

On the threshold

11 challenges for the future of democracy

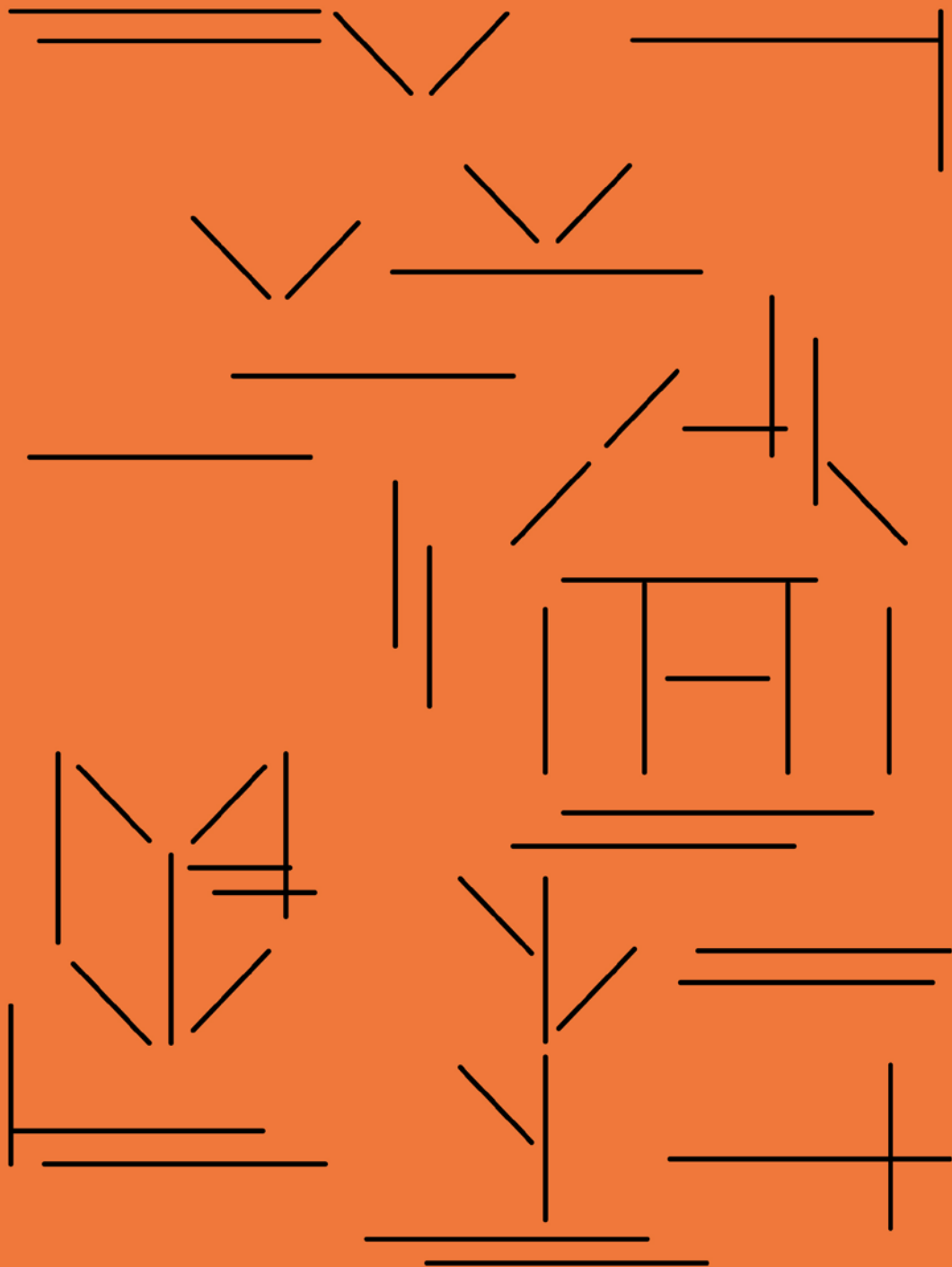
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We do not know what kind of democracy the people who have not yet been born will inhabit. But we do know that this democracy will be built up – or torn down – by means of every single decision, big and small, that we make between now and then.

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Poliniza #01

Pollination is a journey. It is the transfer of pollen grains between one part of a flower and another. With the Poliniza collection, Concomitentes Editora opens a new space for collective reflection that serves as a bridge connecting artistic practices, territories and communities that would otherwise be unlikely to enter into contact. Just as pollen travels thanks to a third party – the wind, insects or hand that transport it without being its final destination – this collection seeks to be an intermediary agent, a place where ideas, processes and learning can be fertilized by others far from their origins, giving rise to ways of thinking and action that would not have surfaced in isolation.

It is no coincidence that Concomitentes is the entity behind this collection. Our practice consists in producing artworks that spring from a desire expressed by citizens, mediating between communities and artists to give collective form to this intent.

