The collaborative dimension of social innovation.

Alessandro Bertirotti / Raffaella Fagnoni

Abstract

Shaping the way we think and act, technological progress is redefining the society we live in. In order not to be overwhelmed by their own tools, people try to build themselves and their aspirations through the imaginary. This one, charged with symbols and striving to represent the desires and anxieties of all of us, may be social as well as individual, thus becoming an active engine to re-think the future of a society that seems rooted in an eternal present. A new demand of change is moving people, group of active citizens, realizing to live in a state of uncertainty, crossing crisis. Thanks to technology and networking they act creating a pervasive creative intelligence spreading collective and grass-rooted activities and bottom-up solutions to real, local and social problems. Terms such as communion and commotion (i.e. shared emotion), can assume a leading role in designing the world of tomorrow with actions oriented the most on processes than on products. Design, with new creative forms of collaboration, can facilitate this process.

Keywords

Emotions-Commotions / Social Innovation / Social Imaginary / Collaborative Dimension / Things and People / Conceivable Future

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1. Introduction

Technological innovations lead to the gradual transformation not only of our thinking but also of our brain’s structure. Many social theorists have argued that social life is now informed by a new technological imaginary operating more and more actively at the level of both the perceptual and somatic processes. This will lead to a redefinition of the significance of society, politics and of humanity. The risk we are facing, with the technological dissemination of devices and their logical-functional mechanisms, is that we can get to influence the human brain function, compromising its ability to think freely and to follow its own common sense, that is the only chance of survival for a free thought. The way to set the human reasoning is constantly adapting in analogy to the mechanical system, by following the rules imposed by technological tools. This means that they risk losing their role as practical aids, gradually becoming indispensable references. It is essential, therefore, to recover the brain as the most powerful technological tool in the world and hand as a means to shape the own insights and aspirations.

2. Perception and imaginary

Every human being on this Earth lives in an impotence condition. Specially as regards to the nature force and to the universe mystery, everybody becomes aware, during his live, of his finiteness, having experience of his own limits constraint, with which he has to learn the living in common. For instance, none of us can be totally master of his own life, because there are many unexpected situations where we must make the best of things, much to our regret. As the years go by, we arrive however to find reasonable explanations to fear and anguishcaused by the time’s concept. And really in this time perception, we waste our change intuition and “the impotence feeling in comparison with the get on change and temporal events, persuades humans to elaborate answers that can fill up the extreme abstractness of this dimension” (Bertirotti, 2009:136).

These are the reasons based on many human actions we see in every world’s cultures, even if with different forms, by which we try to fill the gap between the checkable and the
uncheckable. In this way it’s possible to develop a mental attitude thanks to which, by the aid of imaginary, we are able to tolerate what we cannot take under control, and then what is imponderable. It is a temporal projection through the future (applicable to the past too) that we learn very precociously and that is always with us, conforming itself according to circumstances, as long as we live.

We have two fundamental types of cognitive imagination: the imagination and the phantasia. With the first, data are collected by the sensus communis, while with the second one, understood as the faculty of the first, we coordinate and manage them in a design way (Ferraris, 1996). By the imagination, for example, the man processes the input data from the real horse, while using them in the imagination creating the centaur, this in turn inserted into a collective imaginary (influenced and associated) that makes use of symbols. (Bertirotti, 2009:137).

The production of imagination and phantasia occurs in expressions of mental performance. Our minds are trained, with the use of symbols, to synthesize them and come to build the imaginary, by which we relate with our own kind and our surroundings. We can also distinguish an individual and a social imaginary. With the first one we mean the set of visions, words, colors, shapes, landscapes, scenery, backgrounds and atmosphere, functional and useful to the understanding and explanation of our own idea. With the second one, we are in the presence of the same individual elements, but they are instead shared within a community. The imaging system, the whole of meanings and symbols that a particular community uses to communicate its representation, is the social imaginary that it develops itself and that helps to strengthen its identity. The social imaginary can be the information system, which carries a certain social reality or is able to accept the aspirations and desires, to which we pay more attention. What the community is able to conceive, imagine, and therefore to convey, it creates a link between social imaginary and social consciousness that can lead to the construction of a possible future. The imagery that is built by wishes and aspirations can influence people’s behavior and can induce them to change. If this is done consciously and collaboratively, the construction of the social imaginary can become the way of the social innovation.

