, 2015), proponents of an inexistent crisis for their interests and gains, or committed and competent members of society who are capable of guiding us to safety (e.g., Woods et al., 2018). We argue that the way in which we understand the role of science in our societies, and its legitimacy in driving political decision-making is an important element in the matrix also when it comes to the challenge to survival posed by CC, and that the way in which this has been seen within the COVID-19 crisis could play an important role in the debate. We make a case, however, that – while science must be included in the considerations about the best way forward, in order to be able to develop the sense of "we-ness" that Jetten et al. (2020) refer to, it is important to reconsider and reshape the way in which we understand "expertise."

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

Experts and expertise are other significant ideological battlegrounds: who is allowed to speak, whose voice is heard, and with what authority? Indeed, scholars have started exploring the various forms of "ordinary expertise" in the media. For example, Eriksson and Thornborrow (2016) edited a special issue dedicated to ordinary expertise, in the media which demonstrated, on the one hand, the ubiquitous presence of "traditional" experts (i.e., individuals with academic qualifications or relevant experience who are deemed knowledgeable and able to transfer their knowledge to others; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994), and on the other,

the shifting forms of expertise were presented (e.g., Chovanec, 2016). In the case of COVID-19 coverage, we have "the establishment" (the State) and its representatives, claiming they are grounding their policies on the advice coming from experts. Additionally, we also have "alternative" experts who propose different readings of the phenomenon and argue for alternative forms of intervention (see, e.g., Horton, 2020). However, we also have the views and experiences of ordinary people such as frontline workers or those who have lost a loved one to COVID-19. These propose yet other accounts of what is going on and why. It becomes, therefore, important to consider how expertise is defined and understood in a democratic society facing a threat to its survival, and whose voices are constructed as expert voices, worth being listened to, and why.

Curran et al. (2014) have provided initial correlational data showing how a wider representation of democratic (non-establishment) voices in the news are associated with improved engagement in politics. The data from the same study, however, show (Tiffen et al., 2014) how establishment voices still constitute the vast majority of the voices heard in news media across the nine sampled nations. Coen et al. (2020) argue that for more successful communication among citizens on CC impact and responses, and that it is important to redefine expertise and give a broader representation of different experiences and competencies. Thus, we argue for scientific evidence as an ongoing process and not as an objectivation, should be a guiding principle, an element in the matrix when it comes to addressing and debating CC as a challenge to survival. At the same time, though, we suggest that the inclusion of "ordinary citizens" as legitimate voices and elements in the HSR matrix, would strengthen the perception of CC as an issue that directly involves every individual in a society, each bringing to the fore their unique understanding and experience in the solution of this global emergency. In order to achieve this, however, there needs to be a consideration of another important battleground: Who are the ordinary citizens? and What is their role in democratic societies?

Ordinary People and Democracy

Issues surrounding individual versus institutional responsibility were highlighted in deliberation about lockdown measures adopted by some governments (see also Steffens, 2020). For example, in nations (such as Italy or the UK) in which Governments took more radical measures by imposing a lockdown, the issue of individual responsibility has appeared in governments' demands to abide by lockdown regulations, as well as on media coverage of the (minority) of instances in which individuals breached the rules, thus, effectively shifting responsibility from rule-makers to rule-breakers (e.g., Christodoulou, 2020; Scognamiglio,

2020). Sweden – traditionally characterized by risk-averse and cautious measures in the face of pandemics, has adopted a different response model, what Giritli Nygren and Olofsson (2020) call *ethnopolitics*:

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

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

The COVID-19 crisis has also sparked a rejuvenated sense of community, where ordinary citizens signed up to volunteering initiatives in support of the most vulnerable in society, as well as coordinated efforts to support others locally or via social media (e.g., Booth, 2020), demonstrating how ordinary people display greater solidarity and altruistic behavior in emergency situations (Drury, 2018). In other words, independently from the attribution of responsibility, ordinary citizens have been able to self-organize and support each other, build communities, and coordinate action in a truly democratic fashion. Thus, in order to emphasize the sense of "we-ness" when dealing with the CC emergency, it becomes important to better understand and define who "we" are, and to what extent we have representative portrayals of ordinary citizens. Tensions between ordinary citizens and political elites are characteristics of another important area we now turn to consider: politics (Bowman et al., in press).