Poliniza aims to undertake a process of slow reflection on many of the complexities inherent in these processes. Hence, each pollen-publication in this collection is the result of a question. In this first issue, we ask Remedios Zafra, Fernando Broncano and Jaume Peris, from the Laboratory of Futures at the University of Alcalá, to share their perspectives as to the challenges facing democracy today.

Fernando Broncano
Jaume Peris
Remedios Zafra

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How do we imagine the democracy of the future? What key ideas and emotions will shape it? What languages will it use to express itself? And above all, what forms of decision-making and participation will it enable? These are questions that are doubtless impossible to answer today. But perhaps we can surmise that a future democracy will share some features with our current forms of government – and yet differ from them in some essential respect which we are unable to fully perceive at present. From its very beginnings, democratic thought has always posed a challenge to what each society can envisage. We believe that democracy's power to challenge us lives on in our times, although it is often overshadowed by disputes in parliamentary politics in which the concept is applied in a way that detracts from its deeper meaning, as if it were merely a set of procedures to be utilized to access and exercise power.

Still, we are living in an age in which there is a growing collective perception that certain foundations of democracy are under threat. That is why a large number of countries around the world share an aspiration to uphold the forms of a democratic society – including those that characterized it from the outset: the separation of powers and the existence of elected legislative chambers. But degeneration and corruption are as rife as that aspiration for democracy itself is widespread. The question remains as to whether democracy's prestige – both as a form of government and as the prevailing ethos of society – will continue to endure in the years to come.

What form, then, will democracy take in 50 years' time? We cannot know for certain. This paper opens with an analysis of the areas of tension that exist within contemporary democracies before proposing a series of key themes which, in our view, constitute some of the major challenges facing democracy in the future.

Democracies in a post-globalized and post-liberal era

The first 15 years of the 21st century saw a global surge in collective aspirations for a fairer world. These were expressed in

major feminist demonstrations, a collective awareness of climate change, mass movements against economic and political corruption that took over so many spaces across the globe, gains in rights for the LGBTI community, reactions against racism, and many other advances. Yet the second 15 years of the century have also given rise to profound reactionary shifts seeking sweeping reforms designed to prevent similar periods of emancipation and increased agency for subaltern classes and groups from being set in motion again in the future. Examples of these shifts have been seen in the cultural sphere, such as the war on “woke” culture; in social and political spheres, including moves towards exclusionary nationalisms; and above all in the economic sphere, where an extreme capitalism has gradually shed the neo-neoliberal pretexts of supporting families to consolidate their life plans. It seems we are entering into a far more Darwinian world at every level of the social order.

To these major cultural, political and economic transformations we can add a process capable of reshaping them all: a depth and speed of technological change that is bringing about a complete re-engineering of all systems. This technological change is primarily linked to artificial intelligence, research into new materials and a range of biotechnologies. And it has sparked a global race among major powers to position themselves at the forefront of the transformation, driven by the conviction that technological dominance is the primary source of geostrategic power. At the same time, this technological race is taking place within a context of extraordinary strain on the world’s ecology. While environmental awareness grew in the last century in light of evidence of climate change and the need to ensure the sustainability of resources, in this second 15 years of the 21st century we are witnessing a kind of geostrategic race for control of the natural resources and raw materials necessary to sustain the technological race.

The transformations underway have given rise to collective states of anxiety across all societies, many of which have been manufactured by the powerful communication mechanisms of social media. As is often the case when policies of fear take root, cultural, technological and ecological anxiety has engendered processes of profound moral and political polarization, growing resistance to multiculturalism and open societies and, above all, a gradual dismantling of welfare states.

All these tensions are forcing contemporary societies to embark on processes of transition, from a civilization that had enjoyed stable geopolitical and geo-economic foundations – at least, since the end of the Second World War – to a destabilized world subjected to rapid and irreversible changes. We can identify at least three impending transitions, each of a very different nature.

Firstly, there is the ecological transition. Growing evidence points us to anthropogenic causes of climate change and radical changes in the critical zone where agriculture and life are possible. Strategic resources such as drinking water, fossil fuels and raw materials essential for infrastructure are being depleted. This all paints a picture of an emergency that is forcing us to rethink our use of resources, how we generate energy, and the economic and technological models that make this viable. The transition toward a different model of interacting with the environment will undoubtedly be one of the great challenges we face in decades to come.

Secondly, we must consider the technological transition. Digitalization and the transmission of information via the internet transformed the entire economy at all levels of production, management, logistics and marketing. Similarly, the emergence of artificial intelligence coupled with the rapid pace of innovation driven by its application (biotechnology, new materials, transformations in military and security equipment) is bringing about what the Sussex School refers to as “technological paradigm shifts” which occur when the entire material basis of a society – economic, political and in everyday life – has to adapt to a new technology.

Thirdly, we are seeing a cultural transition in the form of a shift from a global system underpinned by Web 2.0 to today’s data society. Surveillance capitalism, the attention economy, data control and technological sovereignty are emerging as the new communications environments of this new society, in which major cultural wars may take up a new home in the control of data and information, in monopolies over knowledge and the mechanisms for its redistribution.