Mircea Eliade, in his study on the phenomenology of symbols, shows that human beings tend to relate with their own kind and the surrounding environment (in general with all that is other from itself) inventing a system of symbols which states clearly a specific order. An environment-area considered safe for the survival of its members is built separating the center, which is sacred because chosen, from the suburbs, which is inhabited by daily actions (Eliade, 1956). When a culture is able to put in order external and internal things around it, it becomes able to control the environment and its inhabitants (Bertirotti, 2009:137).

The urban areas are manufactured according to the same criterion: we find a city center and a city suburbs, with the same and different empowerment which highlighted by Mircea Eliade. And it couldn’t be otherwise, because what is being built first, compared to what is being built after, that is the center respect to the periphery, it has the value of remaining
the starting point of our future directions, and always carries our future projects. Thanks to the collective exercise of remembering, the places of memory are born, and “they are real sacred spaces where time comes back, hoping to erase the events for which it is remembered. That's why the use of the imaginary allows you to exorcise the time and the death, but also to project to TheLord the distress of everyday life, directing human activity in making real their dreams. Imagination is a holy event of the eternal fight against the death putrefaction and the fate. (Durand G. 1963)” (Bertirotti A., 2009:139).

3. To know, to imagine, to stage

The Humans build their own imagination using languages and tools with different features, but deeply rooted in the effort to represent the desires and anxieties concerning themselves, because typical of existence.

In Prologue of Genesis (John 1,1) we read that God created the world through the sound of the Word, and for this reason the only thing that God doesn't create or invent, is the word, that contains the creative energy of the sound. God, in our biblical tradition, is the verb, because He creates using the word and He gives meaning to the energy of the sound contained in the word. The transcendent derivation of the function of language in the biblical tradition is not a purely cultural matter, but rather an anthropological general dimension, that we can define symbolic, in whose name the creation of meanings happens thanks to the symbols, namely the signs that become further meanings (Bertirotti A., 2009:141-142).

We are obviously facing a mystery, because it is the symbol itself to be in this way. The term derives from the Greek symbolon, that means with, together, and ballo throw, from which derives the verb symballo, that is I put together, I close with. Its meaning is explained to the Encyclopedia Treccani web page: “(symbol) Everything (sign, gesture, object, animal, person), whose perception inspires a different idea from its immediate sensitive nature. The original practical function, prevalent but non-dominant, is replaced by the representative function and the symbol is identified with the sign” (http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/simbolo/).

If the imaginary is filled with symbols, and through these it builds a mental place within which we plan the future, our present world's concept changes. To perceive the reality as modifiable through the imaginary, and to experience the excitement of situations that are between real and not real, it becomes a purely cognitive task. That is typical of a mind that knows through by imagining.

If we assume that all this happens in places and times of art as if it was the staging of oneself, where it lives everything we would be and we weren't able to become now, it becomes necessary to make technology an opportunity to invent new places to realize the imaginary.
4. Presentism

It seems, however, that technology has not carried out this task, or at least it has not had the awareness and determination, especially in recent years, to point that direction. The scenarios we deal with, relate basically to the technology’s intensification, and it is no coincidence that we speak ever more frequently of smart city, as if improving the people life’s quality is not depending on the people themselves, but only on technological instruments we have.

In fact, human history teaches us that the more this period we are living is chaotic, the more is useful, in the absence of clarity, to refer to situations and ideas belonging to previous periods. In the past, the future was the expression of a design through which we could say “one day… most of the imagined things would come true”. The future was perceived as improvement, but, at some point in our history, all this no longer worked: we destroyed forests, cemented the environment, exploited resources, impoverished the Third World countries, starved entire populations, destroying traditions and people. And we fell into the abyss of nothingness in front of us, because we don’t know what we can re-invent that might actually improve our life on this planet.

In this sense, the concept of Presentism fits in, by which we refers to the past and to the future with mental attitudes based on the present, on what we are experiencing. According to this philosophical interpretation of our western current daily life, the past is evaluated, represented and reported using concepts and visions of the present, creating voluntarily the supremacy of now on that of before and after.