Political Leadership and Trust

Politics is a fundamental area of contention and debate. On the one hand, we have a representation of politics as decision-making for the collective. In this case, politicians present themselves as custodians and protectors of the public interest, in a *primus inter pares* fashion. On the other hand,

politics can be represented as "other," and politicians as self-serving representatives of the elites. The extraordinary case of Dominic Cummings (chief advisor to the UK prime minister at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic) illustrates this point. It emerged that during national lockdown Dominic Cummings – who had tested positive for COVID – violated the travel restriction he contributed to establish. This gave rise to a scandal and the demand from the part of the public for Cummings to resign; it seemed that the political elite was issuing rules for the population, while not abiding by them. While this is in itself a very interesting case study, which illustrates many issues (including the attempts on the part of government and majority MPs to reframe the actions of Cummings as the behaviors of a concerned father and loving husband), in this specific circumstance, the battle of meaning concerns politics and what political representatives stand for. In a way, this debate resembles the debate concerning populism and populistic views, and the fact that this faux pas was committed by a populist leader is not lost on some journalists (Hide, 2020). The divide between political elites and citizenry in the public's understanding of what politics is and what it is for is present also in the CC debate, where academics call for a re-definition and re-construction of the political in relation to this issue (Swyngedouw, 2013). The below description of the way in which CC is addressed in the post-political Western democracies seems to parallel significantly what happened during the COVID-19 emergency:

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

In other words, the hegemonic definition of politics in the anthropogenic western world has completely lost elements in the HSR matrix which allows to us imagine and construct a different future for its survival. One of these elements concerns human beings' relationship with nature.

Nature: "Bras De Fer" With Nature or a Socially Constructed Hegemonic Social Representation?

Nature and our relationship to it is another area which has been brought forward in the COVID-19 debate: nature can be seen as an "invisible enemy," a "threat" to human lifestyle and our very existence (Morin, 1973; Moscovici, 1968): for example, bats or wild animals are carriers of viruses; the last frontier is between them and us; contact with them might be dangerous (e.g., Harari, 2020). This understanding of nature might also target and stigmatize the eating habits of certain populations and cultures which put in danger the rest of humanity. It divides "us" and "them" which can bring further conflicts and divisions. In this logic, punishing these populations is the best way of action (Kappler, 2020). Nature is also represented as a passive resource to exploit for humanity, particularly in neoliberal discourses of modernity. In this sense, there is a division between humanity and nature, but also a relationship of dominance.

Contrastingly, nature is seen as a resource and a refuge for people struggling in these unprecedented times, with calls for individuals to take advantage of the forced reduced reliance on technology and artifacts, to re-engage with nature and "the old ways." People have started noticing the effects of reduced pollution in the atmosphere, the appearance of birds and animals in the absence of noise and threat posed by transport, and have started appreciating the value of walks in parks and in the countryside to de-stress (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020). This is a more positive view of nature but still relies on the same idea of nature being something at the service of human beings.

Naomi Klein, in *This changes everything* (2015) argues that the key to addressing the climate crisis is to reconceptualize our perception of nature, and our relation to it. Conceptualizing nature as something we are part of, and we need to respect and work in harmony with, would help address the thorny problem of the way we relate to it. Thus, Klein challenges the predominant representation of nature and proposes an alternative representation. The philosopher Michel Serres argues that global environmental change has forced us to reconsider our relationship to nature. In his influential 1990 book, *Le Contrat Naturel*, Serres calls for a natural contract to be negotiated between the Earth and its inhabitants. In the author's view, our survival depends on the extent to which humans can join together and act globally, on an earth now conceived as an entity. Tracing the ancient beginnings of modernity, Serres examines the origins and possibilities of a natural contract through an extended meditation on the contractual foundations of law and science. The new legislators of the natural contract must bring science and law into balance.

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

The "New Normal"

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

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

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

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

Survival: An Inclusive Social Identity or as the Ingroup (Fittest, "Best," Powerful)?

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

From the psychological perspective of metamodernism (e.g., Vermeulen & Van den Akker, 2010), survival can be considered a form of HSR under construction or a "central imaginary notion" (Castoriadis, 1998) of what constitutes a key part of the globalized world. It acts as the matrix for the creation of other meanings, practices, institutions, and social realities. Democracy, nationalism, and economy, are examples of HSR in modernity, in other words, complex matrices of meaning, culturally created and claimed as legitimating agents in the debates taking place in highly unequal societies. Groups in the competition are constantly reconstructing them. Dominant groups, marginalized minorities, groups with different interests, try to impose their definition as the only legitimate and to legitimate their course of action. In other words, different groups might recognize the "existence" and importance of an HSR and take a position, either by supporting its mainstream definition by dominant groups, using a strategy of reinterpretation, or rejecting it altogether and offering an alternative HSR. In the case of CC, whether and how science and nature will be included as key stakeholders within the global community, our understanding of politics and the role of ordinary citizens in the shaping of the future global society will have important consequences for the way in which we understand and justify the way in which our societies and communities will address the global environmental crisis, providing guiding principles and dimensions along which strategies will be formulated and evaluated.

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

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