How can we tackle these three transitions in a way that benefits not just the economic elites and major power groups but humanity as a whole? The great challenge facing democracy in the years to come is to avoid falling foul of either technological determinism or ecological fatalism, rebuilding capacity for democratic action in spite of these processes. Rather than allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by this maelstrom of changes, we urgently need to find a democratic way through and out of these three transitions with a focus on citizens' capacity for agency and their power to intervene collectively in the processes that are reshaping our lives. There is a sense that we are standing on a threshold because humanity's power is ambivalent: we are potentially entering a dark age of violence and authoritarianism – or alternatively, we could be on the verge of overcoming the capitalist model of global exploitation. We are living in a moment when the dividing line between these two realms of possibility is visible to us.

What follows is an exploration of a series of threats and challenges related to how we approach these transitions democratically and how we can confront these phenomena of future change in awareness of our threshold position.

Challenges for real existing democracies

1. The care revolution and the democracy of interdependence

Every democracy is sustained by an immense amount of care work, without which no freedom could be exercised and no life project developed. This idea, reiterated by the researcher Joan Tronto, serves as a good starting point for looking to the future. For a long time we have narrated our societies through the figure of the autonomous individual. Yet no human being comes into the world independent; no one goes through life without needing help; and almost no one leaves this world without once again depending on others. Our deepest condition is not self-sufficiency, but interdependence. Therefore, one of the main challenges of the next 50 years lies in daring to organize our institutions on the basis of this reality. Envisaging this possible future requires us to replace the historically prevalent logic of war with one of care.

There is a deliberate vagueness surrounding the convention – which, as such, is open to change – that care is exercised through private inclination, family duty or a supposedly natural disposition of women. The patriarchy has a vested interest in not disrupting the unspoken and repeated assumption that women will provide care, and that care professionals will be poorly paid or denied their rights. Meanwhile, the tasks essential to sustaining life are scarcely recognized from an economic, political and symbolic point of view – and this is the root cause of the inequalities that sustain violence, war and the current ways in which the planet is being destroyed. Nevertheless, we do not believe we should continue asking “who carries out care duties” while the privileged – who receive care without having to care for others – look the other way. What we do have to consider is how we manage every human being’s care duty from a social and political standpoint.

The care revolution is not just about work-life balance and equality between men and women. It requires a more profound transformation. Care must be recognized as a principle within democratic organization. Consequently, care duties must be democratized, care work professionalized and dignified, and the tasks that enable life to continue reassessed to acknowledge their true value. A society that assigns this care to one gender alone and undervalues this work is also one that pays those who care for others as a profession poorly or simply does not pay at all. Their work is blindly devalued while some form of symbolic capital (affection, gifts, praise, and so on) is visibly encouraged, legitimizing a hierarchy of values where what matters most is what produces wealth. In contrast, that which makes existence itself possible is not always rewarded with employment rights or a decent wage – let alone fair working hours.

Fifty years from now, living in freedom might mean we abandon the fantasy of the self-sufficient individual in order to recognize that a community is also measured by the way it supports people’s vulnerability. We imagine the democracy of the future as one that learns to recognize itself in mutual dependence, making care a shared responsibility, as opposed to one organized exclusively around competitive and bellicose rivalry and productivity. We would argue that a society that places life at its centre is also a society less seduced by war, less willing to sacrifice the vulnerable, and better able to turn freedom into a truly shared experience. In that society, care would cease to be just another issue or the title of a future government department; rather, it would be the material and ethical foundation that makes democracy possible, and which enhances it as we learn to collectively embrace interdependence.

2. Reinventing democratic participation: From the politics of grievance to the politics of widespread social creation

The issue of citizen participation lies at the heart of democratic life. How are citizens able to influence public policy and collective decision-making through their movements, associations and communities? Much of the non-revolutionary struggle of the last two centuries has been channelled into social protests against injustices and inequalities. These protests aimed to force states to incorporate their demands into social security systems as extensions of public policy and of the very idea of justice. These struggles undertaken by trade unions and social movements have been decisive in the construction of advanced democracies. But we now face a civilizational shift in which, first of all, the global elites have decided to limit or outright dismantle public welfare and replace it with market-driven systems. Secondly, grievance politics are increasingly

seen as a form of nostalgia for what has been lost that lead to generational and intersectional tensions over which demands take priority.

This is why new labour and social movements are in crisis: they are unable to offer social models that inspire hope and combat the fear that has spread as a structural feeling among many peoples across the globe. So one of the great challenges facing democratic citizenship is to reinvent forms of collective participation and the frameworks of meaning around them. We must commit to reactive politics to defend those achievements that are at risk. We must commit to an affirmative imagination capable of proposing credible visions of other possible democracies. And counter the Thatcherite maxim “There is no alternative” with viable and desirable proposals that a social majority can embrace – and feel are theirs.