This domination of the present surrounds us daily. Simply thinking about the soap operas that are continuing in countries around the world indefinitely. Infact the actors, the main characters who die in an episode, can reappear in subsequent episodes as they were resurrected. (Beautiful is the clearest example). If everything in this world, as real as virtual, is consumed and ends, including relationships between people, although it is possible to start again, as if nothing had happened.

The idea is thus created in people’s minds, that there can be no possible imaginary, futuristic, without technology, confirming those worldviews well expressed for example in films like Minority Report (2002) or Matrix (1999) and, to arbori, the 007 Series.

Presentism is based on the belief that only the current phenomena are relevant, and it defines the past phenomena in terms of faith and knowledge. Marc Augé in his essay “What happened to the future” (2008) shows that the future has always been considered in relation to the past and the utopia, often conditioned by the knowledge of religions. The combination of religion to science, with its progress promises, brings with it the risk of a cosmos-technology in which the technological implications of science take a size similar to a second nature, which is therefore comforting. «If Humanity was heroic, it would accept the idea that knowledge is its ultimate purpose. If Humanity was generous,
it would understand that knowledge of goods is the most economical solution for itself. If Humanity was conscious itself, it wouldn’t allow the power games to obscure the ideal of knowledge. But Humanity as such does not exist, there are only human beings, societies, groups, powers and individuals» (Augé, 2008:108). Augé however concludes his essay leaving open a hope, linked to an educational revolution, «People who are professionally engaged in researching and teaching must therefore keep in mind that scientific progress depends largely on the social revolution of teaching» (Augé, 2008:110). He relies on intelligence and human consciousness that cannot get lost in the void of resignation and inability to act, but it can redeem its own confidence in thinking to a better world as really possible.

5. Practical acting, technological and cultural revolution of social innovation

The human doing, based on the recovery and self-production, can be a new way of looking at the future living by the aid of technology. The technological development level achieved is so obvious and pushed that, actually, our minds have lost the ability to follow and therefore control it, and the inequality between us and the technology is such that it produces human beings more and more alienated from themselves. Here we are in the same condition of a child who has to draw a line on a sheet starting from the bottom and going upwards, until he touches the top of the sheet, beyond which you cannot draw. Here he will be forced to fall back to the bottom, because the sheet edge leads him to go back, if he wants to leave a trace of his path. We find ourselves exactly in this situation: to go forward, we must continue looking back, and many times we have to go back, and starting from the point of view of both mental that behavior attitudes.

The signals of a change of course, which contrast with the passive consumption desire of participation, are linked to the movements of the Do It Yourself (DIY) and all'Adhocrazia¹. The ad-hoc approach actuality, already enhanced by the American counterculture of the sixties, reappears in times of crisis and tradition’s breaking. They emphasize the need for the individual to take control and awareness of what he

¹Adhocracy is an adaptable system of organization that is defined by a lack of formal structure. The ad-hoc approach operates in opposition to bureaucracy. The term was first coined by Warren Bennis in his 1968 book The Temporary Society, and then developed by many other authors, crossing from the theory of management of organizations to other disciplines, as architecture and design. «Adhocracy is characterized by an adaptive, creative and flexible integrative behavior based on non-permanence and spontaneity. It is believed that these characteristics allow adhocracy to respond faster than traditional bureaucratic organizations while being more open to new ideas» (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adhocracy, visited in September 2015).
does and consumes. This approach draws Craftsman by Richard Sennett (2008) but it exceeds the craftsmanship of doing with his own hands, moving towards social engagement, which through making is seeking awareness and sharing. And this happens in a period, as ours, in which everything seems dematerialized. The practices based on doing or making often adopt a style almost improvised, which starts from what exists and it reuses, renews, recycles. (Fagnoni, 2013, Fagnoni-Pericu, 2014) They respond to a typically Latin, Mediterranean way to act, that doesn’t necessarily constitute a more or less professional exercising, radical fashion, but a necessity, survival and adapt actions to the adversity, reactions to crises. The authorial dimension takes a backseat: groups of citizens, with production networks involving the users, organize themselves to solve problems, offering products and services, redeveloping disused spaces. It is a sort of cultural and social revolution, which uses the tools proposed by the technological revolution. The social innovation is combined with the technological innovation (Manzini, 2015:17) and through this fusion new ways of approaching can be born and we can solve problems, until to affect the nature of the production and consumption systems, from centralized systems production to distributed systems, for example based on the value of things and local economies.

6. From things to people

In this context, it is important the role of those actions that, taking care of things, prove the value of taking care of people. (Fagnoni, 2009) The interpersonal relationships quality determines also, and above all, the quality of life, both individual and collective. And in the same way people take care of each other mutually, we recover the meaning of taking care of things. Infact, the world’s things, the objects and the situations are always expression of the interaction with the human being. For example, walking on a street disregarded from the urban point of view, that is not clean, with no green spaces and street furniture, causes to bystanders a widespread perception of neglect that affects, obviously, on the people’ state of mind. Following the “Broken Windows” theory, also, this neglect, when it reaches the levels of certain big cities suburbs, feeds the aggressive behavior of those who live there. To spell it out, we take for example the furniture of a hospital, together with its internal placement of rooms and colors used for the walls: the more room is cozy, the furniture familiar and the colors on the walls soothing, the more patients will be able to live hospitalization in a less traumatic and difficult way. (Fagnoni, 2009)

Already in 1338-39 Ambrogio Lorenzetti showed spectacularly in its cycle of frescoes in the Palazzo Pubblico of Siena, both his conception of Good Government, Bad Government, in a city or rural, and the Effects of Good and Bad Government. The frescoes highlight the whole of critical issues showed, on the one hand, and aspirations on
the other, remaining an important reference for generations and generations, a representation of social imaginary that contains the symbols of power and faith, of knowledge and action, of care and pleasure (Fig. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6).

The great economic historian Fernand Braudel dates back to the Renaissance the emergence of an Italian model made of art, beauty and of spirit of initiative that can transform this heritage into a formidable instrument of civil and economic growth. A sustainable cultures that is the basis of our identity and of our development.

If in the past sources of knowledge remained, for centuries, few and clear reference points, today the information tools promote knowledge of relationships, connections, paving the way for a science closer to interpersonal relationships. However Internet is not a neutral technology because the communication between people enabled by the network, can help to create connections, but also to raise barriers.

7. Communion, emotion, communication

Whether in social actions that human technology stimulates and makes concrete although virtually, we discover some shared imaginaries, the strength of these ones is multiplied. In fact the communion of desires makes people more determined to work together, to cooperate for achieving them. It is the ancient and ever valid power of the group, which, thanks to the network, becomes a veritable avalanche of motivations to change that are shared by the whole group. The network, technological by definition, is the innovative way that can reinforce the circulation of new linguistic symbols, through which emotions and forms, emotions and codes are integrated. (Bruno, 2002) In this way we form our social emotions, determining that particular high level of cum-emotion, or commotion, which is now the only human form in which to appeal to not fall in the anguish of fear.

Just think of what is happening with regard to the people’s mass exodus, escaping the war zone, and how all this is now widely visible on the network, with the help of the technology we have. The commotion becomes a good practice of communication, compared to the sharing, however, of the fear to whatever is described as different from us.

This kind of sharing is not without negative aspects. In fact it is often superficial, in the etymological sense of the term, namely a share of surface, without deep awareness and intimate. The commotion that Internet images evokes in people well realized osmosis between invisible and visible, but doesn’t tell the story and the inner evolution that this image contains.

In other words, we can ask: is it possible to imagine this area as an opportunity to facilitate the building of bridges between people or we will continue to consider it an excuse to build walls?

We are witnessing a shift of sense from the depth to the surface, as Baricco described in The Barbarians (2006). It is all about accepting a different dislocation of sense into the
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8. Motivation, project, action

Through the process that goes from communion to commotion and then to communication, it emerges the motivation that guides the project activities, understood as human cognitive occasion in which the final design product combines shared motivations, that are starting emotions, with the gratification of realization. The concept of design as a discipline of objects design (such as architecture on a small scale) is giving way to an approach of design as a political and social action, used by creative people to transform the real into the possible. An epistemological jump about the action of designing, no longer focused on the final product but more interested in the process, whose active participants are people.