Let us take a model example of these new forms of collective participation and imagination: citizens’ laboratories. These modest, fragile initiatives of limited scope nevertheless foreshadow ways in which diverse sections of society can become involved in creative activity. They offer spaces for collaboration between people who, in a horizontal manner, experiment, design and launch projects to improve living conditions in the city, and can be considered prototypes or pilot models for new forms of collective participation. Such spaces for social experimentation and creative imagination anticipate the cooperative dynamics of a possible future democracy.

3. Towards a common culture and a culture of the common: New humanisms that are neither androcentric nor anthropocentric

Humanism represented a crucial innovation in the way we understand our place in the world. Despite all the well-deserved criticism it has attracted, the overarching idea running through the history of modernity is that humanity stands alone when it comes to its capacity for transformation. Neither the gods, nor fate, nor any supposed technology will save humanity. Culturally speaking, humanism has always presented itself as a movement that believes culture can improve societies and people. And with regard to social order, civic humanism has consistently championed projects linked to autonomy at all levels of the social order, something that is often conflated with republicanism. Recent criticisms that humanism does not pay sufficient attention to nature and is anthropocentric, and that it is tainted by supremacism and androcentrism are more than

justified. Notwithstanding, we need to renew old ideas through new projects in solidarity with all life, and governed by principles of inclusion and equality.

How can we renew humanist thought from a perspective that is neither androcentric nor anthropocentric? This is a challenge that future democracies will have to address, yet we can already identify new trends in social movements and critical thought. Feminist struggles and thought have developed a critique of the patriarchal implications of humanism, but they have also provided crucial frameworks for its reformulation, such as the revaluation of care as a fundamental form of relationship. For their part, environmental movements have emphasized the destructive nature of the fantasy of human beings living severed from their natural environment, as well as the speciesism implicit in placing humans at the centre of all ideologies. These movements have proposed new ways of thinking about social matters based on relational forms that involve active participation of both human and non-human agents.

One part of the challenge is to champion a shared culture as a space for non-violent conflict and communication, bringing together different actors within an interdependent network in which each is recognized for their capacity to act. But it also involves a new culture of the common that internalizes the need to preserve and care for common assets and spaces. This common culture and culture of the common will give rise to new forms of community that will be capable of reformulating humanism within new parameters without losing sight of its transformative and emancipatory intent.

4. Beyond consensus-based societies: Democracies that incorporate dissent, friction and conflict while limiting them through democratic forms of control

The myths of our democracy have glorified consensus as a method for resolving social problems. However, in many cases, such consensus has happened more among the political elites than among the social majorities they were meant to represent. Indeed, many of the problems facing today's democracies stem from a consensus-based understanding of institutions: the fear of polarization and social fragmentation has given rise to mechanisms that, in practice, have prevented any democratic experiment and innovation beyond the limits set by the consensual framework. This has led to a flattening of democratic deliberation, which is increasingly reduced to a technical discussion of the means rather than an open debate on the ends. How can dissent, friction and voices that openly challenge the prevailing common sense of an era be integrated into this scenario?

A truly democratic institutional design must always operate on the fringes of politics, allowing for friction and framing conflicts in a common language in which they can be properly expressed. Conflicts express social dilemmas that often put strain on all the institutional processes of democracy. But it is precisely the capacity for self-modification that makes democracies open and situates them in a constant process of self-constitution. Without these conditions, constitutional principles can become a tool for crushing and silencing dissent, and creating structural ignorance.

The democracy of the future will also need to rethink its relationship with justice – not only in terms of the judiciary’s independence from political discussions, but also in terms of a deeper relationship that can prevent those who are not adequately served by it from being silenced and excluded. In fact, epistemic injustice is one of the structural ills of democratic societies, both in its “testimonial” form (when a person’s knowledge is ignored due to structural prejudices concerning the group to which they belong) and in its “hermeneutic” form (when their experience is not understood because there are no available concepts or socially accepted interpretative frameworks capable of explaining it). How might future democracies develop mechanisms to ensure genuine epistemic justice that prevents forms of structural exclusion and the silencing of entire populations who currently lack the capacity to make their voices heard?

5. Re-framing art and creativity: From the framework of the culture industry to widespread social creativity

Art and creativity form an essential part of democratic life because they actively engage the public imagination and allow people to use different ways to explore the conflicts, tensions and fears that permeate contemporary society. This is why the unequal social distribution of creative labour in our societies is so problematic. The conceptual and productive framework of the culture industry developed by public policy and private capital in recent decades has served to professionalize the exercise of creativity at the cost of embedding it within a framework of competitiveness and standardized production. In this context, the majority of the population is excluded from creative circuits and reduced to mere consumers of the images, narratives and discourses produced by others.

A democratic conception of cultural life should explore other dynamics and make cultural creativity a central dimension

of life. This is a complex transition from an experience of democratic citizenship based on the consumption of the productions of others, created by professionals, to one centred on the lived experience – both individual and collective – of cultural creation. It would be a transition to a culture that transforms not through the impact of a message or a representation but through the very experience of the creative act, through the complex process of inventing forms, languages or textures capable of transforming our sensory worlds and our perception of reality.