As explained by Tim Brown (2015), author of the theory of Design Thinking:

Throughout most of history, design was a process applied to physical objects. Raymond Loewy designed trains. Frank Lloyd Wright designed houses. Charles Eames designed furniture. Coco Chanel designed haute couture. Paul Rand designed logos. David Kelley designed products, including (most famously) the mouse for the Apple computer. But as it became clear that smart, effective design was behind the success of many commercial goods, companies began employing it in more and more contexts. (…) Then designers were asked to help improve user experiences. Soon firms were treating corporate strategy making as an exercise in design. Today design is even applied to helping multiple stakeholders and organizations work better as a system. This is the classic path of intellectual progress. Each design process is more complicated and sophisticated than the one before it. Each was enabled by learning from the preceding stage (…)

As design has moved further from the world of products, its tools have been adapted and extended into a distinct new discipline: design thinking. Arguably, Nobel laureate Herbert Simon got the ball rolling with the 1969 classic The Sciences of the Artificial, which characterized design not so much as a physical process a way of thinking. And Richard Buchanan made a seminal advance in his 1992 article “Wicked Problems in Design Thinking,” in which he proposed using design to solve extraordinarily persistent and difficult challenges (Brown, 2015, p. 4).

When applied to complex problems, design provides a set of tools and methods to propose creative solutions imagining artifacts that may lead to new behaviors. Many new research experiences are going in this direction: strategies are planned (actions through communicative artifacts and/or objects, tools, spatial definitions), events are designed to tackle the crisis of daily life that, reasons not too far from them, all human groups currently are living.
Occupied public spaces with the aim to reuse abandoned buildings or places as commons, are getting more and more popular. This happens through processes of sharing, cooperation, the co-ideation and co-realization of material artifacts and digital. The happy cosmopolitan localism expression by Ezio Manzini (2004) effectively makes the idea of creative communities, individuals or groups of citizens, which are activated in design for social innovation, communicating and spreading their activities thanks to ICT. We are facing a technology that allows us to share those actions and human e-motions, by directing perspectives and individual choices to obtaining consensus and the others participation. So, as Manzini describes in his latest book «in a changing world every one designs: each individual person and each collective subject, from enterprises to institutions, from communities to cities and regions. Sometimes these projects generate unprecedented solutions; sometimes they converge on common goals and realize larger transformations. We are witnessing a wave of social innovations as these change unfold» (Manzini, 2015:1).

Manzini distinguishes between diffuse design (performed by everybody) and expert design (performed by those who have been trained as designers) and describe how they interact. He maps what design experts can do to trigger and support meaningful social changes, focusing on emerging forms of collaboration.

Spreading of these practices is strongly growing in Italy: a multiplicity of small local initiatives increase and propagate with actions that often start out as temporaries in disused spaces. The number of abandoned buildings, as highlighted by shrinkage phenomenon, in western cities it is expected to grow\(^2\). These are disused containers, industrial areas, monumental buildings, property of our artistic heritage, whole towns or villages, where the abandoning connects to the decline in population and to the loss of places attractiveness. These are often unable to adapt to the economic and social changes, which impact on the quality of life for inhabitants. These spaces lose their meaning and, at the same time, are characterized by regulatory gap. What allows their recirculation are the initiatives that start from the bottom, the local economies, whose first case studies most striking are those of the cities of the Ruhr Region, from Essen to Gelsenkirchen until Duisburg, in Germany, or American cities of Detroit and Cleveland, supported by equally important studies as for example the Urban Catalyst European research or the National PRIN Re-Cycle Italy research\(^3\). They show the strategies results of civic participation, which aim to involve citizens in urban change and readjust the spaces to the changed social environmental and economical needs of their regions. Initiatives and spontaneous actions

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\(^2\) In Italy there are 5 million of vacant buildings (Agenzia delle Entrate, 2012), about half a million of empty shops (ConfCommercio), two millions of public dismissed urban facilities (WWF, Campagna Riutilizziamo l’Italia, 2013)

\(^3\) cfr. www.recycleitaly.it, Genoa Unit Resp.: Mosè Ricci, Resp. Re-Cycle Lab.: Raffaella Fagnoni.
play a key role in these processes: spaces and structures don’t shape events and actions, but events and actions shape spaces and urban structures (Oswalt, 2013). The effect of these interventions, which is especially social, involves greater participation and the creation of a capillary branch network, both formal and informal, between different projects. The places involved in this type of action, namely, by the temporary uses, are subject to a constant change. In addition to the meeting places, they are instruments capable to begin forms of social self-organization (Rudolph, 2007).

An imaginary of what design represents for social innovation can be described in this way. It is a field of dynamic action in which mental and behavioral attitudes are concretized in an effort to build a better and possible future, based on collaboration and sharing. Come into play the dimension of doing and the dimension of sharing also thanks to the media technologies contribution.

9. The dimension of doing: the imaginary for Social Innovation

Recovering the dimension of doing, through which people learn to live together, doing things, contributes to the human sharing recovery through the production of objects and situations that enhance their living together. In this sense, opportunities for recycling offer a way to revamp their transformation abilities. Additional opportunity for creativity is developed in this way, entrusted to the power that manual skills and doing preserve and realize in their anthropological significance and cognitive.

The upturn of culture of doing, understood as ability development and capacities activation, leads inevitably to the planning of a possible future, in which the human dimension is dominant and fundamental. This is not a technological doing, entrusted to a machine, actuated only by a minimum pressure of a human finger, but involves both the mind in design as the body in its realization. And because in this world we make things by the others help, even when we think we are the only makers of actions or situations, this kind of doing is always social and socializing. The changes construction, both concerning the environment and the objects, always involves the social behaviour, because it involve all human beings frequenting that environment, or using those objects. Design is then in a position to facilitate the implementation of shared behaviors, and into their revaluation of the manual creativity from which depended the whole evolution of the human species. It is, in other words, an emotionaly significant making, which becomes possible only in the moment where it has got its own primary value especially within educational schemes established and programmed with care.

This kind of sensible activism, thanks to which shared actions allow the activation and movement of emotions equally shared, it is easily to be learned. In fact to feel good, staying together making things is the result of a long-term educational process. And, since all that belongs to humanity is always organized in every person’s mind, even in this case
we face the realization of actions that are based on specific features of the human mind. To feel part of a community, when the cognitive neuro system is activated simultaneously in several children while they are involved in collaborative action, it could be the best answer to the crisis of values in which we are involved. (Stiegler B., 2014; Castel M., 2014). Actually, although it is important to achieve the final objective, from an educational perspective the learning process related to the togetherness and the emotional sharing mood is certainly far more important. A sharing that becomes a true co-reconstruction of reality, by prior programming that looks like a Design of what is futuristic, that is a Design of the real as possible. The dimension of making can be an opportunity, if inserted in the dynamics of education, to completely join the community, learning to learn also by their peers, according to a mutual partnership sharing the problem solution. The famous puppy of Jungle Book by Rudyard Kipling lives in each human being from birth to death. It’s up to us to revive him in our everyday actions, and especially in our mind, so that he becomes a real pre-text with which we can rewrite the hope for the future that everyone needs more and more. Basically, the current global situation in which our planet finds itself, although in its geographical and cultural differences, is such as to induce all of us to put into practice behaviors to secure it. We human beings we are facing a future that we cannot approach with effective design perspective, that is useful for the preservation of life itself. The imagery could so become the place where we can experience the upturn and the revival of community and cohesive attitudes, thanks to which we have today too much mistrust. To work together, cooperate and collaborate, is the more universal cultural heritage of this planet, and it stands today as the only alternative for a really foreseeable future because it is really possible.

References


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4 It is, in fact, the dopamine-mesolimbic system that facilitates this process of unification in the concept of symbol, between emotions-motivation and desire of changing of interaction forms, entrusting to Design an arduous task of socialization. In this our brain’s part, the daily efforts to reach a design objective are associated to the gratification to get reach it, thanks to the circulation of dopamine, an important neurotransmitter, responsible for our daily mood (Fig. 7).
Rudolph I.U. (2007), Vacant space and new form of labour: the niche, the meltingpot or the incubator, in AA.VV., Urban Pioneers, Berlin, Jovis, 150-156.