Cultural creation is, moreover, a laboratory for social experimentation of the highest order. It is the arena in which we explore the stories we can tell ourselves, the images with which we represent ourselves, and the sounds and forms that speak to us. A truly deep democracy should ensure not only equal access to cultural consumption, but also that all this exploratory potential is not the exclusive preserve of cultural industries and the capital that finances them. In other words, it should guarantee equal access to the conditions, spaces and tools of cultural creation. And that will be the crucial transformation.

For this reason, one of the great challenges facing the democracy of the future will be to reformulate creative dynamics and public policies concerning culture. What sort of institutions and practices might facilitate the transition to a model of widespread cultural creativity? What spaces, what environments and what sensibilities would we need to generate and reinforce this new democratic culture, in the strictest sense of the term? What new forms of communal life might this cultural transition afford us?

6. A constituent culture: Aesthetics and narratives for a democracy yet to come

Critical culture has been a crucial factor in consolidating democratic life. It has generated languages that can be used to express dissent, discontent and frustration; it has proposed narratives that reflect our indecision, our doubts and our confusion. It has, at times, served as a space capable of channelling the unease that found no other outlets to name or express it. It has enabled us to give shape – sometimes fragile and fragmentary, sometimes forceful and aggressive – to novel emotional states and structures of feeling, and has helped many people to understand obscure aspects of their own lives through works of fiction which, although they might have seemed to be about other things, were in fact speaking to them.

Against the backdrop of the ongoing crisis of the last decade and a half, democratic culture has been extraordinarily

fertile when it comes to creating subversive aesthetics and narratives that bring systemic violence and forms of social domination to light and seek to overthrow their logic. They can be called subversive because they attempt to delegitimize these forms of exercising power by holding them up for their audience to see. Delegitimization, denaturalization, problematization, denormalization and visibility are some of the key terms in this semantic field: a brake and a spanner in the works of the well-oiled machinery of contemporary capitalism. In this way, critical culture acts as a counterweight to the tendencies that normalize precarity and abuse. This is undoubtedly a function that the democratic culture of the future will need to deepen and expand upon.

Naomi Klein pointed out, though, that “saying no is not enough” and that we need to build something that we can say yes to – even if only in the realm of our imagination. And it is true to say that recent culture has been far less fertile in terms of the aesthetics and narratives it has produced that go beyond merely criticizing the status quo to propose images and stories that allow us to imagine and make credible different – and more desirable – ways of living than those that have been foisted upon us. For a process of dismantling or *destituting* something that previously existed must be followed by the creation of something new.

And in the process of shaping or *constituting* a new collective reality, art and culture can play an essential role as laboratories for imaginative experimentation, not only by offering a critique of the status quo but also by tentatively seeking to express the emergence of the new. They do so by broadening the boundaries of what it is possible to imagine, think and represent. What will these *constitutive* narratives (which will help to shape reality and affirm the possibility of other lives, other worldviews and other ways of being together) look like?

7. Education for the future: Against the degradation of thought and in favour of critical thinking and the creative spirit

No society should justify education on the basis of its profitability, normalizing the idea that schools are there to prepare workers rather than citizens. Nor should any society accept that such aims are displayed nestled among flashing neon signs proclaiming: “more competitive”, “more innovative” or “more profitable”, while omitting the fact that such profitability only benefits those who already accumulate power and capital. The free society we envisage could never reduce schools to mere instruments of productivity. Education is, first and foremost, the place where a community teaches people to think for themselves and to think collectively, preparing for and enabling a democratic life. A democratic school or university does not measure people in terms of efficiency; neither does it dehumanize them as cogs in the commercial machine.

When we think of future freedom, we imagine that it will shine brightly if we champion an education capable of cultivating precisely that which is most difficult to quantify; that is, critical judgement, sensitivity to the experiences of others, imagination, free thought that does not lead to bellicose reasoning, thought that exercises the power of dialogue and the spoken word, the ability to argue and to navigate complexity without succumbing to dogmatism, and the capacity to embrace dissent and friction through democratic forms of control. If this is to be achieved, the arts and humanities must not be relegated to the realm of lowest priority, to be seen, perhaps, as mere ornament, something that is difficult to justify in terms of profitability and is consequently sidelined – or worse still, devalued. Democracies falter when the humanities fade out of education and social dialogue. Training technically competent individuals has no social value if it does not help people to understand themselves and others, and to be capable of critically examining the world they live in. Loneliness and anxiety would soon take their toll on people who, faced with the overwhelming flood of stimuli from a world they do not easily understand, seek refuge in the messages and reassurances of louder voices and oversimplified slogans. The future that is now unfolding must respond to what is already happening.

And to gain a full understanding of this, it is essential to be able put ourselves in the place of those who live differently or are different to us. Of course, imagination can come to our aid, because when we imagine we have to see ourselves as others, to put ourselves in those places, situations and bodies, and ask ourselves: how does the world look from here? In the future we imagine, society educates – but so do teachers. And their work finally achieves a level of social recognition and professional dignity that banishes precariousness from their daily lives. Teaching is one of the jobs that carries the greatest political responsibility because the transmission of democratic dialogue between generations depends largely on education. So it can hardly be sustained under conditions of temporary employment, excessive bureaucracy and normalized precariousness. We need to create and consolidate the conditions for teaching work to be carried out as a practice of intellectual care, commitment, support and hope.

If we want to imagine ourselves living in freedom within the next 50 years, we need to reclaim schools and universities as places where it is still possible to linger over a question, to learn, to listen and to discover that knowledge does not consist solely of accumulating information; it also means acquiring a certain disposition toward the world and toward others. For a mature democracy is not one that produces individuals perfectly adapted to the demands of the market. Rather, it is one that dares to educate people who can think critically and collectively about the demands that will be placed upon them, and transform those demands accordingly.

8. Infrastructures for democracy: Policies concerning technological sovereignty and decentralization

We are living in a time when our living environments are being transformed at a terrific pace. This is due not only to the technological revolution and the effects of climate change, but also the accelerated change being experienced by cities and the physical infrastructure of the urban spaces in which the majority of the population lives. The direction that this transformation takes will be crucial: either it will facilitate the dynamics of democratic life or, on the contrary, it will hinder and hijack them. In this respect, the history of cities shows us that the design of public spaces and their interconnection can either foster dynamics of segregation, exclusion and social differentiation or, conversely, it can generate dynamics of participation, inclusion and social wellbeing.

For this reason, policies aimed at rebuilding the city as a liveable environment will be central to the democracies of the

future, since it is precisely urban organization that connects private and public spaces, as well as everyday life with the institutional sphere. What do we want the cities we inhabit to be like? Undoubtedly, more welcoming and liveable, healthier and cleaner, and with a layout that fosters communal living. Democracy is also at stake in physical infrastructure. An environment that facilitates the use of public space and safe mobility – regardless of age, gender, racialized status or social class – makes sure human beings can enjoy what Lefebvre termed the “right to the city”, a right that is all too often unachievable in today’s urban centres. When urban design is left in the hands of private investors and speculative interests, a city’s inhabitants lose the power of decision over their lifestyles, leading to phenomena such as gentrification, social and racial segregation or unequal distribution of safety where the elites enjoy safe spaces while the most vulnerable communities inhabit high-risk spaces.

The necessary change to our spaces and habitats, and the decentralization that has happened across various levels of how we organize and manage social and everyday life increasingly calls for a better distribution of agency across different scales of organization. Not everyone can be an expert, but everyone is an expert in something – particularly in the knowledge they have of their environment beyond the technical division of labour. The idea of technological sovereignty does not boil down to turning every collective into engineers. Instead, capacities should be strengthened to build hybrid, collective agency, where acquiring skills at whatever level possible goes hand in hand with self-affirmation of the particular projects being undertaken by communities and cities, and the full richness of social forms of existence. In a world of unbridled technological competition, policies are needed to create basic networks to interconnect technical and everyday knowledge so that collective and personal projects can be imagined and made a reality, bringing together the technical and the human meaning of existence.

The transformation of cities will be inextricably linked to that of towns, villages and the countryside, and both urban and rural change must be envisaged as part of the same reorganization of human life on the ground. Large cities continue to grow and amass population, resources, services and opportunities. And policies to support villages and rural communities remain insufficient to sustain ways of life that guarantee autonomy and a future for these communities. That said, the challenges of climate change, the housing crisis, pressure on public services and growing discontent with contemporary ways of living in cities are once again placing towns and villages at the centre of the debate. Idealizing rural life or imagining a return to past ways of living is not what is needed. Rather, we should recognize the complexities involved

in a community-led transformation capable of bringing together proximity, care, production, sustainability and access to rights. Restoring the capacity of small areas to foster community, knowledge and autonomy by creating and expanding service infrastructure would be key to a future in which urban concentration can coexist with the need to redistribute population, resources and life opportunities.

The transformation of communities also entails a material transformation of the infrastructures that organize life. But how can we engage with the transformations we desire and tackle those that act as inertia on a planet where the sharp distinction between city and countryside gives rise to sprawling – and seemingly uncoordinated – forms of megalopolises, logistics corridors and networks connecting territories by land, sea, air and the stratosphere? According to David Harvey's analysis, capitalism has shifted much of its capacity for domination from the control of time towards the spatialization of power. Controlling space involves controlling places, infrastructure, flows and possibilities for movement at different scales. In this new landscape, technological sovereignty will be an inseparable dimension of democratic sovereignty. Questions are being raised as to who owns the data produced by our cities and territories, who decides on its use, which systems monitor and predict our behaviour, and who controls the digital infrastructure on which our mobility, security, communications and a large part of our public services depend. Protecting privacy and guaranteeing citizens' control over these resources would, therefore, be one contemporary way of defending the right to the city.

In this vein, decentralization could become one of the key political principles of urban and territorial transformation. To distribute technological, energy and informational power, we must foster systems capable of generating local autonomy and cooperation between territories, such as decentralized energy networks, auditable digital infrastructures, community-based data management, and decisions regarding the built environment that are made closer to those who inhabit it. The democratic city of the future would have to ask itself what technologies it needs, who governs them and what ways of life they make possible. Technological sovereignty thus expands the right to the city, from the basic right to occupy and enjoy a common space to the broader right to intervene in the material, energy, information and algorithmic infrastructures that determine how that space can be inhabited.

9. Freeing up time in our lives from the constraints of productivity

Cortázar wrote that when you are offered an anniversary watch, you are not actually being given a gift; rather, it is you who are the gift for the watch's birthday. He was referring to the way in which the subject of modernity became trapped in the consumerist fetishism of objects, as well as in a regulated experience of time, a “dungeon of air” in which life lost its density and texture. Indeed, few experiences characterize the contemporary world as much as the regulated management of time and its tendency towards speed and constant acceleration. Rhythms, dynamics and demands are imposed in all spheres of life that make any experience of time freely lived a scarce commodity. A new concept of democracy should protect and enhance free time as the core of a new way of living out citizenship.

In no sphere is this experience of speed as intense as in the world of work, where we feel the need to produce more in less time, turning human time into a race against the clock. Moreover, the demand for ever-greater productivity is no longer confined to the world of work: it has spread to all spheres of life, permeating leisure, friendships, romantic relationships and how we experience culture. Watching the latest series, going to the gym, going on dates... So many activities end up being as pressing a task as submitting a report on time or meeting the latest deadline. Our entire lives are at risk of being swallowed up by the dynamics of productivity. Collective exhaustion is, without doubt, its main symptom.

So one of the challenges for the future of democracy will be to rethink this relationship with work and productivity, imagining new ways of inhabiting time that allow us to free it from these frameworks. This will require us to build ways of life and public policies that are not work-centred, ensuring a person's worth does not depend on the work they do or their productivity rate. It will also involve reclaiming the social value of unproductive moments, of time simply passing, of boredom and slowing things down.

We envisage, then, a "slow democracy" that adapts to gentle and flexible rhythms, in which our bodies are not subjected to gruelling schedules or endless working hours. In that slow democracy, we will be able to devote our emotional and mental energy to all those non-productive tasks that bring us pleasure, enjoyment, understanding or knowledge. There, we will reclaim ownership of our time and how we use it, as well as the collective capacity to do with it as we please, at the pace we choose.

10. *De-spectacularizing* life: Reclaiming attention as a common good

Debord suggested that “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images”. Thinking about the future taking shape and the pressures arising from a world of visual excess, we believe that *de-spectacularization* would help ensure that reality – which has been reduced to a monopoly of its appearance – has a counterpoint and is not merely the “default” option. For this imagined future, it would be necessary to offer attention, time and benefit of the doubt from the very outset, because what appears on the screen, driven by commercial forces, seems to seek nothing but an audience. This is undoubtedly very different from that which demands care and attention: that has never been easily turned into spectacle.

Onscreen visibility has become a form of power, and platforms have constructed a regime of attention where value is

increasingly measured by the ability to attract viewers and elicit a reaction – and preferably a swift one, speed being supremely profitable. This transforms the way we perceive, remember and assign importance. One of the great challenges to a new democracy would be to reclaim attention as a common good and to understand the power structures that take hold between our fingertips and our screens. Where attention is captured and commodified, people become more easily manipulated and freedom becomes more fragile.

De-spectacularization would represent a practice grounded in materiality and in a different kind of digitality that liberates modes of existence and relating to one another. In the face of the inertia that turns every experience into content, we must reclaim spaces for encounter where dialogue is not dependent on either being disseminated or filed away. Outside the network is also the material and human inside – shadowy and imperfect. It is a place from which to think and interact without becoming trapped in the logic of profit and visibility as an all-powerful value. The spectacularization of politics, polarization and extreme simplification work to weaken democratic frameworks and render constructive dissent unviable. When language is hollowed out of its meaning and reduced to immediate impact, dialogue loses its depth.

Constant connectivity and sensory overload produce individuals who struggle to engage in contemplation and engage in any depth. The temptation to press a button and delegate by default distances us from creative and reflective processes, learning, error and discovery. Jumping straight to the result fuels our impatience to desire and possess while at the same time concealing the diffuse precariousness that underpins what reaches us. The acts of *desiring* and *achieving* become magic wands. Democracy, however, needs citizens capable of engaging with complexity, listening to lengthy arguments and accepting the slowness of deliberation. That is why it is important to protect spaces for silence, reading, conversation and disconnection – ways of life that are not governed by constant display or immediacy. In short, de-spectacularization means reclaiming the right to experience a less hurried world that is not colonized by the technology industries. Can you imagine mastering the ability to distinguish between what is thrust upon our gaze and what truly deserves our attention?

11. A future where the poor, too, will have a say in tomorrow: Justice and social class

There are things that are passed down from parents to children: a flat nose, a genetic condition, a beautiful eye colour... But what does it mean for democracy that certain jobs are traditionally encouraged specifically for well-off families and favoured for a particular social class? It is not the same to say that there are more poor farmers as it is to say that there are more judges who come from wealthy families. The latter implies that a branch of government which we assume to be independent – such as the judiciary – may favour certain types of individuals and families. And the mere possibility of such conditioning and bias should prompt reflection and reform.

Recent democracies have spent the last 50 years expanding rights and dismantling old forms of exclusion, but they have not paid the same attention to the way in which freedom is

conditioned by the chance circumstance of one's birth. We cannot choose where we are born, the people we grow up with, the language we hear as children, our parents' resources or the illnesses that run in our family. Yet we believe that we do choose what we can "achieve" in our future lives. This is an illusion that springs from a public education system and a democracy that encourage people to dream freely about what they want to become and fosters the hope that they can achieve all that. But the illusion remains a mirage, culminating in unmet expectations that lead to frustration.

One challenge for the coming decades will be to accept that equality does not require treating everyone in the same way. Rather, equality means correcting, as far as possible, the injustices that stem from that initial lottery, from the inequality that tends to repeat itself without social intervention. It means understanding that the root of inequality is that many of life's opportunities depend on the arbitrary distribution of circumstances at birth.

Few areas illustrate this tension as clearly as access to senior judicial posts in the recent years of democratic Spain. What happens if those entrusted with upholding equality before the law come solely from backgrounds that have the possibility of sustaining long years of preparation for competitive examinations and unpaid study – something a poor person could not afford without a scholarship? Should society resign itself to accepting as a given the mindset of those who have grown up knowing that certain positions are more clearly meant for them, that, in a sense, they feel these positions belong to them? We would not want to question merit or automatically suspect those who attain such positions as if it were part of a family legacy. But we should ask ourselves how many talented individuals are excluded before they even set out on that path, how many vocations are abandoned for strictly material reasons, and how much potential a society loses when it confuses merit with entrenched privilege?

The democracy of the future must devise institutions that are less deferential to social heritage. We envisage a robust system of education and scholarships, of specific and sustained financial support, as well as support mechanisms to facilitate access to legal and judicial professions – support not designed as mere welfare policy, but rather as a means of fostering democratic engineering based on equal opportunities. The independence of the justice system does not only depend on the separation of powers; it also depends on genuine access and on *plural* life experiences as opposed to a narrow social sphere. A democracy in which certain professions end up resembling a family legacy runs the risk of turning equality into a fiction and freedom into an inherited privilege.

Deactivating – or helping to deactivating – the invisible transmission of inequalities is something that ought to be on the cards when we consider the

future. It would be a positive boost for democracy if a young man raised on a housing estate, the daughter of a working-class family or someone with no family tradition of higher education could also access the positions from which everyone's rights are interpreted and protected. Perhaps over the past 50 years there have been moments when circumstances have favoured this, but such conditions have gradually been eroded and once again there are obstacles in the road. It is important to prevent someone's background from becoming their sole destiny, and that their birth or the side of town they are from ceases to dictate their future so that democracy can finally create a truly solid foundation that is materially and politically real.

These eleven challenges ahead are by no means an exhaustive list of what is on the horizon. But they do sketch out the contours of a shared intuition: that democracy 50 years from now will not simply be an improved or degraded version of the one we know today. Instead, it will be the result of the cultural, technological, ecological and everyday debates that we engage in – or fail to engage in – over the coming decades. We have spoken of care, of dissent, of non-anthropocentric humanisms, of epistemic justice, of freed-up time and of regained attention, because all these threads weave together to reveal the same question: what forms of shared life do we want to make possible, and whom are we prepared to listen to?

As we stated at the beginning of this document, we stand on a threshold. We do not know what kind of democracy the people who have not yet been born will inhabit. But we do know that this democracy will be built up – or torn down – by means of every single decision, big and small, that we make between now and then. Perhaps that is, after all, the challenge of all challenges: not to settle for a future that is handed to us as a decision already made, but instead dare to imagine it and, from that imagination, begin to inhabit it.

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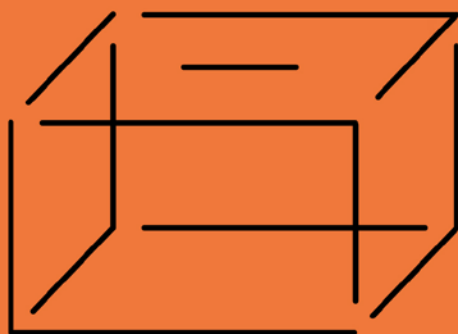
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